

Kohia ngā Taikākā: Collecting the Heartwood.

A thematic analysis of stakeholder interviews on the culture of
Avondale College, 1989-2025

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Thesis Abstract

School culture, with its deep values and visible symbols and practices, plays a powerful role in shaping educational outcomes and capacity for transformation. However, empirical studies of school culture in Aotearoa New Zealand are scarce. This study examines the school culture of Avondale College, a large, diverse, co-educational, public secondary school in Auckland, New Zealand. It uses the methodology of Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) to analyse semi-structured interviews with eleven purposively selected members of the Avondale College community, using an organisational culture theory lens.

The analysis reveals two important aspects of ‘heartwood’ at the core of Avondale College’s school culture. These are ‘Excellence as a values-driven practice’ and ‘Whanaungatanga as a foundational cultural value’. Leadership is found to be an important mechanism for the transmission of culture. These findings align with international literature on school culture in relation to themes of effectiveness, belonging, relationships and leadership, and add further insight into the importance of the concept of whanaungatanga in the context of education in Aotearoa New Zealand. A conceptual framework is developed to illustrate the culture of Avondale College, based on a tree with the ‘heartwood’ values of ‘excellence’ and ‘whanaungatanga’ at its core; branches that show manifestations of culture (symbolic, behavioural and verbal/conceptual); and leaves of visible surface culture.

These findings are significant as they can help to inform the future strategic direction of the school, particularly in relation to recognising leaders as kaitiaki/stewards of culture; harnessing the power of storytelling; enhancing the effectiveness of change strategies; and drawing from the stability of the school’s culture in the face of challenge and change. This research can also give broader insight into how dimensions of culture impact a school’s identity, goals and outcomes in a New Zealand context, which may have relevance to other communities. Limitations of this study include the small

sample size and its context-specific nature which makes it replicable but not generalisable.

Contents

Attestation of Authorship.....	9
Acknowledgements.....	10
Chapter 1: Introduction	12
1.1 School Culture Research	13
1.2 Gaps in the Research.....	14
1.3 Research Question.....	15
1.4 Broader context of New Zealand education policy.....	17
1.5 Avondale College – context and history.....	20
1.6 Seeking the Heartwood	24
1.7 Why seek the heartwood?	26
Chapter 2: Literature Review.....	29
2.1 Scope and Definition	29
Complexity of School Culture	30
2.2 Conceptual Foundations	32
Research Traditions	32
Culture vs Climate and Ethos	32
Models of Culture	33
Visible Aspects of School Culture	34
Hidden Aspects of Culture	37
Conceptual Framework for Analysis	38
Te Rākau o School Culture	39
2.3 Determinants of school culture.....	40
2.4 Culture and outcomes	43

Culture and Identity	43
School culture and effectiveness.....	43
Research links between school culture and achievement.....	44
Characteristics of effective cultures	45
School culture, and improvement and change	46
2.5 Relational/culturally responsive dimensions	48
Belonging	49
Whanaungatanga: Connection and relationship in the context of Aotearoa New Zealand.....	50
2.6 Leadership and school culture	51
2.7 Summary	53
Chapter 3: Methodology	55
3.1 Introduction to Methodology	55
3.2. Research Paradigm and Theoretical Position	55
3.3 Methodological Approach	56
3.4. Reflexivity.....	58
3.5. Research Design	61
Participants and Sampling	61
Data Collection	63
Ethical Considerations.....	66
3.6. Data Analysis	67
3.7 Limitations	71
Chapter 4: Findings	74
4.1 Overview of dataset and analysis	74
4.2 Theme 1: “Excellence as a values-driven practice”	76

4.2.1 Academic excellence is a priority	77
4.2.2 High expectations are foundational	80
4.2.3 “Success isn't just about academia”	82
4.3 Theme 2: Whanaungatanga as a foundational cultural value	85
Whanaungatanga: Definition	86
4.3.1 Relationships	87
4.3.2 Collegiality	91
4.3.3 Reciprocity.....	94
4.3.4 Wellbeing.....	96
4.3.5 Identity and belonging.....	98
4.3.6 Whanaungatanga contributes to success	100
4.3.7 Meaningful cultural connection and diversity	100
4.4 Artifacts of Excellence & Belonging	103
4.4.1 School Crest and Motto	104
4.4.2 Aspirational Architecture	105
4.4.3 School Uniform	108
4.4.4 Belonging in our own way: the development of ‘other’ symbols and language of culture.....	109
4.4.5 School Stories	110
4.4.6 The HEART Values	110
Summary of findings: Te Rākau o Avondale College	113
Chapter 5: Discussion	116
5.1 Returning to the Research Questions: Interpreting the Heartwood	116
5.2 The Heartwood of Avondale College.....	117
5.2.1 Excellence as a values-driven practice	117

Academic excellence is a priority	117
High expectations are foundational	122
Success isn't just about academia	123
Not achieving excellence	125
5.2.2 Whanaungatanga as a foundational cultural value	126
Aiming for “the North-East” (Bishop, 2023): When Excellence and Whanaungatanga work together	130
5.2.3 Leadership as a mechanism of cultural transmission	131
5.2.3 Culture in Motion: Continuity, Challenge, and Change	135
5.3 The Roadmap: Positioning Avondale College for the Future	141
5.3.1 Understanding that leaders are cultural kaitiaki/stewards	142
5.3.2 Harnessing the power of storytelling.....	142
5.3.3 Maintaining belonging in a large, diverse school.....	143
5.3.4 Using culture strategically for improvement.....	143
5.3.5 Preparing for future winds of change	144
Conclusion	147
6.1 Summary of Purpose and Findings	147
6.2 Implications	149
6.3 Reflexivity, Scope, and Trustworthiness.....	151
6.4 Recommendations for Future Research.....	154
References	156
Appendices.....	165
Appendix A: Ethics Approval	165
Appendix B: Participant Information Sheet	167
Appendix C: Consent Form	171

Appendix D: Sample Questions	172
Appendix E: Coding Samples	173
E.1 Example of Codes & Explanations: Whanaungatanga as a foundational cultural value	173
E.2 Sample of coding	174
E.3 Sample of coding: Whanaungatanga sample	175
E.4 Examples of candidate themes	176
E.5 Example of theme development.....	176
Appendix F: Glossary of Māori Terms	177
Appendix G: Artificial Intelligence Declaration Template.....	178

List of Figures

Figure 1

Avondale College Aerial View	21
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Figure 2

Roll by Ethnic Group as at July 2024.....	22
---	----

Figure 3

Te Rākau o School Culture.....	39
--------------------------------	----

Figure 4

Participant Characteristics	62
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Figure 5

Avondale College Crest.....	104
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Figure 6

Avondale College Atrium Interior107

Figure 7

Avondale College Exterior.....108

Figure 8

HEART Values..... 112

Figure 9

Te Rākau o Avondale College..... 115

Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor used artificial intelligence tools or generative artificial intelligence tools (unless it is clearly stated, and referenced, along with the purpose of use), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Susan Elijaš

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“To capture a whole culture is probably impossible” (Schein, 2009, p.220).

Chapter 1: Introduction

As a trainee teacher in 1999, I found myself in the Avondale College library, being enthusiastically welcomed by the principal, Phil Raffills. It was a brief meeting, but memorable. Having experienced my own secondary schooling at a small, rural, Taranaki high school less than a fifth of the size of Avondale College, the only thing I knew about this Auckland school was that it was huge, and that an unimpressed fellow trainee had been on the receiving end of what she had described as Mr Raffills' 'authoritarian' style. When I met him in person, Phil Raffills' warmth and huge pride in his school was evident. I was intrigued. A few months later I accepted a position teaching English and History. Sadly, Phill Raffills passed away the following year, but two principals and 26 years later I am still employed by Avondale College, and I am still curious about this school.

Over nearly three decades, I have become woven into the fabric of the Avondale College community. I began as a teacher, and after taking a short maternity break in the mid-2000s returned as a part-time website manager, then full-time Communications Manager and now Communications Director whose varied role includes responsibility for whole-school communications and involvement in international student marketing. My three children have attended Avondale College, two have graduated and the youngest is currently in Year 13. I have been an international homestay parent, school musical set designer, Polyfest costume maker, camp leader, van driver, school photographer and team mum. My tenure has overlapped with three principals, hundreds of colleagues and many thousands of students. I am an unofficial archivist and cultural storyteller. As editor of 22 editions of *Taikaka*, the school's annual yearbook, and as a content creator for the school's official social media sites, for many years a key part of my role has also been to collate, record and share the stories of the school.

I am fascinated by what it is that makes Avondale College distinctly Avondale College. The opportunity to explore this through a Master's research thesis within the School of

Communication at Auckland University of Technology has been an insightful and valuable experience.

This study is shaped by my longstanding role within the Avondale College community, in which I am positioned as an insider researcher. There are a number of significant advantages to this position, including established trust and contextual understanding. However, there are also some potential risks related to familiarity, power dynamics and potential bias in the responses of participants and the way that data is interpreted. To mitigate these risks, reflexivity was embedded throughout the research process. This is discussed in further detail in the Methodology chapter.

1.1 School Culture Research

The idea that schools each have a unique culture, a distinct way of being and operating, is not new. Scholarly discussion about differences in educational institutions can be found from the late Renaissance Period (17th Century) when the ideas of the Middle Ages were giving way to a rebirth of the ideas of the Romans and Ancient Greeks (Schoen & Teddlie, 2008). The discussion continued into the 20th century, with Waller in 1932 expressing the idea that schools have “complex rituals of relationships, a set of folkways, mores, ‘irrational sanctions’ and moral codes,” (see Deal & Peterson, 2016, p.7).

Now, nearly a century later, Waller’s description still has resonance, but there has since been much scholarly discussion across various research disciplines around ideas of *what* school culture is, whether it is different from school ‘climate’, and what constitutes measures of a ‘strong’ or ‘healthy’ or ‘effective’ culture; *how* it is revealed through visible symbols, stories, unspoken norms and underlying values; and more importantly, *why* it is important: what relationship does school culture have to performance, student achievement, and the potential for transformative change? (Deal & Peterson, 2016; Schoen & Teddlie, 2008; Stoll, 2000; Hoy & Miskel, 2013).

Alongside these issues, the culture of a school is seen to be inextricably linked to ideas about communities, relationships, belonging and identity (Brown, 2004; Hoy & Miskel, 2013; Teasley, 2017); with more recent sociocultural perspectives leading to the development of relational and culturally responsive practices (Bishop, 2023; Bishop & Berryman, 2014; Hoy & Miskel, 2013). The impact of leadership is another important theme in school culture literature, with leaders being seen as crucial to the shaping of the culture of the school (Teasley, 2017; Deal & Peterson, 2016; Plaku & Leka, 2025). Underlying the academic discourse is the shared idea that the study of school culture is not only a worthy area of research, but one of vital importance (Stoll, 1998; Peterson & Deal, 2009; Wagner, 2006). Culture is pervasive. Cultural patterns are enduring: they shape the ways people think, act, and feel; have a significant impact on performance; influence approaches to school improvement; affect the way schools respond to crises and change (Peterson & Deal, 2009; Schein, 2009); and help us make sense of the world (Hammond, 2015). In short, culture impacts everything.

1.2 Gaps in the Research

The popularity of research relating to organisational culture that arose in the 1980s and 1990s has contributed to ongoing interest in culture as it relates to schools. School culture research proposes many theoretical models, yet many scholars identify a lack of empirical studies to support these (Hoy & Miskel, 2013; Schoen & Teddlie, 2008; van Houtte, 2005). Where evidence-based studies have taken place, the majority of these relate to schools in the USA and Europe and often focus on culture as it relates to teachers or school leaders. Few recent studies on school culture relate to the context of Aotearoa, New Zealand, and none consider the specific school of Avondale College.

By situating my research broadly within existing scholarship on school culture, I aim to draw on some of the key ideas from a range of academic perspectives and apply them to a very local context: that of Avondale College, a large, co-educational, state secondary school located in Auckland, New Zealand. This qualitative, interview-based, narrative-led and thematically analysed study not only adds to the wider body of research on school culture but also contributes to a greater understanding of the

unique culture of Avondale College; something that is of particular interest and importance to the large community of leaders, staff, students and parents that it serves.

1.3 Research Question

This study seeks to answer the question:

What do stakeholder narratives at Avondale College reveal about the underlying values ("heartwood") of its culture since 1989. How can understanding the culture help position the college for the future?

Avondale College's motto: Kohia ngā Taikākā (Seek/Gather/Collect the Heartwood) exhorts its community to pursue excellence, to seek and gather that which is of most value in life. This research examines what the stories of a group of Avondale College community members (eleven leaders, staff, students, parents and associates) reveal about the underlying culture and values or the 'heartwood' of the school. This is of interest because school communities are formative, centres of social life, and strongly tied to identity. The second part of the research question focuses on how insight into the school culture may help position the college for the future, identifying the strengths that create continuity and stability while shaping a forward-looking strategic direction.

This study also adds to the body of research on school culture, specifically in the context of Aotearoa, New Zealand. New Zealand schools operate within a bicultural setting informed by Te Tiriti o Waitangi, and within increasingly diverse multicultural communities. International studies cannot fully reflect these unique influences, and studies of large, multicultural secondary schools in New Zealand are scarce. This research can give insight into how dimensions of culture impact a school's identity, goals and outcomes in a New Zealand context. Strengthening the local research base in this way means that theories and models reflect the cultural realities of Aotearoa, that Māori and Pasifika world views are represented, and that local schools can have evidence that is relevant to their situation, and not borrowed or imported.

A supplementary outcome of this study will be the enhancement of the community's collective knowledge, sense of whanaungatanga and connection through the preservation of historically significant memories and stories. Developing a richer picture of the history and cultural foundations of the school ultimately benefits the wider school community.

Each year since its establishment in 1945, when the US Naval Mobile Hospital No. 6 in Avondale was repurposed as a secondary school, the school yearbook, *Taikākā*, has included a page contextualising and explaining the motto of the school. This motto is one of which the school claims it “may be justly proud” (Avondale Technical High School, 1945, p.7). It is drawn from a waiata attributed to a mid-18th century Wai-o-hua chief, Kiwi Tāmaki, who, finding himself under attack by a neighbouring tribe called for warriors with taikākā tōtara (hearts of tōtara) to rally in support.

Tera te haeata o runga te hiwi
 Kei te hauauru kei te Pukematikoi
 He tohu o te maringitangi
 O te too; o te iwi e!
E kohia ngā taikākā tōtara
 E ruia nga rauaruhe nga taitea
 E hui e! E hui e!

There is a glow above the ridge
 In the western sky of Pukematikoi
 A sign of anger,
 of the shedding of the blood
 Assemble now the hearts of tōtara
 And cast aside the fern and scrub
 From my presence
 O gather round! (Avondale Technical High School, 1945, p.7).

In te ao Māori, the Māori worldview, tōtara is a prized wood, and its heartwood used for waka and for adorning the front of marae and houses. Several whakataukī (Māori proverbs) are connected to tōtara, expressing its cultural value and symbolic strength. For example: “Kua hinga te tōtara i te wao nui a Tāne” (a tōtara has fallen in the great

forest of Tāne), is used to mark the passing of an esteemed person or chief (Te Ara Encyclopedia of New Zealand, 2009). In Māori tradition, the inner, durable heartwood/taikākā of a tōtara tree is distinguished from its sapwood (taitea), and this quality has been used metaphorically in proverbs about strength and leadership. For example, the proverb: “Ruia taitea, kia tū ko taikākā anake,” (shake off the sapwood and let the hard heartwood only stand) refers to tōtara’s structure and is used signify things of importance and value (Landcare Research New Zealand, 2023).

In 1945 Avondale Technical High School, (renamed Avondale College in 1948), took as its motto the phrase: “Kohia ngā taikākā,” explaining it further in the school’s yearbook:

Literally it means to “collect the heartwood” but it means much more, namely to strive after the best things in life and to work, play and act in a manner that will bring credit to the school and the community (Avondale Technical High School, 1945, p.7).

The purpose of this research is to explore the 'heartwood' of Avondale College. What are those things of value that have helped to shape and define the school? How do the stories of some of the stakeholders of the school community reflect the unique culture of the school and reveal what is collectively held to be of value? And how can understanding these values help the school position itself for the future?

1.4 Broader context of New Zealand education policy

Before turning the focus onto this one very local example of an Auckland secondary school, it is important to consider the wider context of public education in Aotearoa, New Zealand. Central to this is the bicultural foundation established by Te Tiriti o Waitangi, which shapes educational policy and practice through expectations that schools recognise Māori worldviews, uphold the principles of partnership, participation, and protection, and actively work to reduce longstanding inequities (Ministry of Education, 2020b).

At a national level, the New Zealand education system is strongly shaped by government policy, with the Ministry of Education determining curricula, funding, and

accountability structures. The introduction of the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) in the early 2000s (and its ongoing reform), alongside repeated curriculum and policy changes highlight the extent of political involvement in schooling. However, the most significant shift in the educational landscape in recent decades occurred in 1989 with the introduction of 'Tomorrow's Schools'.

Tomorrow's Schools was part of a major education reform in New Zealand, introduced by the fourth Labour Government under Prime Minister (and Education Minister) David Lange. The school governance model was decentralised from the (then) Department of Education to individual schools. Each school became governed by a local Board of Trustees (now known as the School Board) made up of parents, the principal and a staff and a student representative. The Board was responsible for overall governance, including school management, policy decisions, budgeting and staffing, with the intended goals of increasing community involvement, accountability and responsiveness to local needs. The devolution of governance responsibility to communities was intended to shift control from a distant bureaucracy to local stakeholders, fostering a more democratic, participatory and responsive schooling system, and reflected an ambitious and radical vision that schools would be run by and for their own communities, enhancing local ownership and accountability (New Zealand Council for Educational Research, n.d.).

In practice, this has led to New Zealand's schooling system being among the most devolved in the world (Wylie, 2024). Critics suggest this has led to ongoing issues of competition between schools; mistrust between schools and the Ministry of Education, and the Education Review Office (whose reviews of individual schools are relied on to provide school accountability); a lack of local systems of support and development for school leaders and teachers; an increased administrative burden on boards; and an inconsistent governance capacity (Wylie, 2012). Because board members are selected from and elected by the local community, boards can be more or less successful depending on the social capital and business acumen of individual members. Subsequent reviews such as the 2018 Tomorrow's Schools Independent Taskforce

have called for the rebalancing of governance and the improvement of central support structures; however, implementation of recommendations has been limited (Wylie, 2024).

Policy adjustments since 1989 are now embedded in the Education and Training Act 2020, which affirms school boards of state and state-integrated schools as Crown entities with primary responsibility for institutional governance. Responsibilities include setting strategic direction, establishing policies, overseeing curriculum, property, finance, and health and safety, while complying with the objectives set out in the Act (Education and Training Act 2020 (NZ), s. 127). As the Board's chief executive, the school's principal must comply with the board's general policy directions but otherwise has complete discretion to manage the day-to-day administration of the school as he or she sees fit, subject to delegations (Education and Training Act 2020 (NZ), Sch 6). In short, the tasks and responsibilities of a school board (and its principal) are significant, and decisions made by them have a large and lasting impact on school effectiveness and culture.

New Zealand's education system has its roots in Western traditions of schooling, which, as educational scholars Hattie and Larsen (2020) point out, have in many ways remained the same for the past 200 years. However, the rate of change is accelerating, and future challenges are approaching at pace. Globally, educators are increasingly being asked to be more responsible for emotional and welfare issues of the students (Hattie & Larsen, 2020), particularly in the post-pandemic context, where principals are increasingly being held responsible for ensuring wellbeing measures for students and staff are considered as part of school operations (Thornton, 2021). Locally, increased immigration and demographic shifts in Auckland have led to a more diverse and multi-cultural population; in 2023 nearly 42% of Auckland's residents were born overseas (Office of the Auditor-General, 2023). Other challenges are arising with the development of technology. The New Zealand Government introduced a mandated ban on students using mobile phones in schools in 2024, amidst concern for student wellbeing, lack of socialisation and impact on achievement (Ministry of Education,

2024). The growing influence of AI in education also presents significant challenges, as educators seek to balance innovation with tradition (The Education Hub, 2025). In 2025, the Ministry of Education announced a major overhaul of the NCEA system, signalling the qualification will be replaced by 2030. New curricula are being rolled out at a rapid pace that has led to expressions of concern from principals, educators, and professional subject bodies (Gerritsen, 2025). Educational concerns such as literacy and numeracy standards or the rise of charter schools are frequently reported on by the media, as is the impact of the wider 'cost of living crisis' on students and families. Faced with a future that has many uncertainties, it becomes even more essential for school leaders to understand their school's own unique strengths and to be able to draw on these to support successful outcomes for students, staff and the wider communities that they serve.

Avondale College's history spans more than 80 years and therefore an overview of its entire history and culture is beyond the scope of a Master's-level thesis. For this reason, I have chosen to focus on a more recent timespan: from the introduction of Tomorrow's Schools in 1989 when Avondale College became self-governing, to the present day. Before looking at the underlying and unique characteristics of Avondale College's culture, it is important to understand the school's context and history. The following section gives a 'snapshot' overview of what the school might look like to observers from the outside.

1.5 Avondale College – context and history

Avondale College is a large, coeducational, state secondary school located in Avondale, in the rohe of Te Kawerau ā Maki in central-west Auckland, New Zealand, providing education to students from Years 9 to 13.

During the period since the school was governed by its own Board of Trustees drawn from the local community, the school has been primarily led by three principals:

Phil Raffills, Principal, 1984 – 2000 (*d. 2000*)

[Warren Peat, Acting Principal, 2000]

Brent Lewis, Principal, 2001 – 2019

Lyndy Watkinson, Principal, 2020 – present.

Avondale College has always been a large school. In 1989, the student population was around 1,800 students (Avondale College, 1990). By 2025 the roll had grown to around 2850 students, made up of students drawn from within the school's zone, and a capped number of out-of-zone students. International fee-paying students began attending Avondale College in the late 1980s, peaking at around 250 full time equivalent students in 2018, dipping to just 10 during the Covid pandemic in 2020 and 2021, and rising to a capped 150 students in 2025. In 2025, Avondale College employed approximately 245 staff (full and part-time), consisting of around 170 teaching staff and 75 operations staff (Avondale College, 2026).

Figure 1

Avondale College Aerial View

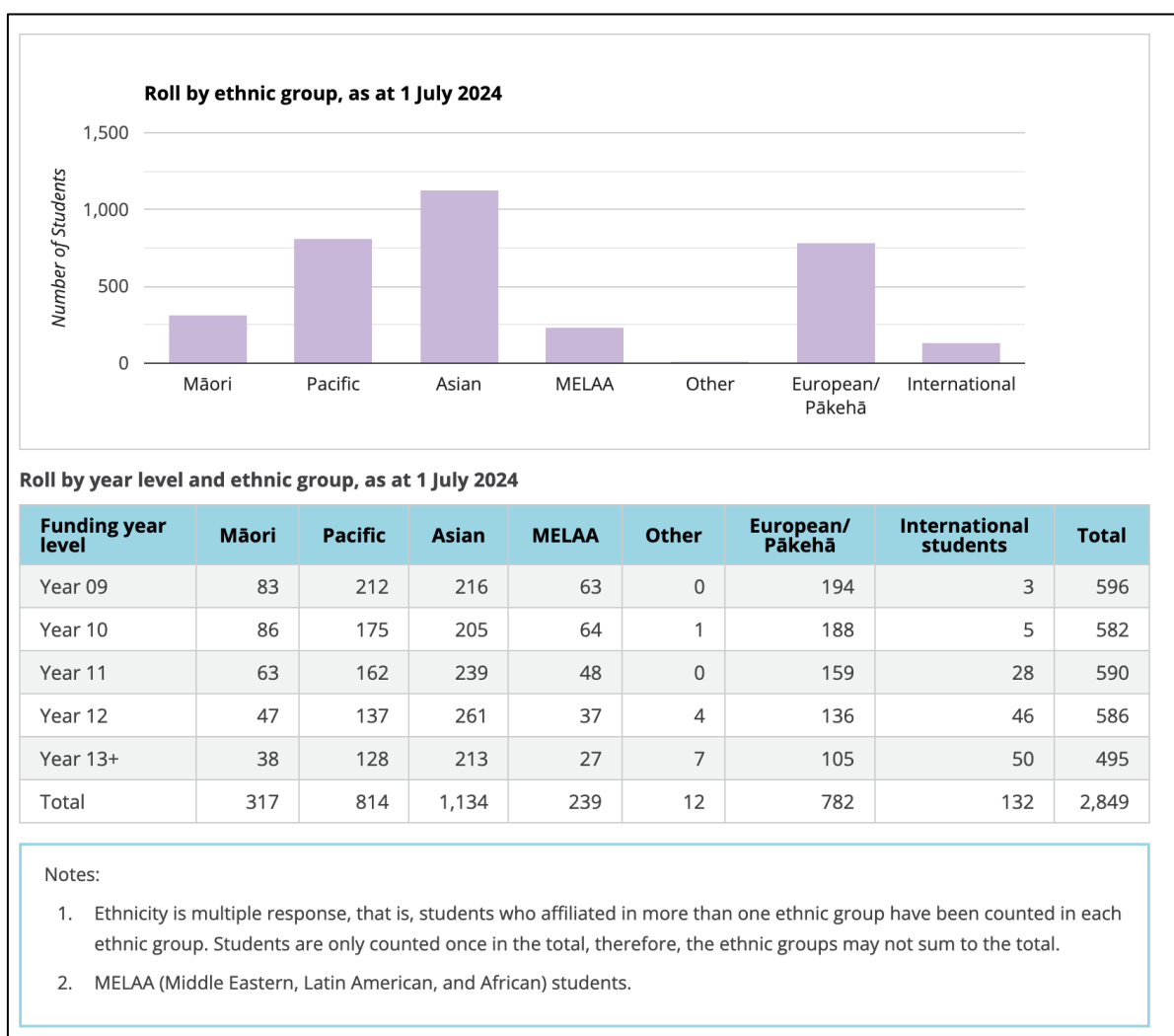


Note. Aerial view of the College, looking towards Auckland City. From Avondale College. Used with permission.

Ethnic diversity is a feature of the school's student community, with students drawn from Asian, Pacific Islands, European/Pakeha, Māori and Middle Eastern, Latin American and African communities (Ministry of Education, n.d.-b).

Figure 2

Roll by Ethnic Group, as at 1 July 2024



Note. Data from Ministry of Education (n.d.-b). Education Counts: Avondale College.

<https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/find->

[school/school/population/year?district=7611®ion=2&school=78](https://www.education.govt.nz/school/school/population/year?district=7611®ion=2&school=78). Reproduced under the terms of the site's licence.

The school is located in Avondale, a mid-to-lower socioeconomic community in central/west Auckland. Decile ratings were used by the Ministry of Education from 1995 to 2023 to measure the socio-economic position of a school's student community relative to other schools. Avondale was initially designated a Decile 3 school and later reclassified as Decile 4. In 2023, the Ministry of Education replaced Decile Ratings with the Schooling Equity Index (EQI), a statistical model that estimates the extent to which students face socio-economic barriers to achievement at school. The EQI ranges from 344-569 where the higher the number, the greater is the disadvantage. Nationally, the average number is 463. In 2025, Avondale College was given an EQI of 441, suggesting it has a moderate level of socio-economic challenges compared to other schools nationwide (Ministry of Education, n.d.-a).

As a state school, Avondale College offers curricula and qualifications in accordance with the New Zealand Ministry of Education's national curriculum and qualification framework. The qualifications of the 1980s and 1990s (School Certificate, Sixth Form Certificate and Bursary) were replaced between 2002 and 2004 by the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) and NZ Scholarship exams. In 2011 under principal Brent Lewis, Avondale College also introduced the Cambridge International Examinations pathway as an option for senior students. In 2025, New Zealand had 554 schools offering secondary education (including secondary and composite schools (Figure.NZ, 2025). Fifty-one offered Cambridge International qualifications (Cambridge Assessment International Education, n.d.). Avondale College is among the state schools that do so, and around 20% of senior Avondale College students chose the Cambridge pathway. In 2024 the top scholar for Cambridge A-Levels in New Zealand was from Avondale College (Avondale College, 2026).

Achievement data throughout this period of time shows Avondale College students generally achieved good results in national assessments, with results higher than the New Zealand average. Success in Cambridge examinations saw 36 Avondale College

students achieve individual Top in the World results between 2013 and 2024 (Avondale College, n.d.-a).

Achievement rates for Māori and Pasifika students also rose during this time. In 2020 Avondale College was named as a finalist in the Prime Minister's Excellence in Education awards, in the Excellence in Engaging category, in recognition of the school's engagement with and support of Pasifika students (Avondale College, 2021).

Outside of the classroom, extra-curricular activities have been an important feature of school life at Avondale College. The school's outdoor education campsite, Taurewa, is located beside the Tongariro National Park. Established in 1975, this was one of New Zealand's first school-based outdoor education camps, and after 52 years of operation, is one of the country's longest running (Avondale College, n.d.-b).

Other co-curricular and extra-curricular activities are offered through the school's performing arts programme, with a school musical performed every year and many competitions and performance opportunities offered in music, dance and drama. Many students take part in the sports programme, with a range of sports taking place after school and on the weekend. Since its establishment in 1985, involvement in Polyfest, Auckland's cultural performance festival for secondary schools has become an increasingly important event for Avondale College's Māori and Pasifika students and other cultural groups. Twelve different cultural groups represented Avondale College at Polyfest in 2025.

1.6 Seeking the Heartwood

The summary of statistics, events and activities listed above serve as a short-hand depiction of the school's identity: its location, size, ethnic population, operations and achievements. However, the 'character' or culture of a school is a different and deeper issue. Culture is "always complex and situationally unique" (Beare et al., 2018, p. 177). Beneath the surface is the unseen 'heartwood' made up of the core values and basic

assumptions that shape behaviours and reflect the true and distinct culture of the school.

One way to discover and make sense of a school's unique identity and culture is to listen to stories. Deal and Peterson (2016) argue that narratives and anecdotes are powerful tools for cultural diagnosis. Stories highlight heroes, crises and turning points, showing which behaviours are rewarded or discouraged. They encode norms and assumptions that may not be found in formal policies, and reveal and reinforce core values like collaboration, resilience or excellence (Deal & Peterson, 2016; Schein, 2009).

For this reason, listening to the stories of people who have been (and are) significant members of the Avondale College community provides an opportunity to discover and make sense of the heartwood at the core of Avondale College's culture. Narratives also reveal the more obvious layers or manifestations of culture: the espoused values, the behavioural manifestations of rituals and ceremonies, and the visible symbols of artifacts and memorabilia, crests, mottos, uniforms and facilities that are outwards expressions of the underlying and more hidden core values of the school.

Interpreting these stories is another act of storytelling, and as a culturally embedded researcher I have, in turn, co-constructed a narrative through my interpretation of participants' stories (Braun et al., 2022). As a New Zealand European woman with a professional background in teaching and communications who is a long-standing member of this community, I bring my own perspectives and unconscious priorities to this research. Gruba and Lincoln (1994) argue that in interpretivist and constructivist paradigms, participants and researchers co-construct meaning, and therefore objectivity is unattainable. However, Braun and Clarke (2022) also note that through quality practice, it is possible to be a trustworthy researcher, one whose subjectivity is not a flaw to eliminate but a central analytic tool. Schein (2004) too highlights the complexity of researcher positionality, particularly with regards to studies of organisational culture. He suggests that being an embedded researcher can be a great advantage, as it is possible to observe and understand nuanced aspects of culture that

may be missed by an outsider, thereby enabling deeper analytical insight. However, the drawback of this position is that an embedded observer may take for granted aspects of culture that seem ‘normal’ to them and therefore risks failing to question or unpack ‘normalised’ layers as a result. Like Braun and Clarke (2022), Shein (2004) recommends reflexivity as an essential tool to help the researcher look beyond the surface and gain deeper insights into the observed culture. I used a reflexive journal to note and examine my thoughts and responses, as well as engaging in ongoing critical reflection and self-examination throughout the process. A more detailed discussion of these aspects, and their implications is provided in the Methodology chapter.

1.7 Why seek the heartwood?

Finally, before moving to a more in-depth review of the literature relating to school culture, I would like to return to the question of why understanding culture is important. Scholars of organisational culture argue that culture affects everything (Schein, 1985; Wagner, 2006). Culture tells people in a school what is truly important and how they are to act (Stolp & Smith, 1995; Teasley, 2017). It influences what people pay attention to, how they identify with the school, how hard they work and the degree to which they achieve their goals; in other words, it affects focus, commitment, motivation and productivity (Deal & Peterson, 2016; Peterson & Deal, 2002). Understanding culture helps us make sense of the world.

Finally, understanding the shape and history of a school’s culture helps to determine the direction for future growth (Teasley, 2017). Stolp and Smith (1995) suggest that the history of relationships give meaning to the present, and Deal and Peterson (2016) note that “without a well-known historical map, the school loses its way” (p. 61).

Understanding a school's deep culture means that future planning can be based on enduring core values (Deal & Peterson, 2016).

With these points in mind, it becomes clear that studying the culture of Avondale College provides an important opportunity to identify and understand unique aspects of

the culture of the school, with implications for the school's future growth and development.

The chapters that follow address the following aspects:

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter gives a review of the academic literature as it relates to school culture. I outline different models of school culture, demonstrating consensus that culture has both hidden (deep) and visible (surface) aspects, and propose a conceptual framework. I explore determinants of school culture, along with themes of effectiveness, improvement, transformation and leadership. I outline relational and culturally responsive positions, along with the key concept of whanaungatanga as it relates to school culture.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter explains the interpretive paradigm underpinning the study, the qualitative methods used for data collection, and the process of analysis using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) through the lens of organisational culture.

Chapter 4: Findings

The Findings chapter gives an overview of the dataset, and key findings are outlined. These are constructed as themes which are also shown to be reflected and reinforced by key symbols, statements and behaviours. I map these findings to the conceptual framework 'Te Rākau o Avondale College'.

Chapter 5: Discussion

In this chapter I discuss the findings in relation to the literature and outline their significance to Avondale College's school culture. I position key themes as heartwood values, and discuss the significance of continuity, challenge and change.

Understanding the school's culture is shown to be of use in seeing leaders as kaitiaki/stewards of culture, maintaining belonging in a large, diverse school, using culture strategically for improvement, and preparing for future winds of change.

Conclusion

Finally, I give a summary of the purpose and findings of the study. I outline implications for Avondale College, for school leaders more broadly, and for research and theory. I consider reflexivity, scope and trustworthiness, and give recommendations for future research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In this chapter I present some of the discourse about school culture in academic literature. I firstly outline the scope of the review; and consider the way scholars have defined school culture. I examine conceptual foundations, along with key theoretical models, and propose a conceptual framework based on these.

Next, I explore determinants of school culture, including external contexts such as political climate, school size/age, socioeconomics and diversity. The link between culture and outcomes of identity, effectiveness/achievement, and improvement and change are considered.

I then examine the way scholars have discussed relational and culturally responsive dimensions of culture, particularly in relation to the concept of whanaungatanga (relationships and belonging). Finally, I review the impact of leadership, showing that leaders can be seen as culture shapers who build, adapt and transmit culture within the school.

2.1 Scope and Definition

In this literature review I draw upon theories of organisational culture, educational leadership and culturally responsive pedagogy to explore the specifications and impacts of school culture. There is inevitably much interconnection between these areas of discourse. There is also overlap with other related fields, such as detailed curriculum theory, micro-level classroom management and wider educational and pedagogical theory; however, these aspects are not addressed unless directly related to ideas about school culture.

In this review I consider global research on school culture, while also acknowledging the specific context of Aotearoa New Zealand. New Zealand has a unique educational setting, influenced by aspects such as Tomorrow's Schools reforms and self-managing governance, an increasingly multi-cultural population (especially in Auckland schools),

historic and current policy shifts, and bi-cultural commitments to the principles of Te Tiriti o Waitangi. These are all important aspects when considering school culture in a New Zealand context.

Complexity of School Culture

In addition to asserting that school culture is one of the most important concepts in education, school culture researcher Louise Stoll claimed it is also “one of the most complex” (Stoll, 2000, p.9). Similarly, Loup (1996) pointed out that defining school culture has: “historically been fraught with conceptual complexity and confusion” (Loup, 1996, p. 83). Some of the complexity arises from the fact that academic discussion of school culture is found across several different research communities and traditions, including sociological, anthropological, psychological, organisational and educational. Each of these different disciplines bring a different lens to the definition of culture and its relationship to a school setting (Hoy & Miskel, 2013; Maslowski, 2001; Schoen & Teddlie, 2008). Because the concept of culture incorporates deep levels of underlying values that are shared by an organisation’s members and which often operate unconsciously to shape an organisation’s view of itself and its environment (Schein, 1985, 2009), and because every school has a different context, reality and mindset about school life, identifying and explaining the culture of a particular school can be difficult (Stoll, 2000; Deal & Peterson, 2016).

Definition is further complicated by the fact that there is no single universally agreed upon ‘best definition’ of ‘school culture’ (Deal & Peterson, 2016; Schoen & Teddlie, 2008).

This complexity is illustrated in some of the very simple concepts or metaphors writers have constructed to help define the concept of culture. Some of these conceptualise the shared nature of an organisation’s culture:

- Culture is the way things are done around here (Bower, 1966).
- Culture is the lens through which participants view themselves and the world, (Hargreaves, 1994).

- Culture is the web of significance in which we are all suspended, (Geertz, 1973).
- Culture is “the glue, the hope and the faith that holds people together” (Deal & Peterson, 2016, p. 26).
- Culture is “the shared beliefs and values that closely knit a community together” (Deal & Kennedy, 1982, p. 4).

Other metaphors relate to the deep and complex nature of culture:

- School culture is the “existential tenor” of a school (Deal & Peterson, 2016, p. 14).
- Culture consists of the “unwritten rules of the social game” (Hofstede et al., 2010 p.5).
- Culture is the “software of the mind” (Hofstede et al., 2010).
- School culture is “a mosaic of organisational realities” (Morgan 1997, p. 137).

In general, scholars agree that school culture consists of ‘seen’ aspects such as artifacts, symbols, espoused values, statements, behaviours and practices; and ‘unseen’ aspects – the underlying beliefs, norms and values that characterise a school (Brown, 2004; Deal & Peterson, 2016; Schein, 1985, 1997, 2009). School culture also relates to the shared experiences both in school and out of school that create a sense of community, family, and belonging (Deal & Peterson, 2016; Wagner, 2006).

Peterson & Deal (2002)’s explanation provides a useful summary:

Beneath the surface of everyday life in schools is an underground river of feelings, folkways, norms, and values that influence how people go about their daily work. This taken-for-granted set of expectations affects how people think, feel, and act. It shapes how they interpret the hundreds of daily interactions of their work lives and provides meaning and purpose (Peterson & Deal, 2002, p.9).

Because culture is living, evolving and complex, pinning down a definitive definition is difficult. Taken together, the metaphors and definitions outlined above have sufficient conceptual alignment to provide a practical and workable basis for understanding the

concept of school culture. In this study, I draw on these ideas to refer to school culture as being the shared values, norms, traditions and expectations, both written and unwritten, seen and unseen, that shape how people behave, interact, and experience daily life within a school.

2.2 Conceptual Foundations

Research Traditions

Different research traditions have brought alternative approaches to the study of school culture. Anthropological researchers tend towards more interpretative approaches, investigating what culture *is*, and examining the nature of it as a social construction. Organisational theorists take a functionalist approach, seeing culture as something that an organisation *has*, with further implications for examining (and changing) what it does. (Hoy & Miskel, 2013; Mak, 1998). This is an important distinction, as by framing culture as something that an organisation *has* means that it can be purposefully manipulated and transformed (Mak, 1998). This has wider implications for theories of school transformation and change, as seen by the large body of research on school effectiveness and improvement from the 1980s onwards. More recently, theorists such as Gay (2018) and Hammond (2015) have considered school culture in relation to culturally responsive pedagogy and, particularly in a US setting, critical race theory.

Culture vs Climate and Ethos

The use of different terminology for similar aspects across disciplines has also added to the complexity and confusion around what is meant by school culture. Schoen and Teddlie's (2008) survey of literature relating to school culture across the disciplines of sociology, anthropology, psychology and business management found that the terms 'culture', 'climate' and 'ethos' have been used to mean different things and also have been used interchangeably as synonyms. Psychological studies have tended to define climate as a separate entity from culture. Climate in this context generally refers to the overall atmosphere or 'feel' of the school and considers aspects like behaviour and relationships. These aspects are sometimes studied quantitatively. Climate is

perceived to be observable through aspects such as leadership style and new initiatives, and can change quickly (Hoy & Miskel, 2013).

In contrast, culture, when defined separately from climate, is regarded as representing the deeply ingrained values, beliefs, traditions and norms that shape how a school operates. It is stable and evolves slowly over time, influencing long-term strategies and identities (Hoy & Miskel, 2013). This definition is typically used from an anthropological perspective where underlying assumptions and shared meanings that define a school's character are investigated, and in this context is more likely to be studied qualitatively.

However, these distinctions in definitions between culture and climate are not always clear cut. Schoen and Teddlie (2008) found there to be many similarities between these concepts which they suggested had led to confusion. They argued that climate and culture are not actually separate constructs, but components of one broader construct that had been explored separately in different ways by diverse research communities. They presented a strong case for school climate being regarded as a second level or subset of school culture. Many scholars (Deal & Peterson, 2016; Schein, 2009; Wagner, 2006; Beare et al., 2018) choose to discuss concepts of climate and culture under the encompassing term of 'culture', and this is the stance I take in this study.

Models of Culture

Scholars generally agree an organisation's culture exists in layers or levels. At the heart of an organisation is deep, stable (hidden) culture, which is revealed through more visible layers of surface culture (Beare et al., 2018; Schein, 1985; Deal & Peterson, 2016; Hammond, 2018; Hofstede et al. 2010). Schein's foundational work proposed a three-level model where culture is seen as having hidden basic assumptions at its deepest level; espoused values at the second level, and more obvious artifacts of symbolic meaning on the surface that together reflect and reinforce the underlying values (Schein, 1985). In a similar fashion, Hofstede et al. (2010) conceptualised culture as an onion with outer layers of symbols, heroes and rituals that reveal the deeper cultural values at its core. Beare et al. (2018) suggested a model with hidden conceptual and

intangible foundations of values, philosophies and ideologies that are revealed through conceptual/verbal proclamations, visual symbols and behavioural manifestations, and where all elements impact and are impacted by interactions with the community. Aliza Maynard's Culture Tree model discussed by Hammond (2015) proposed a three-layer system of organisational culture that particularly relates to the trust of community members. These are the 'roots' of deep culture (the collective unconscious, beliefs and norms that have an intense emotional impact on trust); the 'branches' of shallow culture (unspoken rules that have a high emotional impact on trust) and the 'leaves' of surface culture (observable patterns with a low emotional impact on trust). Deal and Peterson (2016) outlined a model of school culture that incorporates aspects that are implicit (values and norms of behaviour) and explicit (symbols, traditions, rituals, celebrations, heroes and stories). The common thread in all these theoretical models is the idea that some aspects of culture are visible and other, deeper, aspects are invisible. Hammond's (2015) discussion of neurological theory further presented the view that the brain uses culture at all its levels to make sense of the world, and this idea can be applied to all the theoretical models mentioned above, regardless of variations. Understanding culture helps us make sense of the world.

Visible Aspects of School Culture

The more visible surface manifestations of culture occur in what Schein (1985) describes as two levels of 'artifacts' and 'espoused values', and what Beare et al. (2018) categorise as visual symbols, behavioural manifestations and conceptual/verbal proclamations.

School symbols and artifacts include items such as crests and mottos, uniform, architecture and facilities, honours boards, badges and memorabilia. These physical symbols are used to communicate culture (Hoy & Miskel, 2013; Deal & Peterson, 2016). Artifacts reflect and reinforce deeper ideas about what is valued by the members of the community (Deal & Peterson, 2016; Hoy & Miskel, 2013; Schein, 2009; Stolp & Smith, 1995). These artifacts can be easy to observe but difficult to decipher; they contain

underlying meaning and assumptions that may not be easily discernible to members outside the group (Schein, 2009).

School uniforms, for example, are important symbols of school culture. They constitute a visual expression of a student's affiliation with a particular school (Beare et al., 2018); they have a hierarchic function, conveying the differences between staff members and students, and distinguishing age groups within students; they make students visible and identifiable as members of a school community; and play a role in disciplinary mechanisms of schools (Reidy, 2021; Friedrich & Shanks, 2021). Uniforms also represent the history and tradition of a school, and provide cues to outsiders about the school's character, for example, whether it adheres to more traditional or more modern perspectives. Within schools, uniform reinforces institutional culture to students, identifying the wearer with objectives beyond the self (Reidy, 2021).

Similarly, crests and mottos constitute a symbolic 'livery' of the school (Beare et al., 2018). Crests are a visual summary of the underlying values and philosophy of the school; they can vary widely depending on whether a school has secular or religious origins. Some schools use and retain a traditional crest with symbolic imagery; more recently established schools often will use a more modern logo. Mottos often occur in association with crests and aim to encapsulate the school's philosophy and values through an aphorism. This could be in Latin, English or, in the case of some New Zealand schools, te reo Māori.

Architecture is another visible symbol of an organisation's culture (Schein, 1985; 2009; Deal & Peterson, 2016). A school's architecture (its building design, spatial configuration, and physical artefacts) is a potent cultural symbol, embedding and reinforcing shared values and expectations within the school community (Deal & Peterson, 2016; Beare et al., 2018).

Behavioural manifestations are also important aspects of school culture that both reflect and reinforce underlying values and philosophies. Deal & Peterson (2016) highlighted the importance of rituals and ceremonies in school culture. Rituals are the

routine ceremonies and rites that signal what is important in the organisation (Hoy & Miskel, 2013; Rossman et al. 1988). Rituals and ceremonies help keep community members connected, they link to tradition, foster renewal, and provide opportunities to bond with others (Peterson & Deal, 2002). Beare et al. (2018) further suggested that other behavioural manifestations of culture include the way rules and regulations are constructed and upheld, the psychological supports offered to students and staff, the way teaching and learning takes place, and operational processes that support the core business of education; all of these are outward behaviours that reflect and reinforce culture. Notably, much of this discourse relates to schools in the USA or the UK and while many of these aspects are relevant to schools who follow western traditions of schooling, there is little discussion in the literature about the impact of extra-curricular activity in relation to a school's culture. Playing sport, taking part in musical or dramatic productions, or performing in cultural groups are important aspects of secondary schooling in New Zealand, involving both students and staff. To the above list of behaviours I would therefore suggest that extra-curricular activities offered by a school are further examples of behavioural manifestations that reveal and reinforce underlying cultural values.

Conceptual and verbal proclamations are further ways that culture is revealed. Organisational stories convey and reinforce culture (Schein, 1989, 2009; Deal & Peterson, 2016; Hoy & Miskel, 2013; Beare et al. 2018). Stories are narratives that are based on true events, but they often combine truth and fiction. Myths are stories that communicate an unquestioned belief that cannot be demonstrated by the facts. Legends are stories that are retold and elaborated with fictional details (Hoy & Miskel, 2013). Stories are often about organisational heroes or heroines who epitomise the organisation; they provide insight into the core values of the organisation (Hoy & Miskel, 2013). A school's mission statement and values statement is another important conceptual and verbal manifestation. Schein (1985, 2009) regarded espoused beliefs as those which can be expressed at a conscious level, and which are socially validated by the shared experience of a group. They serve the function of guiding members of the group in how to deal with certain situations and train new members how to behave.

These articulated beliefs and values gradually become underlying assumptions supported by articulated sets of beliefs, norms and operational rules of behaviour. If espoused beliefs and values are reasonably congruent with the underlying assumptions then the articulation of those values into a philosophy of operating can be helpful in bringing the group together, serving as a source of identity and core mission (Schein, 2009).

Hidden Aspects of Culture

At the heart of an organisation's culture are basic assumptions: a complex set of tacit understandings about the nature of the way things work, and about the best way to handle problems or situations that occur in the organisation (Schein, 2009). These are so taken for granted, that the organisation members may not be aware of them nor be able to articulate them. Made up of norms and values, basic assumptions tend to be non-confrontable and nondebatably by group members, and therefore extremely difficult to change (Schein, 2009). Norms are the unspoken rules for what is regarded as customary or acceptable behaviour within the school (Schein, 1985; Stoll, 2000; Morgan, 1997). Morgan (1997) suggested that "life within a given culture flows smoothly only insofar as one's behaviour conforms with unwritten codes. Disrupt these norms and the ordered reality of life inevitably breaks down," (p. 139).

Values are at the core of what the school considers important; they define what is 'good', and what is meant by quality and excellence. Values shape behaviour, decision making, and attention because people attend to what they consider important (Peterson & Deal, 2002). Shared values lead to a sense of community and provide organisational stability. Once basic assumptions are established, group members will be most comfortable with others who share the same assumptions and uncomfortable in situations where different assumptions are held (Schein, 2009). These unseen aspects permeate all aspects of school culture (Deal & Peterson, 2016; Wagner, 2006). Basic assumptions define for members of the community what to pay attention to, what things mean, how to react emotionally to what is going on, and what actions to take in various kinds of situations (Schein, 1985; Deal & Peterson, 2016). Basic assumptions

impact change initiatives: when proposed changes don't align with the core values of the culture, members are likely to be resistant to implementation (Schein, 2009, Poskitt, 1989).

Conceptual Framework for Analysis

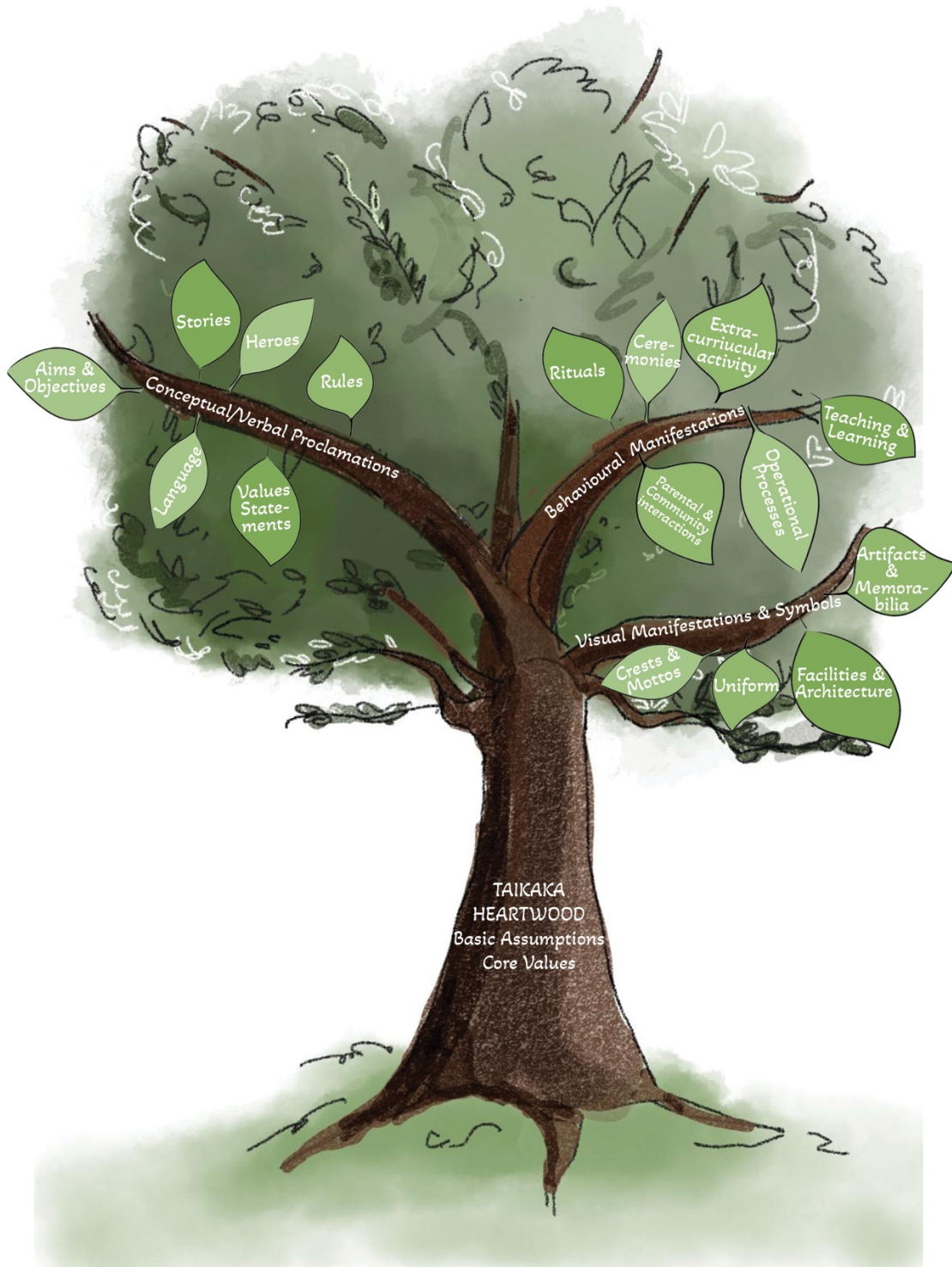
The theoretical aspects of culture outlined above provide useful guides for the practical analysis of school culture. In analysing my dataset as it relates to the culture of Avondale College, I propose a simple conceptual framework that draws on Schein's (1985, 2009) levels of culture, Beare et al.'s (2018) three-part framework of how visible culture is manifested, and Aliza Maynard's (Hammond, 2015) concept of a culture tree.

This proposed conceptual framework sees school culture as a rākau/tree. At its core of this tree's trunk is taikākā/heartwood. These are the strong, underlying and hidden core values that shape all other aspects of school culture. Stemming from this trunk are three main branches which represent three ways that visible culture is manifested, with each branch supporting leaves that stem from these. The branches are: visual manifestations and symbols, with 'leaves' of the school's crest and motto, uniform, facilities and architecture, artifacts and memorabilia. The second branch represents behavioural manifestations, as seen in the 'leaves' of rituals, ceremonies, rules and regulations, teaching and learning, operational procedures and extra-curricular activities. The third branch represents conceptual and verbal proclamations – evidenced by the 'leaves' of the school's aims and objectives, mission statement, school values, organisational stories, and heroes. This theoretical concept is depicted in the figure below, and I will explore further how it relates to the particular culture of Avondale College in the Findings chapter.

Te Rākau o School Culture

Figure 3

Te Rākau o School Culture



Note. Illustration by Rose Elijaš and Susan Elijaš.

2.3 Determinants of school culture

Scholars suggest that many factors contribute to the development of a unique school culture, including its context, history and the people in it (Stoll, 2000; Hoy & Miskel, 2013). Brown (2004) noted that schools are complex, harbouring many different conflicting aspects, each affecting student learning in different ways. He identified factors such as ethnicity, social class, learning styles, aspirations, bureaucracy and the political nature of educational governance as contributing to “the cultural layer cake” of secondary schooling (Brown, 2004, p.3).

School culture is influenced by a school’s external context. Political and economic factors or changes in national educational policies affect what is officially valued or mandated in schools, and this varies widely across the globe. In New Zealand, as previously outlined, the government’s Ministry of Education sets educational policy and provides funding to public schools, which has a significant impact on the way schools operate (Ministry of Education, 2020). Examples include the Tomorrow’s Schools reforms of 1989, the introduction and later redevelopment of NCEA in the early 2000s and again in 2025, and changes to school funding models such as the former decile system and the current Equity Index (Ministry of Education, 2020). A further example is the former legal requirement that school boards must give effect to Te Tiriti o Waitangi, introduced in the Education and Training Act 2020 (s. 127) which was revoked through the Education and Training Amendment Act 2025. At the same time, New Zealand schools also function autonomously, with self-governing school boards shaping individual school direction, operations, and culture.

Socio-economic factors have an impact on school culture. This is a factor recognised by the New Zealand Government in the funding models used to address equity issues between schools located in higher or lower socio-economic areas. Interestingly, educational researcher John Hattie observed that well-resourced schools are not necessarily the most effective, suggesting that if a culture of deficit thinking and impoverished mindsets are present then schools will be less effective, regardless of how well resourced they are (Hattie & Larsen, 2020).

The ethnic makeup of a school population can shape a school's culture. Scholars of culturally responsive pedagogy note that different ethnic cultures value different ways of being and learning (Hammond, 2015; Bishop, 2023). Hammond (2015) argued that cultural archetypes, while generalised, nonetheless give insight into how different groups operate. For example, whether individualism or collectivism is most valued by a culture will impact how individual students learn and relate to others. In many European societies and in North America, individualism is highly valued, with an emphasis on individual achievement and independence. In collectivist societies such as those found in Latin America, Asia, Africa, the Middle East, some Slavic cultures, and the Pacific Islands, relationships and interdependence within the community and cooperative learning is valued. Cultural psychologist Geert Hofstede ranked New Zealand fifth highest in an individualist-collectivist continuum, with 79/100 points, suggesting that, in general, it is a society that values self-orientated, individual effort in business and learning (Hofstede et al., 2010). Hammond (2015) emphasised that this scale is a continuum and that often societies can contain elements of both individual and collectivism; a relevant point for New Zealand where the dominant European/Pākehā culture can overshadow the values of less dominant cultures. Māori culture can be seen to value collectivism, as evidenced by the importance placed on concepts such as whanaungatanga (relationships and belonging). Similarly, Pacific Islands cultures value collectivism; an important consideration given that Auckland, where Avondale College is located, is the world's largest Pacific Island city. Taken together, these examples highlight how an individual school's culture is impacted and shaped by external socio-economic and cultural factors that may be different for each school, depending on context and location.

External events such as natural disasters or pandemics can also impact a school's culture. A recent example of this is the Covid pandemic which saw Auckland schools close for more than 16 weeks during 2020 and 2021. School closures necessitated a rapid shift to distance learning via digital technology, requiring different ways of interacting, and leading to significant and ongoing impacts on student and staff relationships and wellbeing (Moore, 2024; Thornton, 2021).

The age of a school is another factor that influences school culture, particularly in relation to its potential for cultural change. Stoll (2000) drew upon Schein's identification of three significant developmental periods in a business organisation's life to suggest the age of a school can reflect its cultural stage and subsequent potential for change and transformation. In the early years of a new school, dominant values emanate from its founders, and the school's culture and values are clarified and shared with the community as a unifying force. In midlife, a school is established but growth and renewal may be needed due to internal change or external contexts. At this point, the most important aspects of the culture are embedded and increasingly hidden. Change becomes more difficult because culture is more implicit and harder to articulate and understand. In the third phase, (maturity and/or stagnation and decline) cultural change is problematic if the school has ceased growing and responding to its environment. Dysfunctional elements may have arisen and challenges to embedded assumptions may be resisted (Schein, 2009; Stoll, 2000).

Additionally, school size impacts culture. Hattie (2023) presented research that shows people in larger schools have less sense of belonging than those in smaller schools, and that people in small schools are more likely to know and respect each other. However, larger schools are potentially able to provide a more optimal curriculum and use resources to maximise the collective efficacy and the skills of teachers. Hattie argued that more important than population is how a school relates to students' sense of belonging, regardless of size.

Collectively, these external socio-economic, cultural and other factors contribute to the complex and multi-layered nature of school culture, which is further impacted and shaped by community members who bring with them their own values systems, experiences and expectations. For these reasons, each school's culture, and its particular outcomes, is unique.

2.4 Culture and outcomes

Culture and Identity

All the elements that contribute to the culture of a school combine to create a cohesive school identity (Deal & Peterson, 2016). Schein (2017) noted that identity has both an external component: how the organisation presents itself to the outside; and an internal component of what its inner sense of self is. Deal and Peterson (2016) further argued that in schools the link between identity and image is complex; a school's meaning comes from a deeper set of accomplishments and aims than just achievement scores. This highlights the complexity of the relationship between a school's culture, its identity, and how outcomes are understood and evaluated.

Because local challenges, beliefs about education, and external factors are different, each cultural profile is unique. Beare et al. (2018) phrased this as every school having a "distinctive personality, its own 'character'" (p. 190). Outward manifestations of culture send clear signals about what is valued by a particular school (Beare et al., 2018; Deal & Peterson, 2016). A school's unique identity is reinforced by stories and ceremonies that reflect 'who we are' and 'what we stand for' (Deal & Peterson, 2016). In this way, while culture and identity are interconnected, it is the culture that underpins and shapes identity, making it an important focal point for understanding the deeper influences at play within the school.

School culture and effectiveness

School culture is widely recognised as a lever for effectiveness and improvement. Broadly defined, effectiveness is regarded as the successful achievement of goals. What defines those goals, and therefore the school's effectiveness, is a related area of discussion, with definitions shifting across time and across stakeholders. Schools are complex institutions and goals may vary for school leaders, teachers, students and parents (Hoy & Miskel, 2013). Schools themselves use multiple measures to assess effective outcomes, including cognitive (academic achievement) and relational (wellbeing and belonging) (Hoy & Miskel, 2013). Hattie (2023) similarly pointed out that

there are many outcomes of schooling, for example: attitudes, physical outcomes, belongingness, respect, citizenship and the love of learning. With regards to academic achievement, Hattie makes a strong case for the goal of students gaining at least a year's growth for a year's input. He noted that narrow definitions of excellence have led to curricula being based on achievement in a few privileged domains, and argued that "we need a richer, wider and more worthwhile basket of goods to define the value of schooling" (Hattie, 2023, p. 153). What defines school effectiveness is the subject of ongoing scholarly discussion.

In a New Zealand context, the Ministry of Education (2025) considers the following criteria to be measures of school success: student achievement and progress; equity (especially for Māori and Pacific learners); engagement with whānau and community; and compliance with curriculum and assessment standards. The stated vision of The New Zealand Curriculum and Te Mātauranga o Aotearoa is that all young people are successful "confident, connected, actively involved, lifelong learners" (Education Review Office, n.d.). In relation to Māori students specifically, Bishop (2023) argued that success is not just about task achievement but includes things like: becoming successful self-managing learners, learning how to be a life-long learner, and gaining the 'intangibles' and 'soft skills' that prepare students well for life beyond schooling. He also identified the importance of students standing tall and being proud of their identity as Māori; a goal related to cultural sustainability.

Research links between school culture and achievement

While definitions of successful outcomes vary, the majority of research on school effectiveness focuses on links between school culture and academic achievement. Rutter et al.'s (1979) study of schools in the UK established school 'ethos' (culture) as the prime contributor to academic achievement. Subsequent studies have endorsed this connection: the use of the School Culture Triage survey in the USA found there is a strong connection between school culture and student achievement (Wagner, 2006). The study also found connections between school culture and staff member

satisfaction, parent engagement, and community support (Wagner, 2006). Lee and Shute (2010) found that student engagement and learning strategies operating in a school culture that is conducive to learning and reinforced by parents and peers produce high academic achievement. Similarly, Bryk and colleagues also found that culture or climate is an important factor in facilitating academic achievement (Bryk et al., 2010).

Characteristics of effective cultures

Many researchers have attempted to identify the cultural characteristics critical to school effectiveness and success. This connects to a much larger discourse on pedagogy and teaching practice, analysis of which is beyond the parameters of this study; however, aspects relevant to school culture that are shown to lead to positive outcomes include: having a culture that values high quality, effective teachers (Hattie, 2009, 2023; Bishop, 2023); having a clear mission focused on student learning (Levine & Lezotte, 1990; Hoy & Miskel, 2013); fostering high expectations for all students (Bishop, 2023; Levine & Lezotte, 1990); valuing positive relationships that create a sense of community and social trust (Rutter et al., 1979; Brown, 2004; Wagner, 2006); creating a sense of belonging (Berryman and Elley, 2019); and having effective leadership (Deal & Peterson, 2016; Plaku & Leka, 2025), among others.

Unsurprisingly, scholars agree that positive cultural factors foster success in schools, whereas dysfunctional or 'toxic' cultures have a negative effect on belief and progress (Brown, 2004; Maslowski, 2001; Deal & Peterson, 2016; Stolp & Smith, 1995), as well as having a negative impact on the mental health and wellbeing of community members (Montiero & Joseph, 2023). Peterson & Deal (2002) argued that positive, professional school cultures foster productivity, reinforce collaborative problem solving, planning, and data-driven decision making. Wagner (2006) demonstrated that healthy school cultures can be measured by professional collaboration, affiliative and collegial relationships, and efficacy or self-determination, and that the culture of a school is linked to staff member satisfaction, parent engagement and community support. Similarly, data produced by using the Organisational Health Index (OHI) not only

identified sound interpersonal dynamics in school life as being important ends in themselves, but that they are also predictive of school effectiveness, student achievement, organisational commitment, collaborative teacher attitudes and faculty trust in colleagues and in the principal (Hoy & Miskel, 2013). As can be seen by the above studies, school culture shapes achievement, expectations, relations and collective efficacy, for better or for worse.

School culture, and improvement and change

Closely linked to the discourse on school culture and effectiveness is the large body of research related to school improvement and change. Simply stated, if a school's effectiveness is to improve, then some kind of transformational shift is seen to be required. Transforming outcomes requires intentional cultural shifts (Schein, 2009), as well as cultural alignment and buy-in from stakeholders (Rossman et al., 1988; Stoll & Fink). Erickson (1987) argued that seeing patterns of social organisation as grounded in culture and human agency provides a "reasoned basis for hope in the possibility of educational reform" (p. 23). Together, these viewpoints highlight the importance of understanding culture in order to effect improvement and change.

Because norms shape reactions to internally or externally proposed or imposed improvements, Stoll (2000) argued that it is important for schools to understand what unspoken norms are. This idea underpinned the work of Saphier and King (1985) and Stoll and Fink (1996) who identified that improving schools are typified by norms of shared goals, collective responsibility, collaboration, continuous improvement, openness, and mutual respect that foster learning and support for all.

Many scholars note that school effectiveness and improvement are impacted by the way that school cultures shift and move (Stoll, 2000; Hargreaves, 1995; Stoll & Fink, 1996). While the core of a school's culture may be well established and stable, it is nonetheless a dynamic phenomenon that is constantly being impacted by external factors, interpersonal relationships and leadership behaviour (Schein, 1985, 2009; Stolp & Smith, 1995). Loup (1996) noted even though cultural content carries with it a

deep sense of obligation amongst organisational members, it is nevertheless subject to changes as members come into contact with and/or create new ideas. Leaders have the potential to shape and ‘renovate’ the culture of their school (Deal & Peterson, 2016; Schein, 2009) but in order to do so effectively must be aware of the deep underlying values that shape the culture. Hoy and Miskel (2013) emphasised that a strong culture can be a liability in times of rapid change because the organisation’s culture may be so ingrained that it prevents adaptation to new constraints.

Cultural change is most effective when the underlying core values of community members are aligned. In a local example, Poskitt’s (1989) ethnographic study of two New Zealand schools found that each school held distinct “sacred values” (p.88), deep and widespread cultural commitments that shaped how change occurred. School change was most successful when it was compatible with each school’s deepest cultural values.

Diehl (2024) gives further insight into the difficulty of sustaining transformation, demonstrating that declarative and procedural culture are stored in different parts of memory systems and acquired through different pathways. He observed that teachers often understand the principles of reform (declarative culture) but then fail to enact them (procedural culture). Diehl highlighted the importance of bridging the declarative-procedural gap through situated practice, coaching and rehearsal, so that real change will be widespread and effective. In a local example, Bishop (2023) noted that many New Zealand schools who initially implemented the Teaching to the North-East programme, which was aimed at improving both relational and effective teacher practice, were unable to sustain it authentically over time. Diehl’s findings about declarative and procedural culture, and the underlying issue of cultural alignment gives insight as to why transformative change can be hard to achieve.

Finally, Stoll (2000) showed that real improvement cannot come from anywhere other than within schools themselves, and “within” is a complex web of values and beliefs, norms, social and power relationships and emotions. Sustained transformation “requires an understanding of and respect for the different meanings and

interpretations people bring to educational initiatives, and work to develop shared meanings underpinned by norms that will promote sustainable school improvement” (Stoll, 2000, p. 14). Together, these insights reinforce the idea that real change and transformation require the delicate work of reshaping a school’s underlying cultural fabric rather than relying on externally mandated change.

2.5 Relational/culturally responsive dimensions

The importance of relationships, community, identity and belonging are recurrent themes in school culture literature. Hattie (2023) noted that a school’s culture is powerful, affecting the development of students’ sense of identity and belonging. Brown (2004) argued that relationships are at the core of school culture. Where people and relationships are valued, people flourish. The relational aspects of a positive school culture connect people together, creating a sense of community, identity and belonging; they help people find meaning in their lives, enhance wellbeing and provide an essential foundation for student achievement and success (Deal & Peterson, 2016; Hoy & Miskel, 2013; Stoll, 2000).

Relationships influence the way an organisation’s culture forms and develops. Schein (2016) argued that new members of any organisation bring their own cultural learning from previous groups, education and previous socialisation experiences, but as the new group develops its own shared history, it will develop new assumptions that contribute to the culture of this particular group. Building on this idea, Brown (2004) argued that shared experiences such as those found in a particular school culture are significant as they establish relationship (or ‘community’) with others and help provide the context people need to find meaning in their lives. He suggested that “culture is rooted in relationships” (p. 9); and that close and supportive relationships (teacher-student, student-student, and teacher-teacher) are a significant aspect of a productive school culture. Similarly, Mak’s (1998) study of a New Zealand school found that having positive relationships with students, colleagues and leaders was a key factor in

enhancing job satisfaction for teachers. Plaku and Leka (2025) found that shared rituals, celebrations, and storytelling reinforce a sense of identity and belonging among community members. These studies highlight the importance of positive relationships in a healthy school culture.

Belonging

A sense of belonging is another important factor and outcome of positive school culture. Belonging refers to “the extent that students feel personally accepted, respected and included and supported by others in the school social environment” (Hattie, 2023, p. 205). Hattie (2023) further argued that a sense of belonging is an important precursor to students’ engagement with learning. Similarly, Korpershoek et al., (2020) found that students who identify with their school develop a perception of belonging that then facilitates their engagement and commitment to schooling.

A shared sense of common purpose amongst community members is important for not only creating a sense of belonging to a community, but also for achieving goals of improvement or change. Rutter et al., (1979) identified that a sense of community and social trust among staff members contributed to shared commitment towards school improvement. Positive relationships in school culture are also closely linked to positive student outcomes. Gay (2018), Hattie (2023), and Bishop (2023) argued that the way teachers relate to their students is critical to their success. Proponents of relational pedagogy and culturally responsive pedagogy identify relationships as foundational to positive student outcomes, academically and holistically. Hinsdale (2023) argued that positive teacher–student relationships encourage students’ engagement work habits, and wellbeing, further creating an environment that encourages students to experience a sense of belonging at school.

Contemporary relational scholars such as Gay (2018) and Hinsdale (2023) further argued that prioritising positive teacher-student relationships is especially important given the challenging context of twenty-first-century educational environments that reflect troubled social histories across differences of socioeconomic class, gender,

race and ethnicity, and ability status. The recognition of power dynamics and historical inequities has led to a large body of international scholarship calling for the embedding of more culturally responsive and inclusive practices into school culture. For example, Brown-Jeffy and Cooper (2011) proposed using Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) as a framework to help bridge cultural gaps and improve educational equity. Many scholars point out that having a school culture where positive relationships are prioritised is not enough in itself; highly functional schools combine solid relationships with aspirational excellence and sound pedagogy to support student success (Hattie, 2023; Bishop 2023).

In a New Zealand context, ideas about culturally responsive practice, relationships and belonging in relation to school culture are often articulated in relation to the term 'whanaungatanga'.

Whanaungatanga: Connection and relationship in the context of Aotearoa New Zealand

The terms whānau and whanaungatanga feature prominently across educational policies, strategies and guidelines at both national and school levels in Aotearoa New Zealand. Whanaungatanga is one of the guiding principles underpinning the professional code and standards of teachers in New Zealand (New Zealand Ministry of Education & New Zealand Teachers Council, 2011).

Whanaungatanga is a Māori concept stemming from the word whānau, that refers to the extended family-like relationships obligations within a group (Bishop et al. 2014). In an educational context, whanaungatanga refers to creating learning environments that feel like a whānau: where power is shared, relationships are caring and learning is co-constructed (Bishop et al., 2014). The Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand defines whanaungatanga as "engaging in positive and collaborative relationships with our learners, their families and whanau, our colleagues and the wider community" (New Zealand Ministry of Education & New Zealand Teachers Council, 2011).

Berryman and Elley (2019) suggested that whanaungatanga and belonging is foundational to student success and warned that a persistent focus on excellence without supporting a sense of belonging can result in negative consequences for students. This idea is supported by Bishop et al.'s (2014) findings that relationships (especially those modelled on whanaungatanga) are critical for effective teaching and learning, and for the success of Māori students. They found there was a strong correlation between whanaungatanga and discursive teaching practices, student engagement and achievement, and that high levels of effective practice and student engagement did not occur without whanaungatanga. Their finding that whanaungatanga is necessary but not sufficient, that it must be paired with high expectations, culturally responsive strategies and effective pedagogy provides the basis for Bishop's (2023) model of culturally responsive practice, 'teaching to the North-East'. In this framework, Bishop argued for the necessity of both improving teaching practice and improving relationships in order to achieve better outcomes for Māori students. Importantly, he contended that "what is good for Māori is good for all" (p. 203), a finding supported by Hattie (2023) who argued that what works best for all students may not work best for minority students, but what works best for minority students is likely to work best for all students. In this way, relational education practices can be seen to benefit all students.

2.6 Leadership and school culture

Woven throughout discourse on school culture, effectiveness, transformation, and the relational and culturally responsive approaches discussed above is the key idea that leadership is central to school culture. Hoy and Miskel (2013) suggested that leadership has three important functions: binding groups; helping the group learn new things; and teaching others how to lead; all three of these functions are closely related to the task of sustaining and influencing school culture. Plaku and Leka's (2025) research showed that principals play a decisive role in shaping school culture. Schein (2009) went

further, suggesting that the “only thing of real importance that leaders do is to create and manage culture” (p. 52).

This idea is echoed by Deal and Peterson (2016) who argued that effective school leadership is about shaping meaning not just managing tasks. They suggested that leaders must act as symbolic figures who shape meaning through stories, symbolism and symbols. Leadership is not just managerial, but about inspiring belief and purpose. Similarly, Mak (1998) demonstrated that principals act as cultural leaders by articulating and embodying school values, creating school vision and fostering collaboration. Plaku and Leka (2025) also regarded principals as cultural leaders, suggesting their leadership style (whether collaborative, authoritarian or somewhere between) strongly influences teacher morale, engagement and school culture. They suggested positive leadership fosters collegiality, self-determination and professional growth. Negative leadership leads to disengagement and defensive behaviours. Similarly, Brown (2004) emphasised the relational function of leadership, arguing that effective leadership fosters organised social learning, challenges isolation and builds collective capacity. Hattie (2023) also highlighted the role leaders can play in articulating a shared narrative that focuses on enhancing impact in the classroom. He further suggested a major role of leaders is to develop, esteem, and highlight the culture, climate, and collective impact for all educators and students to feel invited to thrive and learn.

In te ao Māori, leaders are known as rangatira, the word stemming from kairanga, which means weaving (Te Aka Māori Dictionary, n.d.) Bishop (2023) argued that school leaders are the weavers of their people. They have responsibility for the wellbeing of their people, and it is in their actions of responding to and supporting their people that a rangatira is measured. Bishop argued that in the modern school settings of Aotearoa New Zealand, especially since the self-managing school structures implemented by the Tomorrow’s Schools reforms, principals have traditionally been seen as managers. He suggested that there needs to be a shift in focus towards leadership that approximates more of the rangatira concept, where principals draw their community together as

whānau to serve the collective goals, interacting in ways that support learning and monitoring impact. This echoes Deal and Peterson's (2009) call for principals to be more than just managers, instead taking on an inspirational role in the way they shape and reinforce culture.

In summary, while different scholars take different approaches to what is or should be valued in an educational leader, they agree that school leaders have a significant impact on shaping and sustaining school culture, which in turn impacts outcomes for all.

2.7 Summary

This chapter has synthesised and critiqued literature in the field of school culture research generally, and in the context of Aotearoa New Zealand.

It has highlighted the complexity of definition and noted that school culture is both dynamic and stable; consisting of core values and hidden basic assumptions that are revealed through symbolic artefacts, and behavioural and verbal manifestations.

Important themes in the literature have been identified; in particular, how school culture affects school effectiveness/achievement and the link between school culture and improvement and transformative change. Relationships are shown to be central to school culture, impacting community, identity, belonging and wellbeing, as well as academic achievement and success. The importance of relationships and community (whanaungatanga) in a New Zealand context is also highlighted. Leadership is shown to be key to maintaining and improving school culture.

Drawing on theoretical models of school culture, a new conceptual framework has been proposed, of a tree where heartwood represents core values, and branches and leaves represent the visible symbols, behaviours and verbal/conceptual manifestations of school culture.

While much has been written about the culture of schools in western education traditions, especially in relation to schools in the USA and UK, a review of the literature has identified a scarcity of recent empirical studies of New Zealand secondary schools. This study adds to the body of research by examining the school culture of one New Zealand school in particular: Avondale College.

The following chapter examines the methodology used in this study of Avondale College's unique culture.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction to Methodology

This research aims to explore what stakeholder narratives at Avondale College reveal about the underlying values (heartwood) of its culture, and to further consider how understanding the culture can help position the college for the future.

This chapter explains the interpretive paradigm underpinning the study, the qualitative methods used for data collection, and the process of analysis using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) and the lens of organisational culture.

3.2. Research Paradigm and Theoretical Position

This study adopts a relativist ontology and a subjectivist epistemology approach, making the assumption that reality is multiple and constructed through social interaction. It uses an inductive, qualitative design approach, located within a social constructionism paradigm. Given this position, themes constructed through Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) of participants' narratives are understood as interpretive patterns co-constructed by the researcher and participants, rather than objective truths (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

The main purpose of qualitative research is to provide an in-depth description and understanding of the human experience (Lichtman, 2023). Qualitative research involves “the studied use of and collection of a variety of empirical materials that describe routine and problematic moments and meaning in individuals' lives” (Gruba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 2). Qualitative research is holistic, aiming for description, understanding, and interpretation. It is also flexible, allowing for inductive and multi-linear thinking (Lichtman, 2023).

A qualitative research approach was therefore well suited to this study's purpose of exploring meanings ascribed to stakeholders' narratives about their experiences of being members of the Avondale College community.

Social constructionism is the view that all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context (Crotty, 1998). In a social constructionist view, meaning is not discovered but constructed by people as they engage with the world they are interpreting. Social constructionist conceptualisations treat language as social and meaning as malleable and flexible. Meaning is constructed in and through language and the ways people talk about things (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Language is understood as symbolic, powerful, and active, rather than neutral and passive.

A social constructionist approach is therefore well suited to the research aim of understanding the subjective experiences of participants who have been and are members of the Avondale College community. Their reality of these experiences is constructed through social interactions and shared meanings and subjectively shaped by cultural and social processes. This is of relevance to this study of the culture of the school, which identifies patterns of meaning in participants' stories and language that reflect underlying values and norms that have helped them make sense of their world.

3.3 Methodological Approach

In considering which qualitative research methods would be best suited to exploring participants' stories about school culture, several viable options emerged. Narrative analysis allows for the examination of stories: their structure, sequencing and the meaning they hold for the narrator. In narrative study, "attention shifts to the details – how and why a particular event is storied, or what a narrator accomplishes by developing the story in *that* way, and effects on the reader or listener" (Riessman, 2007, p. 12). In narrative analysis, the approach is particularly on the individual stories rather than on any shared meanings identified across a dataset.

In contrast, Thematic analysis (TA) focuses on identifying patterns of meaning ("themes") across a dataset, allowing comparison across participants (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This occurs through a rigorous process of data familiarisation, data coding, and

theme development and revision. Because this study aimed to analyse shared meanings, values and norms rather than individual life stories, I found Thematic Analysis to be the most appropriate choice of methodology.

Boyatzis (1998) suggests Thematic Analysis is “a way of seeing” (p. 1) that moves the researcher through three phases: observing, encoding and interpreting data. Used in this way, it can be seen as a way of encoding qualitative information.

Braun & Clarke (2022) identify three broad approaches to Thematic Analysis: coding reliability TA, codebook TA and reflexive TA. I found Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) to be the most compelling and appropriate methodology of these, as it is well suited for exploring patterns and meanings (themes) across the dataset in a flexible, in-depth and reflexive way. In RTA, (unlike codebook or reliability TA) themes are researcher-generated, not inherent.

One of the key advantages of RTA is the flexibility it offers to researchers. It is possible to do RTA using different broad theoretical frameworks, foci for meaning, and orientations to data, without these approaches being mutually exclusive (Braun & Clarke, 2022). In orientation to the data, I took mostly an inductive approach, with coding capturing both semantic meaning (what was stated on the surface), as well as latent meaning (what was lying beneath the narratives). An inductive approach also drove the theme development. As time passed, and my reading incorporated more theoretical constructs, some deductive analysis was included, initially through the lens of the theory of Schein’s organisational culture as it relates to schools, and latterly through the conceptual framework of ‘Te Rākau o School Culture’ outlined in the previous section.

The flexibility offered by RTA was also important as it allowed me to acknowledge and embrace the ambiguity and nuance that emerged from my participants’ narratives. This was especially the case as I was interested in exploring not only what people were saying, but how and why they were saying it; understanding that underlying values and cultural norms of school culture can be revealed (and constructed) by participants’

narratives (Deal & Peterson, 2016). A flexible approach was also important given the complexities of the multiple communities and experiences discussed by the participants, which further took place across a 36-year period of time.

Braun and Clarke (2022) note that it is impossible for inductive analysis to be objective, particularly when the researcher is part of the community they are studying. “Who we are shapes what we notice... and the stories we tell about them” (p.56). As a member of the Avondale College community, I am both an embedded participant and an observer of the school’s culture. Braun and Clarke (2022) further emphasise that researcher subjectivity is not a flaw to eliminate but a central analytic tool. Schein (2009) also notes that an embedded researcher can potentially add understanding and deep insight to cultural aspects that might be missed by an outsider; however, he cautions that familiarity may lead to an insider overlooking contradictions or dysfunctions because they are seen to be ‘normal’. RTA allowed me to consider my positioning within the community as a resource rather than a source of bias, and to engage with the data in a way that added to the depth of perspective in the analysis. At the same time, I was very conscious of needing to approach the research in a critically reflexive and questioning manner, being aware that certain aspects of the school’s culture may appear ‘normal’ simply because it was familiar to me. Reflexivity was an important aspect of doing this in a high-quality and trustworthy way.

3.4. Reflexivity

Lichtman (2023) notes that the researcher's role in qualitative research is critical because he or she makes sense of, or constructs, a view of the world. The attempt to seek and define the underlying culture of Avondale College is an interpretive act of construction. Social constructionist theory proposes that knowledge is constructed by the researcher and is affected by his or her context. As a dynamic force, the researcher constantly adapts and modifies a position with regard to the research topic, the way that questions are formulated, and the interpretations given to the data (Lichtman, 2023).

For this reason, reflexivity is key to good qualitative analysis, and researchers must strive to understand and 'own their perspectives' throughout the research process (Elliott et al., 1999). Braun & Clarke (2022) suggest that reflexivity involves the researcher recognising and taking responsibility for their own position within the research and the effect that it may have on the setting and people being studied, questions being asked, data being collected and its interpretation.

To ensure high-quality and reflexive practice, I kept a reflexive journal throughout the research process. A reflective or reflexive journal is "a repository for documenting and storing thoughts for subsequent reflection, interrogation, and meaning-making," (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 19). Used in this way it becomes a tool that allows the researcher to make sense of their research and research journey, facilitating insight and critical engagement. Writing in my reflexive journal allowed me to note and consider my responses to aspects that arose in the interviews to which I had a strong reaction or opinion. It also enabled me to notice and explore my (pre-existing) assumptions and viewpoints. For example, in my day-to-day role as the school's Communications Director I have a professional obligation to promote and protect my institution's reputation, telling organisational stories through a positive lens. However, in order to engage authentically as a researcher, I deliberately had to adjust my perspective and be prepared to acknowledge and explore tensions that exist in the culture of the school.

Similarly, my personal connection to many of the participants was another cause for self-reflection. I was conscious of the trust they placed in me in sharing their stories, and the responsibility that I had to tell their stories respectfully yet truthfully. I was also aware that familiarity with the participants might influence the way that they responded to me. Because I have a long history of connection with the school, I have long-standing relationships with some of my participants. I was aware that there was the potential for participants to assume shared knowledge and therefore not speak about certain aspects of events. In the interview transcriptions there are several examples where I say to the participant: "tell me more about that" in an attempt to elicit more information about an event or situation. In some cases, familiarity was an advantage as I knew there

was more to a story that could be shared and was able to encourage participants to share further. At the same time, I was conscious of not asking leading questions or indicating that I wished them to respond in a certain way. Questions were designed to be open ended, and frequently participants went on to share other aspects and stories beyond what the original question had asked.

Familiarity also carried the risk that some participants may not have wished to share negative thoughts or opinions with me, particularly given my position as the school's Communications Director. I was conscious of fostering an open interview and supportive interview environment where participants were encouraged to share both positive and challenging experiences. Participants were also reassured that they could indicate if they wished any information not to be included in the research.

Excerpts from my reflexive journal illustrate some of my thinking about these aspects throughout the research process. For example, when preparing for the interviews I wrote: "I might be biased about showing positive aspects at the exclusion of negative... participants may feel reserved about communicating negatively to me." And later: "They [participants] may not wish to negatively impact my good opinion by sharing negative aspects..." These reflections indicate some awareness of the potential for both participant self-censorship and researcher bias within the study.

Reflexive practice also allowed me to critically examine power dynamics at play within the research process. As the researcher I held significant authority in how the research would be interpreted and presented, as well as some relational influence within my professional community. This raised important questions about whether participants would feel their views were accurately represented in the study. Power was also relational and fluid – for example, interviewing senior leaders introduced its own complexities – whereas in other contexts such as with the recent former student, I was in the dominant position. My journal also reflects an awareness of ongoing professional relationships influencing interpretation: "I am... impacted by the power dynamic... I need to maintain that relationship going forward." Journaling helped me unpack my

responses to points of tension such as these, to note contradictions, and to explore aspects that I hadn't considered previously.

Beyond personal reflection, my journal also became a place to explore ideas around methodological choices and how these shape the production of knowledge. One entry written in the midst of coding and candidate theme construction expresses this idea simply: "I am one big filter machine!" This statement recognises the challenge of the analytical process in deciding what information is included or highlighted and what is left out. In addition to my own sense of commitment to fair representation of the interviewee's perspectives, I kept in mind a further moral guardrail on my interpretation and analysis, which was if another interpretive researcher were to undertake the same study, they would no doubt arrive at different interpretations and points of emphasis, but should find nothing contradictory. Reflexivity was not just limited to my journal but was an active and ongoing practice that I engaged with throughout the research process. This meant deliberately questioning points of alignment or tension and discomfort in the dataset, revisiting transcripts to make sure I had correctly interpreted meaning, and using the reflexive journal to examine how my assumptions impacted the generation and interpretation of data.

As Braun and Clarke (2022) suggest, reflexivity was an essential factor in my journey from being simply a cultural member to becoming a cultural commentator.

3.5. Research Design

Participants and Sampling

Braun & Clarke (2022) note that RTA allows for flexibility around dataset size and composition. Smaller datasets can provide 'information rich' data items, giving access to a diverse range of meanings, perspectives and experiences, from which the researcher can explore, develop, and interpret patterns of meaning. For this reason, eleven participants were selected from purposive sampling, ensuring representation

across a range of time, experiences and positions at Avondale College. These included school leaders, principals, board members, long-standing staff members, community members, and former students. While I would have liked to have included many others, the scope of a Masters-level thesis meant that interviewing more participants would have provided more data than could realistically be used in this context. I chose not to include any current students due to the study's focus on cultural perspectives across time, in addition to the ethical considerations around interviewing minors, and because the participant who had recently finished school was able to speak about the experiences of being a recent student. At the same time, he was also able to offer a considered and mature viewpoint because he was no longer a student.

Seven of the eleven participants had more than one connection or role at the school, for example, being both a staff member and a parent of a current or former student of the school, or being a student and also a board member. Many of the participants are enduring members of the school community, and therefore had observed and/or directly contributed to or shaped the school's culture over time.

Table 4

Participant Characteristics

Participant	Role/Position	Relationship to school	Timeframe
Participant 1	Current senior leader	School leadership	2020-present
Participant 2	Former senior leader	School leadership	2001 – 2019
Participant 3	Former student	Family connection to leadership	1980s – 1990s
Participant 4	Board member	Former student; grandparent	1970s - present

Participant 5	Former board & staff member	Pastoral/cultural leadership	1990s-2020s
Participant 6	Kaumātua	Cultural leadership	2019-present
Participant 7	Teacher	Former student, parent, staff member	1980s - present
Participant 8	Teacher & middle leader	Long-standing staff member	Pre-1990s - present
Participant 9	Former teacher	Programme leadership	1980s – 2010s
Participant 10	Recent former student	Student leadership	2020s
Participant 11	Administrative staff	Long-term staff; parent	1980s - present

Note: Participant descriptors have been generalised to protect anonymity while retaining analytically relevant characteristics. Due to the small and interconnected nature of the research, complete anonymity cannot be guaranteed.

In Reflexive Thematic Analysis, depth and richness is more important than saturation (Braun & Clarke, 2022). My sample size was deliberately small, just eleven participants, so that I could capture stories that were rich and deep and highly appropriate to RTA, as well as being well-suited to the aims of the research and the scope of a Master's study this size.

Data Collection

Data was collected in semi-structured interviews designed to generate conversation and reflections about the culture of Avondale College. Interviewing is an active process where the interviewer and interviewee, through their relationship, produce knowledge

(Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The semi-structured interview offers flexibility in data collection. It provides an opportunity for the researcher to hear the participant talk about a particular aspect of their life or experience. Through follow-up questions, the researcher seeks rich, detailed insights into the research topic (Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

Because most participants were personally known to me, the invitations to be interviewed for this study were sent by email from a school administrator so that any sense of personal obligation to participate was lessened. The email included the Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form. Due to the specific and public nature of the roles held by participants at Avondale College now and in the past, it was not practical to guarantee confidentiality as it is highly likely they would be identifiable to those who are part of the community. Additionally, the insights they shared were of significance partly *because* of their role. Participation was voluntary, and withdrawal from the study was possible at any time until publication of the results.

Interviews were conducted at Avondale College and, in two instances, at a location more convenient for the participant (my house and the participant's place of work). Interviews ranged from around 45 minutes to 120 minutes in length, with the typical length being around one hour. All participants demonstrated a willingness to be involved, and some had capacity to give generously of their time.

Interviews were semi-structured and story-oriented, in which participants were invited to share 'stories' rather than brief responses, to elicit cultural meanings. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) describe qualitative interviews as conversations with meaning and purpose. They define semi-structured life world interviews as interviews with the purpose of obtaining descriptions of the life world of the interviewee in order to interpret the meaning of the described phenomena (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). With this purpose in mind, interview questions varied depending on the individual participant's role and experience, but focused on gathering:

- Topical stories: narratives around key historical events and important figures in the life of the school

- Personal narratives: recollections of the interviewee's experiences in relation to Avondale College, and particularly in relation to the culture of the school

This fluid method of data collection allowed flexibility for me as a researcher when responding to the in-depth personal accounts, as I could ask supplementary questions or ask for further detail or seek clarification on certain points. This included using elaboration and clarification probes to gain a better and deeper understanding of the interviewee's answers, and at times using steering probes to help get the interview back on track (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Asking questions in this way enabled the gathering of detailed and potentially rich qualitative data (Willig, 2021).

My dual role as a community insider and researcher meant that I was able to bring my knowledge of the community and the participant's unique role within it to the interview questions for that individual. The interviews were informal, relaxed and conversational in tone. In a semi-structured interview, the interviewer needs to find the right balance between maintaining control of the interview and allowing the interviewee room to redefine the topic under investigation and thus to generate new insights (Willig, 2021). At times I was able to appropriately prompt the participant to give more information on an area of particular interest, or to supply forgotten names or aspects of events being discussed. At the same time, I was conscious of not leading the interviewee towards predetermined conclusions or statements. The research interview is not a conversation between equal partners because the researcher defines and controls the situation (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Therefore, the semi-structured interview requires sensitive and ethical negotiation of rapport between the interviewer and the interviewee, so that participants do not share information that they later regret (Willig et al., 2017). In two interviews, participants shared sensitive background information and requested that these portions not be transcribed or included in the analysis. They wanted me to understand a broader context for their answer but didn't want to risk damaging relationships, especially since the research will be public and participants are potentially identifiable. I was conscious of my obligation as a researcher to behave in a

courteous and ethical way to my conversational partners (Rubin & Rubin, 2005), and these requests were granted without question.

Interviews were recorded and verbatim transcripts created using AI, which were then thoroughly checked for accuracy. Subsequently, minor edits to transcripts were made to enhance readability, such as punctuation being added to clarify meaning, the deletion of repeated words, and insertion of ellipses to indicate missing words or phrases.

Writing in my reflexive journal during this interview stage was an important way to note and process personal responses to what I was hearing, reading and thinking about. Braun & Clarke (2022) suggest that: “a reflexive researcher is someone who is thoughtful and (self)questioning, identifying and then interrogating their positions, values, choices and practices within the research process, and the influence of these on knowledge generated” (p.15). In this context, the researcher seeks awareness and new possibilities. This definition continued to inform my practice of reflection throughout the entire research process. It was an ongoing, iterative process and I found my ideas shifted, changed and developed throughout.

Ethical Considerations

Because this study involves human participants, ethical approval was sought and gained from the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC). Key principles of ethics considered by AUTEC include respect for rights of privacy and confidentiality; social and cultural sensitivity; respect for vulnerability; and informed voluntary consent (Auckland University of Technology, n.d.).

With regards to participants’ rights to confidentiality and anonymity, AUTEC’s guidelines stipulate that if either of these cannot be guaranteed, participants should be advised of this fact and the reasons why (Auckland University of Technology, n.d.). Typically, qualitative research maintains the principle that participants have a right to remain anonymous; however, in certain situations anonymity cannot be achieved (Newby, 2014). This research project sought to specifically explore the elements of

culture of a specific school (Avondale College) whose school's motto (Kohia nga Taikaka) is not only an identifiable element but a central and pivotal aspect of this study. For this reason, the school is identified in the study. Principals are also named where their tenure is linked with significant events in the school's history.

Because participants were purposively selected because of their roles, involvement and insights, and because of the study's small community it was not practical to guarantee anonymity. Participants were made aware of this and gave consent prior to interviews taking place. However, to protect participant confidentiality, pseudonyms have been used and identifying details were removed or, where necessary, slightly generalised. In some cases, aspects of roles or contextual information have been deliberately softened to reduce the risk of deductive identification within a close-knit school community, while maintaining the integrity of participants' accounts.

As part of informed and voluntary consent, participants were advised that withdrawal from the study was possible at any point prior to publication of the study. During the interview process, care for participants was shown when sharing potentially sensitive experiences about school culture; for example, reminding participants that they didn't have to say anything they didn't feel comfortable sharing, and that they had the option of requesting that parts of the interview be excluded from the research if so desired.

Care was also taken when writing, as previously described, to ensure participants accounts were presented coherently and accurately.

3.6. Data Analysis

The interview transcripts provided a rich source of data for my study, and much more than I could realistically use in the context of a Master's thesis. In using Reflexive Thematic Analysis, Braun & Clarke (2022) propose a six-phase procedure as a tool to

systematically explore, interpret and report patterned-based analysis from the dataset, and this was the process I undertook in my analysis, as outlined below.

- 1. Familiarisation with the dataset.** Familiarisation provides the researcher with the initial entry point to the data, allowing deep engagement with the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Willig et al., 2017). After copying the transcripts of the interviews into MS Word documents, I immersed myself in the dataset, reading and re-reading these numerous times, and using the comments function of MS Word to note individual points of interest, questions, and wider connections to the dataset. These comments also recorded my insights into latent meaning and were useful indicators of early emergent patterns and themes across the dataset. (See Appendix E Coding Samples.)
- 2. Generating initial codes.** Having developed a sense of the overall dataset, I began generating codes. Semantic codes identify and summarise the content of the data, mirroring the meanings of what participants say (Willig et al., 2017). As I read through the transcripts, I generated succinct code labels that captured information that was meaningful and relevant to my research question. I wrote these into a column beside the relevant text in the MS Word document. These included codes for meaning, values, norms, culture-related aspects and more. The codes identified both semantic and latent meaning. Through a process of review and revision, this list grew (and shrank and grew again) to finally incorporate 517 different code labels across all of the interviews, with 1868 different coded items in total. In a MS Excel spreadsheet, I copied the relevant quotes beside each coded item to illustrate each point made. The process of manually coding the dataset (rather than using software to do this) helped me to engage deeply with the data, making sense of it and developing insight. This process provided a rigorous and thorough foundation for the analysis. The codes generated created the building blocks of analysis for the initial themes (Boyatzis, 1998; Willig et al., 2017). (See Appendix E Coding Samples.)

- 3. Generating initial themes.** In Reflexive TA, themes are defined by meaning-unity and conceptual coherence, with each theme having its own central organising concept (Braun & Clarke, 2022). From the long list of codes, I began grouping them together into candidate themes based on shared meaning or ideas, and relevance to the research question. Codes that reflected similar underlying ideas (e.g., aspiration, achievement, high expectations) were clustered together and examined for coherence as a potential theme. This process was iterative, involving comparison between and within the interviews to make sure that the emerging themes captured patterns or shared meaning rather than one-off instances.

The refinement process involved reviewing candidate themes against the dataset to test if they were coherent, distinctive and self-explanatory. At this point some themes with overlapping ideas were merged together, while others were collapsed into broader organising concepts because they were not strong enough to stand on their own. (See Appendix E.4 Examples of candidate themes.)

Decisions were not made solely on the frequency of the codes, but on how deep, rich and relevant they were to the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Braun and Clarke (2022) note that analysis is a constrained-but-open process in Reflexive TA, that there is no one right “route to the end” (p. 9), and this was my experience as the larger patterns of meaning began to take shape in the form of multiple candidate themes. (See Appendix E.5 Example of theme development.)

- 4. Developing and reviewing themes.** Themes were further refined by unity of meaning and conceptual coherence, with each theme having its own distinct

central organising concept. Thematic mapping was a useful way to see how ideas and patterns of meaning linked to each other as well as to the central organising concept. This stage also involved expanding the focus of revision and development by going back to the dataset to check the coherence of developing themes (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Although a large number of candidate themes were initially generated, the process of refinement led to the identification of two central themes that most effectively captured the core cultural values (“heartwood”) evident across the dataset. This decision was informed by the research aim of identifying deep underlying values rather than producing a broad descriptive account of all cultural features. (See Appendix E.5 Example of theme development.)

Both of these themes had supporting sub-themes that added further detail and nuance to the theme.

5. **Refining, defining and naming themes:** This stage involved developing an interpretive orientation that enabled a story to be told that made sense of the pattern and diversity of meaning in the data (Willig et al., 2017). A detailed analysis of each theme was developed, in which the scope and focus of each theme (the “story” of the theme) was worked out. Themes were defined, with a short summary of the core idea and meaning developed for each. Working titles for the themes were developed further so that a name was given to each that better captured the central ideas. These were: ‘Excellence as a values-driven practice’; and ‘Whanaungatanga as a foundational cultural value’.
6. **Writing up:** Finally, the analytic narrative and data extracts were woven together and contextualised in relation to the existing literature exploring school culture and the educational setting of Aotearoa New Zealand. At this point it was possible to integrate my findings with the theories of organisational culture that suggest culture is observable on many levels (Schein, 1985). Here ‘Te Rākau o School Culture’ became a useful framework to map specific themes and

findings about Avondale College's culture to broader conceptual ideas about organisational culture as they relate to schools.

The selection of interview extracts for inclusion in the written report was a deliberate and interpretive process. I chose excerpts that would illustrate patterns across the dataset, particularly ones that I considered to be well phrased or representative of key ideas and themes. I also chose extracts that would represent diversity across the dataset, taking care to include a range of voices and perspectives. Extracts were also selected to capture nuance or contradictions in the words of the participants themselves. In this way, the voices of the participants themselves became a rich and living aspect of the research.

The process of interpretation is never impartial or detached; it is always filtered by the interpreter's perspective and conditioned by the prevailing social and institutional power arrangements (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2022). For this reason, I took care to ensure qualitative rigor took place in my use of RTA. This included using Braun & Clarke's (2022) criteria of quality and trustworthiness: coherence, transparency, reflexivity, and resonance. This meant ensuring that themes were logically and consistently developed in alignment with the dataset and research questions; that clear documentation of analytic procedures and researcher decisions was kept; that my role, perspectives and influence as researcher were considered throughout the analysis; and that the themes meaningfully reflected participants' experiences and connected with broader contexts.

3.7 Limitations

Limitations of this study include its reliance on a small sample of participants. Their perspectives represent individual viewpoints and are not necessarily reflective of the entire Avondale College community. While the eleven participants were purposively selected to provide a range of experiences and stories, inevitably many voices remain unheard. The sample included individuals from different roles (including senior

leadership, middle leadership, governance, administrative, cultural, community and recent student perspectives), with many participants having long years of connection with the school. They represented a range of ages (from 18 years old to nearly 80), different ethnicities, and various levels and forms of participation. Therefore, identifying patterns of shared meaning across their accounts is meaningful and of significance. However, I acknowledge that these narratives do not capture all possible perspectives within the school.

One key limitation of this study is the absence of current student voices, despite students being central participants of school culture. While ethical considerations around interviewing minors was a consideration, ultimately the decision not to interview a current student was due to the scope and design of the study which aimed to capture historical perspectives of continuity and change in the school's culture over a period of several decades. For this reason, while the study did include a recent former student, it did not focus on gathering perspectives of more shorter-term community members or current students.

Despite the small sample of participants, the interviews generated more data than was possible to include in the writing up of this study. Again, my choices as the researcher dictated which aspects were included and which were left out. I was guided by my thesis supervisor and Braun & Clarke's (2022) advice to focus on the data that was most relevant to the research question.

A further limitation of this study is its context-specific nature. The findings relate exclusively to the culture of Avondale College and therefore are unique to this setting. As such, they are not generalisable to other schools. However, the study design is potentially replicable in similar contexts, and it has implications for school leaders at a broader level. Importantly, this research addresses a gap in the academic literature, where there is a scarcity of empirical studies examining secondary school cultures in Auckland, New Zealand.

A notable strength of the study is the richness and nuance of its insights, drawn from multiple stakeholder perspectives.

In the next chapter I outline the key themes that were generated from the reflexive thematic analysis of these interviews, and use the conceptual framework previously discussed to present a visual understanding of these findings.

Chapter 4: Findings

This chapter presents the findings that were developed after analysing eleven semi-structured interviews with key members of the Avondale College community. Using Reflexive Thematic Analysis, two major themes were developed through a process of iterative coding and refinement guided by Braun and Clarke's (2022) six-phase procedure. These were: (1) Excellence as a values-driven practice; and (2) Whanaungatanga as a foundational cultural value.

These themes represent patterns of shared meaning, each underpinned by a central organising concept that illuminates the 'heartwood' of Avondale College's culture. Each theme is discussed with illustrative quotes and interpretive commentary, followed by an integrative section on symbols, behaviours and verbal/conceptual manifestations that connect these findings to the conceptual framework of Te Rākau of School Culture outlined in Chapter 2.

While leadership emerged as a significant influence across participant narratives, it did not function as a standalone cultural value. Instead, leadership operated as a mechanism through which core values, particularly 'excellence' and 'whanaungatanga,' were enacted, protected, and transmitted. For this reason, findings relating to leadership are embedded across the themes rather than presented as a separate theme.

4.1 Overview of dataset and analysis

Reflexive Thematic Analysis allows the researcher to tell a story based on patterns of shared meaning across a range of data and participants (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Thematic Analysis guides the process of identifying themes in the data which capture meaning and are relevant to the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Willig et al., 2017). My research question is:

What do stakeholder narratives at Avondale College reveal about the underlying values ("heartwood") of its culture since 1989? How can understanding the culture help position the college for the future?

From the semi-structured interviews with eleven key current or former members of the Avondale College community, around twelve and a half hours of conversations were recorded and transcribed. These transcriptions were then reviewed multiple times in a process of familiarisation, and analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis. Codes were ascribed to interview fragments as a shorthand for meaning, and then sorted so that patterns of shared meaning (initial themes) could be identified across the whole dataset. An iterative process of refinement led to the generation of two major themes. These are:

- Excellence as a values-driven practice; and
- Whanaungatanga as a foundational cultural value.

It is important to note that neither theme is perceived as being of more importance than the other; rather, they reflect two important aspects at the heart of the school's culture. Furthermore, the ideas and practices inherent in both 'excellence' and 'whanaungatanga' were often found to interconnect and overlap.

Each of the themes have sub-themes that are connected to the theme's central organising idea. This chapter examines these themes and sub-themes in detail, considering how they illustrate key aspects that represent the 'heartwood' at the core of the culture of Avondale College.

These themes are further viewed through an analytic lens of organisational culture that considers deep underlying values (basic assumptions) which are revealed and reinforced by symbols (artifacts), behavioural manifestations and verbal proclamations (Schein, 1985; Beare et al., 2018; Peterson & Deal, 2016). These aspects, and the themes themselves sometimes overlap, and where this occurs, I have situated them where they were perceived to be most prominent.

The voices of the participants are used throughout to illustrate significant aspects of their narratives. Because the different roles that participants have held within the Avondale College community give important context to their narratives, I have included participants' names and/or positions in these findings.

4.2 Theme 1: “Excellence as a values-driven practice”

“Kohia ngā taikākā [means] you haven't got to be the best to be excellent, and you haven't got to be perfect to strive to be the best.” - Participant1 (current senior leader)

One major finding is that Avondale College has a culture that exhibits a deeply held commitment to excellence as a values-driven practice. At Avondale College, excellence is broadly defined as pursuing the best possible outcomes across a range of activities. In this context, ‘excellence’ is values-based: it includes but is not limited to academic achievement; it is aspirational, encompassing personal growth and cultural participation, and values tenacity and endeavour. Excellence at Avondale College is often relational, emerging from strong relationships within the community and a shared commitment to supporting one another to thrive. This ethos is both articulated and reinforced through verbal proclamations, behaviours and symbols such as architecture, uniforms, and the school motto.

The theme of ‘excellence as a values-driven practice’ was identified through an iterative process of development. This theme is the unifying idea behind 18 individual codes, including ‘Culture of Success’, ‘Aspirational Culture’, ‘Culture of Excellence’, ‘Success isn’t just about academia’, and ‘Culture of improvement’.

Within this theme, three important sub-themes emerged: Academic excellence is a priority; high expectations are foundational; and success isn’t just about academia.

4.2.1 Academic excellence is a priority

“We have a tradition of being academic.” – Participant 1 (current senior leader)

Participants consistently framed academic achievement as being core to the identity of Avondale College, positioning it as a long-held cultural expectation rather than a recent focus. Current senior leader Participant 1 refers to academic endeavour as “our core business.” Furthermore, the expectation of academic excellence is perceived to be so embedded in the culture of the school that they express it as a cultural norm, a “tradition,” with the important function of facilitating future success for students beyond their secondary schooling. Like traditions, reputations also develop over time and reflect the shared perceptions of a wider community based on past actions and performance (Mateus & Acosta, 2022). Community member and cultural leader Participant 6 speaks of Avondale having a reputation as “a high achieving school,” which suggests academic success has been noted by the wider community over a period of time. High expectations of academic achievement have been espoused by school leaders for many years. Participants recalled principal Phil Raffills (principal from 1980 – 2000) frequently articulating aspirational goals of academic excellence. Former senior leader Participant 2 noted that academic priorities were the driver behind a series of strategic initiatives introduced to support student achievement in the 2000s and 2010s. Current senior leader Participant 1 suggests that Avondale College has “a very long-standing tradition of being a school with an academic focus.” In summary, striving for academic excellence is a goal that has been purposefully espoused and enacted by a succession of Avondale College’s senior leaders. The prioritisation of academic achievement has shaped patterns of normative behaviour for staff and students over many years.

Academic priorities can be seen to underpin the measures leaders have put in place over time to improve student performance. For example, former senior leader Participant 2 describes the strategic implementation of “systems and processes that could uphold a standard for everyone.” They use the metaphor of fixing an engine to illustrate this process: “I described it at the time to the senior exec... it's like we've got a

Ferrari engine on the floor here, and we're going to have to fix a lot of bits before the engine starts..." Some of the improvements introduced during this time (2000s and 2010s) included a self-auditing system for teachers that encouraged professional standards of best practice, creating live data-tracking reports that enabled staff (and later, parents and students) to see each student's achievement in real time, and the implementation of a series of strategic performance drivers for staff and students designed to shift behaviours and raise achievement rates. Participant 2 notes that attaining benchmarked goals built "confidence and cockiness and self-belief" in students and led to increased efficacy amongst staff. Taken together, these initiatives illustrate how processes and systems were used over time to reinforce excellence as a shared cultural norm rather than an isolated goal.

Academic priorities also shaped decisions about qualification pathways, as seen by the introduction of Cambridge International in 2011. Cambridge was regarded by Participant 2 as being a "more challenging and worthwhile" option for students than NCEA. They recalled there being some initial resistance from staff and the wider community, but suggested that this lessened once results were released, as, "the kids did extraordinarily well." Students from a broad range of backgrounds had the opportunity to achieve academic success in Cambridge examinations. Participant 2 recalls:

The very first Cambridge Dux was a Samoan boy from the local community... And then our kids started becoming top of New Zealand, top of the world. And then we had the Top New Zealand scholar in Cambridge, and kids raced away, and it became a fixture and a point of difference in the school.

The decision to implement Cambridge International Examinations can be seen as being based on the desire for a more academically robust and prestigious qualification. As this example also shows, academic success was not only celebrated within the school, but was observed outside of school, reinforcing Cambridge as a symbol of academic excellence within the wider school community.

Raising the achievement of students who are *not* experiencing academic success has also been an ongoing priority for school leaders. Current senior leader Participant 1 notes that the School Board has traditionally provided strong governance aimed at enhancing outcomes for all students. Former senior leader Participant 2 recounts a number of strategies that were effective in helping ‘priority learners’ to achieve success. These included identifying and changing some of the traditional structures and operational processes that were limiting outcomes for some students, and in particular, for Māori and Pasifika. As a former student in the 1990s, current teacher Participant 7 recalls that academic streaming had an impact on subject choices for some students. For example, top-streamed academic students were only able to choose Latin or French and not Te Reo Māori. As a teacher in the 1980s and 1990s, Participant 5 also noticed systems that meant some Pasifika and Māori students were streamed out of more academic pathways. With the support of principal Raffills (and later principal Lewis), Participant 5 worked collaboratively with senior leadership and other staff to shift thinking around some of these systemic barriers. One initiative was MAPIAS (the school’s Māori and Pacific Islands Achievement Study), which encouraged heads of departments to review achievement rates of Māori and Pasifika students, and to set aspirational targets and goals for them. Similarly, former senior leader Participant 2 identified the opportunity to effect what they framed as “extraordinary change” for students who had been “buried” in the lower streamed classes. One of the significant measures subsequently put in place was the systemic data-tracking of student achievement in the classroom which identified students who were struggling and enabled the possibility of targeted support. Taken together, these examples reflect a shared commitment by leaders and teaching staff to support success for all students, not just the most academically able. Over time, some systemic barriers have been identified and addressed, demonstrating a values-based approach to academic achievement that aims to provide all students with opportunities to experience success in its various forms.

The development of teaching staff through professional learning has also been seen as a way to enhance student outcomes. In the 2000s and 2010s, professional learning for

teachers included utilising external expertise, attending internally led sessions or workshops, and gaining IT qualifications. In the 2020s, regular weekly professional learning and development (PLD) sessions were introduced, which current teacher Participant 7 describes as providing valuable opportunities for staff to share and extend their practice.

Another strategy implemented by principals over time has been to find ways of engaging parents in their children's learning, reflecting the belief that wider support is essential for improving student outcomes. This idea is explored further in the Whanaungatanga theme description later in this chapter.

4.2.2 High expectations are foundational

“Whatever situation we are in, we aim to do what we're doing as well as we can possibly do it.” – Participant 1 (current senior leader)

Having high expectations is a foundational aspect of values-driven excellence. That students from the Avondale community have the potential to achieve ‘excellence’ in all its many forms is a recurring idea in the narratives. This is inextricably linked with having high expectations and aspirational goals, alongside values of resilience and endeavour. Some narratives identified the fact that some Avondale College students must overcome situational or socioeconomic barriers in order to achieve success, but that self-belief and perseverance can help with this.

While not everyone might reach the heights of top academic achievement, having high expectations and aspiring to excellence is an important shared cultural value. In articulating this idea, current senior leader Participant 1 explicitly referred to the school motto, ‘Kohia ngā taikākā’, explaining it as: “You haven't got to be the best to be excellent, and you haven't got to be perfect to strive to be the best.” Aiming for excellence, and the values of endeavour and tenacity associated with this, are perceived to be just as, if not more important than achieving individual honours. Participant 7, a student in the 1980s, recalls principal Raffills being very clear about his high expectations of Avondale students, reflecting the belief that: “why should

Avondale not be just as good a school as Grammar, as whatever other school... we are just as good." Raffills' repeated statement to students (and one which has gone on to be embedded in the school's cultural history via a memorial award annually presented at the school's annual Senior Prizegiving) was: "Get to the top and take someone with you." The phrase speaks of the importance of striving for and achieving excellence, but also goes further, recognising the importance of relationships and community; that success is enhanced when it is used to lift the achievement of others.

The idea of aspiring to be 'just as good' (or better) than other schools, and of rising above circumstances to attain success is also a shared idea across accounts. Participant 3, also a former student of the school with family connections to former leadership, recalled Raffills celebrating excellence and encouraging students to be proud of their successes. They framed Raffills' key message to students as: "You're all winners, don't let your background, your story today, what people may have told you, your family situation - do not let that define you, because you're a winner - and you can achieve greatly." It is interesting to note the underlying context of challenge in this narrative, where external factors potentially hold students back from achieving success. Avondale's socio-economic context as a Decile 3 and 4 school arguably makes high academic achievement (and the expectation of this) more challenging. However, having high expectations is seen as an important aspect of achieving success, regardless of circumstance. Socioeconomic considerations aside, current senior leader Participant 1 has observed that parents in the Avondale College community have traditionally held high aspirations for their children, saying: "I think that... the Avondale College community is a hardworking and aspirational community, and I think that that's been there for... a long time." Their observation that this has long been a feature of the school community reinforces the idea that having high expectations alongside values of endeavour and resilience in striving towards aspirational goals is an embedded feature of the school's deep culture.

Teachers and leaders play a significant role in impacting student aspirations. Current teacher Participant 7 notes that when teachers work together with a similar student-

centred vision, the outcomes can be significant for individual students: “It's the feeling that a student gets [when realising], oh, why are my teachers talking about me?... Oh, because we both think that you can succeed, and we really want you to succeed.”

Similarly, Participant 3 recalls Raffills encouraging one student to apply for a scholarship to the University of Cambridge in the UK: “...and he said, “I know you can't see yourself studying at Cambridge, but I can.”” Participant 3 recounts that the student won the scholarship and studied aeronautical engineering. These accounts suggest that an underlying feature of the aspirational culture of Avondale College is the belief that all students are capable of aiming for excellence, and that high expectations, communicated through positive relationships, play a key role in shaping students’ aspirations.

4.2.3 “Success isn't just about academia”

A recurring idea in participants’ narratives about excellence and success at Avondale College is that it both is and ‘should’ be broadly defined; encompassing academic achievement certainly, but also personal growth, co-curricular activity and cultural engagement. In these situations, excellence has a values-based approach that is often found in achievements outside of the classroom.

The importance of recognising success outside of traditional academic frameworks is discussed by participants in a variety of contexts. For example, former teacher and programme leader Participant 9 suggests that students benefit from the wider opportunities offered at the school, saying: “...but those extra things, you know, the music, the sport, the drama... everything, you know, it's not just about ABC...”

Participant 9 particularly highlights the value of achievements made by students in an outdoor education setting, as they rose to new challenges and embraced “life changing experiences.” Perhaps even more than the outdoor experiences themselves,

Participant 9 values the deeper life lessons Taurewa offered students: “...and kids came back [from Taurewa Camp] with new friends... which I think was really important, learning how to set a table, learning how to use a potato peeler...” In these examples,

success is framed as learning gained outside the classroom, incorporating personal challenge and resilience, relationship building, and personal growth.

A shared culture of values-based excellence is also seen outside the classroom in areas of co-curricular activity such as sports and the performing arts. Long-serving teacher Participant 8, who was involved for more than 30 years as a backstage manager for school productions highlighted shared norms of high expectations of behaviour in co-curricular activity: “Yes, we don't do things half-heartedly. Here, ...if you're doing a theatre, then it's theatre. And you know, you don't just walk out on stage for the hell of it...” Another example is seen in the school's involvement with Polyfest, the Māori and Pacific Islands cultural performance festival and competition for Auckland secondary schools. Former teacher Participant 5 recalls being asked by Raffills to help ease conflict that was arising at the school between Samoan-born and New Zealand-born Samoan students in the late 1980s and early 1990s. One of their strategies involved developing the Samoan cultural performance group by making use of the local community and families' expertise. Expectations of behaviour were high, with mandatory practices and specialist tutors brought in. Over time, the group began winning and becoming a group member became highly sought after: “Because it wasn't that we were just good. We were *very* good.” Similarly, current senior leader Participant 1 suggests students' success in Polyfest reveals underlying values of hard work, tenacity and a commitment to excellence that is seen in other areas as well:

It also reflects the school in terms of the amount of hard work that the students put into it and what they will commit to it. You know, if our students decide to do something, they decide to do it really, really well. And I think that comes through strongly in Polyfest.

Across these accounts, a consistent pattern emerges of high expectations, hard work, and pride in doing things well.

Recent former student Participant 10, whose first two years of secondary schooling were interrupted by the Covid pandemic, also relates excellence to personal growth and wellbeing, saying: “Whether it's in sports, Polyfest, kind of any sort of

extracurricular activity, just making sure everyone is doing their best and making sure everyone's together and supporting each other...[is important].” Taken together, these examples highlight experiences of a shared values-based approach to excellence that encompasses personal achievement, cultural involvement and care of others.

Being involved in activities beyond the classroom is perceived to lead to other benefits for the students and the wider community, including a sense of pride, identity and enhanced connection with the school. Participant 5 found that students involved in the Samoan Group displayed greater engagement with their academic studies:

““[Previously] they weren't engaged in the classroom. They *were* engaged here [in the Samoan Group], and then that transferred over into the classroom.” This engagement was further supported by other initiatives for Pacific Islands students and their families, such as a parents’ group, an after-school homework club with Pacific Islands tutors from the University of Auckland, and annual Pasifika Leaders Fono where community voices were heard and achievement data discussed. Participant 5 considers that the increasing success of the Samoan students in the cultural performance space allowed for the raising of achievement amongst other Pacific Island students, and Avondale students generally. Like Participant 5, current senior leader Participant 1 notes that students who are involved in Polyfest and other co-curricular activities have high engagement in other areas of the school as well: “...they grow into our school leaders. Or they grow into academic leaders as well.” In this example, high engagement, leadership and academic achievement are not only recognised, but positioned as success markers in the school’s culture. Participation in co-curricular activity such as Polyfest is valued as an indication of achievement and leadership, reinforcing the underlying belief that involvement across multiple areas is one measure of success at Avondale.

A values-based approach to excellence is also seen as important for the achievement of Māori students. Participant 4 (a former student, parent, grandparent and Board Member at Avondale College) suggests that while the range of academic achievement has varied for Māori students at Avondale College over the years, academic measures

aren't the only valid ones, but include whether or not Māori students have a sense of pride in their cultural identity and a recognised place in the school: "But for me, the biggest thing is for us to enable our students, our Māori students, to be proud that they are Māori and not to have to hide that..." They go on to note that: "Avondale College - success isn't just about academia, you might have mediocre grades, but there are other elements of success that need to be acknowledged in ways that differ from the prizegivings and the credits." The phrase 'that need to be acknowledged' used here points to both the idea that acknowledgement of non-academic success is important; and also, that Participant 5 identifies there is work yet to be done in this space.

Other measures of success mentioned by participants suggest that education in general is valued as mechanism for developing attitudes that set young people up for success in later life. Former senior leader Participant 2 expressed this idea, saying: "Part of education is making people personally powerful..." and that at school, students have the opportunity to build a sense of agency and increase resilience which mitigates a "dependency mindset" later in life.

In summary, 'excellence' is broadly defined at Avondale College, taking on a values-based approach that encompasses academic achievement alongside high aspirations, co-curricular activity, cultural engagement and personal growth.

4.3 Theme 2: Whanaungatanga as a foundational cultural value

This second theme describes the ways in which whanaungatanga is articulated and enacted at Avondale College through strong interpersonal relationships, a sense of collective identity and belonging, and meaningful cultural connection. These aspects are encapsulated in the theme of 'Whanaungatanga as a foundational cultural value.'

Steps three to five of the process of Reflexive Thematic Analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2022) involves generating initial themes from the codes and collated data, then developing and reviewing these themes, and then refining, defining and naming themes.

It allows for both inductive and deductive analysis throughout and is typically a recursive process. The theme of 'Whanaungatanga as a foundational cultural value' developed through this process, it was not something I had initially expected to find. During the coding process, the code 'value of whanaungatanga' was assigned frequently across the dataset, and it subsequently became a candidate theme. Braun and Clarke (2022) note that in the development and review phase, themes are sometimes split or combined to determine that they tell a convincing story of the data. At this point I realised that several other candidate themes could be encapsulated within the broader idea of whanaungatanga. As I read more about whanaungatanga in an educational context, I realised that this concept was the unifying theme that could tell a 'story' of what the data was showing.

Across the dataset, the theme of 'whanaungatanga as a cultural foundation' emerged, in which participants revealed a shared sense of valuing the relationships between members of the school communities, as well as valuing the sense of belonging and collective identity that comes through reciprocity and meaningful connection. Relationships and belonging are built and reinforced through shared values, rituals, and respect for diversity. The commitment to authentic cultural responsiveness in the context of Aotearoa New Zealand is reflected by the school's journey towards a bi-cultural ethos.

The theme of 'whanaungatanga as a cultural foundation' was the unifying concept behind sixteen individual codes, including: 'Value of whanaungatanga', 'Community connection', 'Whānau involvement', 'Positive teacher–student relationships', 'Cultural inclusion and belonging' and 'Respect and belonging through cultural validation'. (See Appendix E1 for an indicative list of codes.)

Whanaungatanga: Definition

Whanaungatanga is a foundational concept of Māori culture that speaks to the importance of relationships, kinship and a sense of belonging through shared experiences and reciprocal care. In an educational context, whanaungatanga involves

the purposeful fostering of strong, respectful and supportive relationships to create an environment where learners feel connected and valued. It is not limited to familial ties but extends to all interactions that build trust and collective responsibility for learning and wellbeing (Bishop & Berryman, 2006; Macfarlane et al., 2007; Ministry of Education, 2011; Bishop, 2023).

In its simplest form, whanaungatanga can be defined as ‘relationships’ and ‘belonging.’ It encapsulates the way individuals are connected to each other (Harris et al., 2025).

The following sub-themes illustrate the way in which whanaungatanga is enacted and practiced at Avondale College. These are: Relationships; Collegiality; Reciprocity; Wellbeing; Identity and Belonging; Success; Meaningful Cultural Connection and Diversity

4.3.1 Relationships

That strong interpersonal relationships are highly valued by the participants was seen by the frequency of coded items that related to the idea of relationship and connection, both inside the school community (student to student, teacher to teacher “collegiality,” and teacher to student/student to teacher), as well as with the wider parent/caregiver community and beyond.

The concept of whanaungatanga stems from and is connected to the idea of whānau (family and kinship). Several participants expressed school-based relationships in terms of this familial relationship. Participant 6, a cultural leader and community member, talks about two funeral services held at Avondale College for long-standing staff members as being significant events in the way they brought the community together. They express the value they see in the fact that these rituals were held at the school, by the school community, for community members. They also tell of leading a blessing ceremony at the school for colleagues of a staff member who had passed away while the school was in lockdown during the Covid pandemic, saying: "She was part of the family here." They note this ceremony was an important way for staff members to process the loss of their colleague who was regarded as a family member.

In its most positive form, Avondale College is described by former staff member and board member Participant 5 as being “a real rich community and family.” Participant 11, who has worked as an administrator at the school for nearly four decades also frames school relationships in terms of family:

I just always loved the family feeling of Avondale. You know, there'd be some teachers come and we'd be pleased to say, good luck for the next job and that they were going. And there were others that, you know, we literally cried when they left.

This strong sense of connection is echoed again when long-standing teacher Participant 8 reflects on what makes Avondale College special for them. While not expressed in terms of whānau relationships, when asked to articulate what makes Avondale College special for them, Participant 8 acknowledges the significance of relationships with students and colleagues: “The kids. It's always the kids and the people I work with. I've worked with some amazing people through the years.” Here, positive student/teacher as well as collegial relationships are framed as an important and foundational part of school culture. In another example, Participant 8 describes what they see as normative patterns of behaviour in the interactions students have with her:

It's the Avondale way. It's been there since I've been here. And I can't describe it. It's just the way the kids are - they will say good morning to you. They will yell out at you and ask you how you are, and they're interested in what you're doing.

In this brief description of ‘the Avondale way’, Participant 8 suggests normative patterns of behaviour in the way teachers and students interact, that students demonstrate a sense of connection through their willingness to initiate engagement with teachers. It’s a relationship that is reciprocal and based on mutual interest and warmth; ideas inherent to the concept of whanaungatanga.

From a student’s perspective, strong relationships with staff can lead to ease of communication and positive outcomes across a number of contexts. Recent former student Participant 10, who was also a student representative on the School Board says their positive relationships with staff was a key factor in their effectiveness in role as an

advocate for other students. They perceived the school culture as being one that supported sensible student proposals: “Every time there was a student-led initiative... as long as we had a good plan, we had a good purpose for it, and we had good reasoning behind it, it was always supported.”

The impact of positive teacher/student relationships can be significant, and long-reaching. From their time as student in the 1990s, Participant 7 recalls a number of “individual teachers who had a big role in shaping things for me.” These included Principal Phil Raffills who wrote personal notes commending them for performances they had been part of or for positive behaviours observed. The impact made by a history teacher was also significant: “I could always go and talk to him about things, and he was so enthusiastic.” When Participant 7 earned a Master’s degree in History, they returned to the school to show their thesis to this teacher. Similarly, former student Participant 3 recalls the positive relationship their class had with one teacher: “We loved her, and I think she loved us, and we... felt that.” Negative teacher-student interactions also made an impact of a different kind. Participant 3 recalls having a teacher “who didn’t have control of his class,” and that they were “desperately unhappy about that.” Participant 7 provided another example of an impactful encounter with a teacher who shouted at them during a rehearsal: “And then within a second, she turned back and she said, I’m really sorry. I shouldn’t have shouted at you. And that was so impactful as a student, to have a teacher apologise for their bad behaviour.” Together, these examples highlight how interactions between teachers and students that are founded in values of respect and care can have an enduring impact on students’ experiences of belonging.

The opportunity for positive teacher/student relationships to develop through extra-curricular activities is an important aspect of Avondale College school culture. Long-standing teacher Participant 8, (who is not of Samoan descent) has been involved for many years with the school’s Samoan Group, and this has led to an annual tradition where the group makes them a puletasi (traditional Samoan dress) to match that year’s performance uniform. Their support of the group is valued: “I think that is because I’ve

always been interested in what they're doing.” In turn, they always wear one of the previous years’ garments to school, in the lead up to Polyfest week; a visible display of cultural connection and support. The example of the puletasi exchange exemplifies whanaungatanga in practice: reciprocal, respectful relationships are shown to be valued, and traditions are celebrated over time. In this way, cultural belonging is a lived and enduring feature of school life.

At Avondale College, positive student/teacher relationships are seen as essential to student achievement and success, particularly in relation to Māori and Pacific Island students. Participant 7 recalls the impact made by the advice of a Samoan colleague in the context of PLD around improving outcomes for priority learners:

With teaching and relationships, you're banking a cheque, and you can't draw on kids' goodwill if you're not investing in them... so you've got to keep making deposits, and that's relationship building. So, when you need them to back up their ideas or participate or do something, you can make that withdrawal.

This example links positive relationships with positive student outcomes; an idea that is repeated throughout the narratives.

Relational practices by staff and leaders are also valued by the wider school community. Historically, Participant 3 recalls Raffills having a very visible presence in the community. “He was super involved as a principal. He didn't just go to the school show... he went every night. He didn't just go to the premier netball team... he'd go to the B team, the C team...” Participant 7’s recollection concurs: “He was always the principal you see out in the playground talking to the students.” Similarly, Participant 7 sees the current principal’s leadership style as relational: “She walks around, she's always [at school] on the weekend, she'll be here visiting different rehearsals or sports, and... cheerfully chatting with people.” These examples illustrate how leaders build relationships and model relational behaviour through visibility, approachability, relational warmth and connection-building. Whanaungatanga is reflected as an enduring cultural value within the school.

4.3.2 Collegiality

Within Avondale College's large and diverse staff community, positive collegial relationships are valued, and having a shared sense of vision and purpose is seen as important. As a beginning teacher, Participant 7 identified Avondale College as having: "a relaxed, sort of student-centered collegiality that I really liked... people seemed to enjoy their jobs, and that was a draw card. People seemed to value each other as staff." Collegiality and fun were also important aspects for Participant 8, although they identify a shift in culture over time towards the tolerance of practical jokes:

I've worked with some amazing people through the years, people have gotten into trouble, but those were the days when you could do things and get each other into trouble and not get slapped down... like flicking mirrors and sunlight through one classroom to another, sending kids on long waits for a left handed hammer, things that the kids got involved with and could see the funny side of that you probably wouldn't do these days.

These examples suggest collegiality has been a valued aspect of staff relations at the school, shaped by good humour and a shared sense of purpose. Positive interactions help staff members feel a sense of belonging to the school community.

Participants accounts indicate that Avondale College has developed a staff culture defined by professional expertise and a relational commitment to students. Former senior leader Participant 2 noted that during their tenure, "there were top teachers already here," representing a "huge core of people who did care about kids [and going] the extra mile." In addition to appointing local teachers, teachers were recruited from the UK, which led to more British teachers joining the staff. Having a more diverse, multi-national staff had its own impact on school culture. Participant 2 observed that some staff were initially wary of the new recruits, but that the shared collegial values of professional educators led to increased social connection between staff: "And once you got a whole bunch of people like that, they became absolutely welded and became best friends with the others because they had shared values. So, you were building a different social group of people who loved each other." Participant 2's comments

suggest that, alongside professional expertise, having shared values played an important role in enhancing collegial relationships and contributing to school culture.

Establishing and maintaining shared values and norms of behaviour within a large, diverse, multi-cultural and multi-national group of educators in the context of Aotearoa New Zealand is not without its difficulties. Current senior leader Participant 1 points out that the school is made up of multiple communities, which they regard as a strength and an important aspect of the school's identity, but notes that this also leads to challenges: "We're trying to find a shared culture that goes across a wide diversity of peoples in our community." They recognise there are "cultures within cultures" and the challenge is "how do we bring that all together and have a shared culture in the school?" The value of respect is seen as an important key to achieving this goal:

How do we find that shared culture, but also accept that... there are going to be people who come from very different perspectives, and at some point... we may have to just agree to disagree with some people, but we've got to do that in a way that means we're still a functioning community. Participant 1's observation that there are "cultures within cultures" is an important one. The school is made up of people from different backgrounds with different perspectives and who hold different values. Several participants identified the existence of subcultures at various levels, for example, broadly between department to department, as well as within each department; or within student groups. Disagreements and tensions between staff, or between staff and leaders can arise when underlying values don't align. Amidst different perspectives and viewpoints, Participant 1's statement points to the goal of maintaining a "functioning community" underpinned by the value of respect. Similarly, the narratives of cultural leader Participant 6 and recent former student Participant 10 also emphasise the importance of the value of respect in relating positively to difference.

Establishing a shared sense of purpose through the articulation of mission, values and goals is one way Avondale College has fostered collegiality amongst staff. For example, current teacher Participant 7 suggests there has been a shift in school culture over recent years as the school has increasingly incorporated values of te ao Māori, Te Tiriti o

Waitangi and mātauranga Māori into the curriculum, rituals and processes of the school. Participant 7 identifies specific and regular professional learning sessions as having helped to “bring people on the journey”:

I think, as in any big institution... you have to have buy-in. So, if you just change everything without getting buy-in, people just don't do it... And I think most of our staff are keen, but we have a lot of staff from overseas who have got no knowledge, no understanding [of te ao Māori]. They're often the ones who are keenest to learn, because they've come to a new country.

In this way engaging in professional learning becomes an expression of whanaungangatanga, creating a sense of belonging amongst staff through the shared experience of developing cultural competencies that support student success.

Strong collegial relationships are also seen to be linked to professional support and a sense of belonging. Participant 7 suggests that “the stronger you have those relationships, the more likely you are to seek help or feel comforted or know that that people will look after you or help you, and just makes it feel a better place to be, a more belonging place.”

Participant 7 further recognises that having a shared purpose and vision amongst staff has a positive impact on student outcomes, particularly when those goals are “student centred.” It’s a foundational base that both current and former senior leaders (Participants 1 and 2) frequently return to in their narratives: initiatives are measured by the impact they have on student outcomes, and whether or not they support student achievement or wellbeing.

It is important to acknowledge that while nearly all participants’ narratives highlighted the importance of having positive collegial relationships and gave examples of these, they also shared instances where, for a range of reasons, relationships were not positive. Relationships are inevitably complex, and sometimes positive and negative aspects co-existed within the same relationships. Not all staff agreed with the direction set or decisions made by school leaders. An example of this is the disappointment Participant 9 felt when the cost for students of attending the school camp was

increased by the Board. In another example, former teacher Participant 5 describes their positive working relationship with Phil Raffills saying: “He was a good man,” but also acknowledges that “there was a lot of contention in his time too.” Cultural leader Participant 6 recounted their observation of there some tensions within staff culture at times, and that some staff appeared to be “walking on eggshells.” Former senior leader Participant 2 notes that some initiatives introduced were “misunderstood” by some staff. Several teaching staff mentioned their perception that there was an increasing pressure of expectations and workload over time, and observed the negative impact that this had on their sense of wellbeing and efficacy. Participants also recalled instances where relationships were strained. In some cases, disaffected staff or those who did not subscribe to shared values or cultural norms would move on. Participant 7 recounts observing one teacher shouting at students in a way that was unexpected and jarring. They describe this teacher as having “quite a deficit view of her students,” and noted that the teacher did not stay long at the school. Several participants also identified a difference in the perception of teaching staff and operations staff over the years, and noted their discomfort when non-teaching staff were treated as being of less value or importance than teachers.

These examples show that collegial relationships can be complicated and not always positive. They can be marked by tensions, disagreements and moments of dissonance. However, the framing of these moments as troubling or disappointing suggests the existence of a shared normative ideal of collegiality. Participants’ narratives reflect an expectation that staff relationships *ought* to be supportive, inclusive and aligned with shared values, even if the ideal is not realised in practice.

4.3.3 Reciprocity

The idea of reciprocity between community members is an important part of the concept of whanaungatanga. Relationships between Avondale College students, staff, parents and the wider community are valued, with ‘investment’ going both ways. Current senior leader Participant 1 states the importance of these relationships clearly: “I think for me, it comes back to that culture of being community.” The actions of staff

and their underlying significance are given weight by parents and caregivers. Current Board member Participant 4 notes that “It certainly it feels like the staff are heavily invested in our tauriras’ futures.” Former teacher and pastoral leader Participant 5 also highlights the opportunity that leading the Samoan Group gave them to connect with students, and by natural extension, their families. “I engaged with the families. I would always go... and knock on the door. Can they come to the practice? I'll bring them home.” These relationships later gave them a platform from which to engage with parents, to be able to talk about “hard stuff” and to further encourage families to support their children’s learning: “they threw us hard questions, and we could also say, well, this is what we're doing. How about you do this?” Relationships had been established and strengthened with families as a result of extra-curricular involvement. These examples reflect the value of whanaungatanga through caring relationships, mutual responsibility and shared investment by community members.

The longer-term impact of positive relationships established between students, their parents, teachers and the school can be seen in narratives that mention alumni coming back to offer service to the school, as sports coaches, music tutors, camp leaders and more. Under Participant 9’s management of the school campsite, work parties were held where former students and their families undertook maintenance work at the camp. Other participants spoke about students returning to tutor Polyfest groups, or coming back to offer careers advice to current students or to present awards and scholarships at the annual prizegiving. For some parents, such as Participants 5 and 4, joining the School Board was seen as a way of giving back to the school community. Participant 5 expressed a sense of professional obligation to give back through involvement in school governance. Participant 4 said joining the board “was a way of contributing to the school for my mokopuna.”

More wide-scale support of the College has been seen in positive responses to community fundraising efforts, notably towards rebuilding after the fire of 1990. Participant 9 recalls: “They were huge, huge fundraising things. But it worked. And the community really got in behind.” Participant 9 also regularly canvassed businesses in

the local community for support to help with the cost of camp fees. "I used to just go and... and say, look, I've got this kid whose parents can't afford to send him to camp. Can you help him?" Special events such as the school trip to Samoa in 1992 were also supported financially by parents. Support from the wider business community has also contributed to the school's development. In the mid-2010s, the school's IT network was extended as a result of engagement with companies such as HP and others. The partnerships meant that, in turn, the school was able to offer shared IT facilities to a school in Northland, along with the opportunity for students to visit Avondale and gain IT certifications. Further opportunities for the school to give back to other communities were taken up, with former senior leader Participant 2 recalling: "We did the same thing when the [measles] epidemic hit Samoa. We did a big fundraising for some more because of the deaths and the mayhem was carrying on there... And we sent quite a chunk of money to Samoa." Taken together, these examples illustrate how reciprocity is an enduring aspect of whanaungatanga, with support flowing both from the community to the school, and from the school back to its communities.

4.3.4 Wellbeing

A recurring pattern across the narratives is the idea that positive student/teacher relationships help support student wellbeing, which leads to improved outcomes for students. Former teacher and pastoral leader Participant 5 frames this in relation to identity and wellbeing: "If the students aren't understood or happy or sad or if something is disturbing them, you have to understand that and help to nurture that so they're solid in their identity." Emotional wellbeing is also regarded as an essential prerequisite to student achievement. For this to happen, Participant 5 suggests: "You really need someone who has a real love of people, not just the kids, but their families and their difference." These qualities of relational empathy and respect for difference reflect core elements of whanaungatanga, where relational empathy and respect for others are foundational values.

Regard for student wellbeing can be seen to underlie leadership decisions that impact the overall school community while also supporting individuals. This focus on wellbeing

also reflects whanaungatanga in practice, where care and responsibility are evidenced through the everyday decisions leaders make to support students and their communities. For example, former senior leader Participant 1 gives the example of quietly working with the guidance counsellor in the early 2000s to ensure a transgender student had access to appropriate toilets. The concept of holistic care is also central to current senior leader Participant 1's ethos of the school: "for students to be able to learn and achieve... then we've got to look after them as a person as well." Participant 1 notes that the Covid pandemic in 2020 and 2021 led to a "real focus" on wellbeing. They recall: "People really went out of their way to look after each other." The school leaders initiated practical assistance for students and families, for example, arranging for an online order of bedding to be delivered to a family being held in isolation during the early days of the 2020 lockdown. "It was just making sure that, as ever, in a school our size, that... if we need to focus on individuals, we can focus on individuals." With students learning from home during the Covid pandemic, the school developed an online wellbeing hub with information and activities designed to provide the students with wellbeing tools, and to enhance their sense of connection with the school. Post-pandemic, Participant 1 notes this emphasis on wellbeing has extended into other areas of school life. "That's led into things like a restorative focus across the school around how we relate to each other when things go wrong." The physical and mental wellbeing of students has also been an ongoing priority. Collaboration with Te Whatu Ora in 2024 has led to the expansion of the school's health clinic, with five full-time nurses, a part-time doctor, a part-time physiotherapist and psychologist on site. This has a wider impact on community wellbeing, as board member Participant 4 notes: "It's a facility that's there and it's at hand, and it's available without hardship or burdens or hurdles in terms of getting there." Together, these examples reflect a commitment by school leaders and governors to proactively develop measures that support student wellbeing, enacting whanaungatanga through care and relational connections in a very practical way.

4.3.5 Identity and belonging

A significant outcome of positive relationships across all areas of the school and community is the building of enhanced connections, identity and sense of belonging; all key components of whanaungatanga. The idea that collective identity and belonging can be generated through shared experiences is a common thread throughout participants' narratives. Beyond the classroom, engaging in co-curricular activities is a key shared experience that leads to a sense of belonging. Current teacher and former student Participant 7 articulates the idea in terms of community: "I think the more you get involved, the more you feel that there's a community." On reflecting on their own experience as a student and being involved in the performing arts, they note: "Your sense of belonging is often connected to all those things you did." Participant 7 still keeps in touch with some former classmates. Similarly, former student Participant 3 also noted the positive connection that exists when they discover a new acquaintance has attended Avondale College. Recent former student Participant 10 relates their experience of involvement in sport as being critical to their sense of identity and belonging: "it kind of felt like - that's like our people, that's who we're representing whenever we go out to games... Like we're not only representing the school, but we're representing the wider community around us." For Participant 10, the social side of being involved in sport was important too, and as a student leader, this connection went beyond their own experience of involvement. They played an active part in encouraging others to support school teams. The support was reciprocated by other Avondale students, with Participant 10 noting: "that real sense of togetherness was important for us." These examples suggest belonging is built through shared activity, which contributes to an enhanced sense of identity, connection and community.

For many at Avondale, the experience of taking part in Polyfest has led to a sense of cultural pride and collective belonging. Former senior leader Participant 2 suggests that in the 2000s Avondale's Samoan Group went from being "a bit player at the festival to being *the* player. And that was a very deliberate thing, too, to have those kids owning a place in the school." A sense of collective identity and school pride can also be

generated by being part of the wider group. Recent former student Participant 10 suggests a key part of Polyfest for them was “seeing so many people come together for their culture, but then people who don't even participate, or people who weren't even from that culture, supporting each other.” In this example, celebration of culture builds a sense of group identity and community that can go beyond individual participation.

The shared experience of navigating external events also has the potential for creating a sense of togetherness. Participant 10 suggests that the shared experience of their cohort having to do schooling during the Covid pandemic (and lockdowns) as students in Years 9 and 10 led to a greater sense of connection in later years: “we all kind of just wanted to be together, backing each other.” Participants’ reflections suggest that navigating challenge together can intensify cohesion, with the shared experience of collective resilience providing the basis for community and togetherness.

Similarly, current senior leader Participant 1 notes that during the Covid lockdowns, providing online challenges and activities for students to engage with outside of teaching and learning was important for creating a sense of connection and belonging. “That sort of co-curricular side of the school - and different people find their little places.” The acknowledgement of ‘different people finding their little places’ in this statement speaks to the existence of sub-groups within the school, where students (and staff) find smaller groups with which they identify. Current teacher and former student Participant 7 refers to these as “different pockets” of the school, noting that as a student in the 1990s, there were “certain values that we all shared,” but that particular students gravitated towards different groups and activities. “I remember saying to a friend of mine, Rosina, ‘Oh, why don't, you know, so-and-so audition for the show as well?’ And she said, ‘No, it's because they think it's what the smart white kids do.’” In relation to this particular example of norms around involvement in the school show, Participant 7 suggests that there has been a shift over time: “It's very different from now.” Participant 10, a more recent student, also refers to the existence of sub-groups within student culture, particularly in relation to their involvement with sport. Participant 10 recalls that, as a student leader, they prioritised bringing students

together, creating a sense of collective community and belonging underpinned by values of respect. Together, these accounts reinforce the importance of shared experiences that allow people to connect in small groups, finding a sense of identity and belonging in a smaller sphere, which can lead to a sense of connection with the larger identity of the school.

4.3.6 Whanaungatanga contributes to success

Across participants' accounts, whanaungatanga was framed as being integral to success: mutual commitment between school and families was perceived to build a sense of belonging, which supported engagement and positive outcomes. Cultural and community leader Participant 6 suggests a "parallel commitment" is needed between the school and families in order for students to experience success. Similarly, former teacher and cultural leader Participant 5 noted the enhanced connection between the school and parents involved in the Samoan Group that led to an increased sense of belonging and subsequent engagement and success in other endeavours. Current senior leader Participant 1 also emphasised the importance of community in supporting student outcomes: "They [students] want to be at our school, and they want to do well at our school, but none of them do that alone." Taken together, the accounts suggest that whanaungatanga is a mechanism by which students feel connected to the school, which leads to engagement and enhanced outcomes.

4.3.7 Meaningful cultural connection and diversity

A recurring pattern across the narratives is the idea that authentic and meaningful cultural connection (in the sense of ethnic or cultural identities) amongst the diverse communities within the college is valued. In this section, 'cultural connection' refers to the ethnic and cultural identities of students and their families. While this type of cultural connection is distinct from school culture, it intersects closely with whanaungatanga, as authentic engagement with cultural communities necessitates the building of strong relationships, leading to a shared sense of belonging and identity,

underpinned by values such as reciprocity and respect. In this way, the practice of whanaungatanga supports and affirms cultural diversity within the school.

Participants framed respect as an important prerequisite for cultural connection across the school's diverse communities. Recent former student Participant 10 identified respect as being the most important HEART value to him: "We have so many people from different cultures, different ethnic backgrounds, different religious backgrounds, but it was making sure that we all just treat each other with respect..." Similarly, current senior leader Participant 1 identifies respect as an essential factor contributing to the goal of creating a cohesive shared school culture across school communities.

Participants identified culturally competent leadership as an important mechanism through which cultural connections have been established and developed over time. Current senior leader Participant 1 acknowledges that over a number of years the school board has offered strong governance in this area, prioritising "conversations around our diverse communities, and accepting the language, identity, the culture - and not being afraid to have a focus on equity for Māori and equity for Pasifika." In cultural terms, the relationship of the school with tangata whenua, its alignment with the principles of Te Tiriti o Waitangi and the valuing of te ao Māori within the wider culture of the school is perceived to have been strengthened over time. The discussion contributes to wider perspectives of Avondale College's cultural location and identity, which are foundational aspects of whanaungatanga: relationships and belonging.

The school's journey towards cultural competency has been complex and ongoing. In their early years of involvement as a Board member, Participant 4 recalls experiencing difficulties in expanding the presence of Te ao Māori at the school. This was partly due to the fact that the area around Avondale was under dispute as to who the primary iwi might be. Early school and community engagement events had limited traction without mana whenua involvement. Current senior leader Participant 1, recalls: "Between the board and the senior leadership team, there was that very real desire to connect in an authentic way with tangata whenua, and with mana whenua." The Te Kawerau ā Maki iwi settlement, which came into effect in 2015, acknowledged Te Kawerau ā Maki as iwi

for the area in which Avondale was situated. In 2019, Warahi and Linda Paki, tangata whenua with strong links to the iwi, were formally invited to become kaumātua of the school, alongside Whaea Bella Mano who had been a long-standing and valued member of the Avondale community, serving in an unofficial capacity for many years. Avondale College signed an official Memorandum of Understanding with Te Kawerau ā Maki in 2023. Participant 1 notes the partnership has led to “authentic” and “meaningful” engagement with the school community. These accounts demonstrate how the school has progressed over time, with iwi relationships contributing to the way cultural practices have been embedded into the life of the school.

Participants suggest that the commitment of school leaders towards developing cultural connections with te ao Māori and the establishment of a formal relationship with mana whenua has led to several key outcomes over recent years. This includes the collaborative development of a school pepeha that establishes and frames the school’s identity in a culturally meaningful way; professional learning opportunities for staff on Te Tiriti o Waitangi and mātauranga Māori; the establishment of a Whānau Home Room class; the creation of a Māori parents’ advocacy group, Te Kuaka; and, in 2025, a formal prizegiving event celebrating Māori students’ success: Te Po Angitu. Board member Participant 4 suggests that, in terms of Māori culture, the school is “more inclusive.” Participant 7, as a staff member and Treaty historian, has valued the opportunity to lead staff PLD on the Treaty of Waitangi and says they have noticed more staff promoting the use of te reo Māori. Collectively, participants acknowledge there is still work to be done, but Participant 7 regards the progress around the acknowledgement of te ao Māori as significant, and that “huge shifts” have been made. Current senior leader Participant 1 further acknowledges the commitment and engagement of staff in embedding changes in their classrooms and planning: “People have carefully considered the relevance of those national [curriculum] documents for our context and our community. And you know, in my view, created a pathway, next steps, which are authentic and meaningful and serve our kids well.” Taken together, participants described these developments as helping to strengthen cultural

connections within the school community, with whanaungatanga supporting the recognition and valuing of diverse identities.

In summary, a significant finding of this study is that whanaungatanga is a foundational cultural value at Avondale College, where strong, respectful and supportive relationships are purposefully fostered to create an environment where learners feel valued and connected.

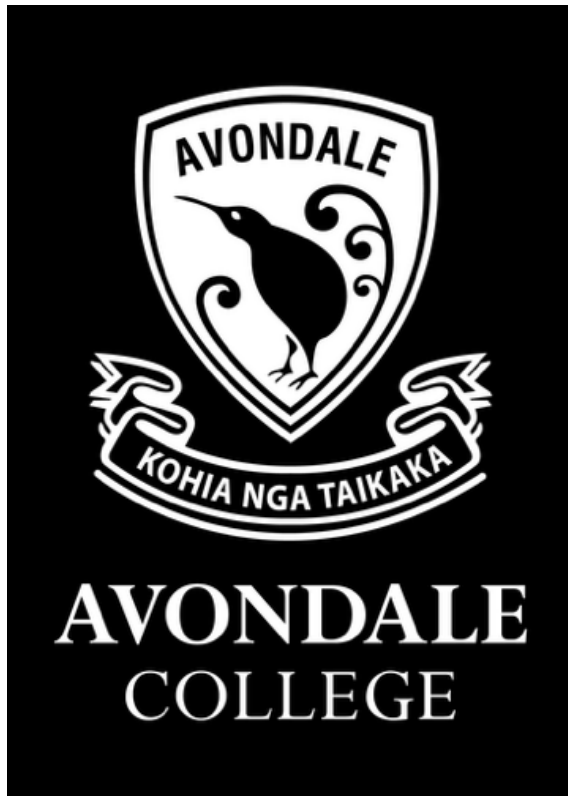
4.4 Artifacts of Excellence & Belonging

As the work of Schein (2009), Beare et al., (2018), Deal and Peterson (2016) and others suggest, culture is made up of different levels. Deep underlying culture, the basic assumptions and values that underpin how an organisation operates, can be revealed and reinforced by visible artifacts such as organisational behaviours, verbal proclamations and symbolic artifacts. The narratives of the eleven participants revealed that these deeper values of 'excellence' and 'whanaungatanga' at Avondale College are reflected and reinforced by artifacts throughout the school. Of these, the school's crest and motto, architecture, uniform, school stories and HEART values emerged as important symbols of Avondale's culture.

4.4.1 School Crest and Motto

Figure 4

Avondale College Crest



Note. From Avondale College. Used with permission.

The school's crest and motto are seen to be an enduring symbol of the school's identity. The Avondale College crest or logo of 2025 is almost unchanged from its original inception in 1945, other than the change of name from Technical High School to College in 1948. Inside a traditionally shaped shield is the word 'Avondale' above the image of a kiwi and a curling fern frond. These items convey the New Zealand educational context; the fronds represent the unfurling knowledge, and the kiwi is both a national symbol and the name of the Wai-o-Hua chief who spoke the whakataukī that is written in the banner beneath the shield: Kohia ngā taikākā. In 1999, the left side of the fern frond was turned to create a heart-shaped image that was later used in the mid 2010s as the symbol of the school's newly established HEART values. Participants who

had had a long connection with the school suggested the motto had a relevant and enduring message. Participant 4 referred it as a “a fitting motto” for preparing students for life. Former student Participant 7 recalls Raffills frequently spoke about collecting the heartwood in assemblies, and that it was “something that I took on for myself as ... a way to... seek excellence and take people with you.” The fact that it is a Māori whakataukī was also framed as a strength by several participants. Board member Participant 4 tells the story of one eighty-year-old alumna visiting the school:

He talked about how proud they were that they had a motto in Māori, not in Latin, like many of the other [schools]. You know, you go to all the grammar schools, they all have a motto in Latin which no one knows what it means or how to pronounce it.

This example suggests the school’s crest and motto are regarded as important and embedded aspects of school culture. They act as visual and linguistic symbols of school identity, connecting past and present. The motto also reflects deeper values. It represents striving for excellence by ‘collecting the heartwood,’ and recognising that success is supported through relationships with others: an expression of whanaungatanga.

4.4.2 Aspirational Architecture

Architecture can be seen to symbolise aspects of both excellence and whanaungatanga at Avondale College. Since 1990 there has been ongoing development of the school’s original buildings in two notable phases. The first phase took place under Raffills’ leadership after the 1990 fire; the second was led by Lewis in the mid-2010s. The buildings constructed in the 1990s after the fire (which include the Performing Arts Centre and Stadium) are seen to hold symbolic meaning. The two gymnasiums are named after alumni: local politician Noeline Mills, and Olympian Murray Halberg. Halberg is himself a symbol of overcoming challenge in the pursuit of excellence. An injury sustained while playing rugby for Avondale College had resulted in a permanently damaged arm. Nonetheless, Halberg won a gold medal in the 5000m event at the Rome Olympics in 1960. He is a local hero to the Avondale College

community, and the Halberg Gym is named after him. The post-fire rebuild was funded in part by a massive school-wide fundraising campaign and business sponsorship, with Participant 3 recalling Raffills wanted to build “the most amazing school that New Zealand has ever seen.” The buildings represented a huge, shared community endeavour: of striving toward aspirational goals, having the “best facilities for the best school”, and importantly, building a collective sense of resilience and growth as the school literally rose from the ashes. Participant 3, a student at the time, recalls that the school’s new recording studio in the Performing Arts Centre was named The Phoenix Studio.

The second major rebuild took place in the mid-2010s under Lewis’ principalship. A large three-stage rebuilding programme was undertaken to replace the school’s remaining original wartime-era buildings. Former senior leader Participant 2 recalls the aim was for students to have facilities that gave them a sense of pride. The brief to the architects was to create buildings that were environmentally sound, with design that reflected the school’s “multi-cultural flavours,” and that had a “wow factor.” “We wanted clever architecture, tilted roofs... [with] natural ventilation, natural heating, so minimal energy, high efficiency, minimal maintenance, but attractive.” Participant 2 recalls the Ministry of Education strongly advocating for a ‘modern learning environment’ style rebuild with open plan classrooms, but Lewis was reluctant to do this, citing the lack of research into the impact of this trend on student outcomes. In the end the majority of classrooms were built as single-room classes, with two rooms incorporating bi-fold doors to create larger spaces if needed. Participant 2 also recalls there was work done behind the scenes to ensure that the aspirational architectural goals were achieved, with MPs and government leaders being called upon to help keep the three-stage project moving. In addition to Ministry funding, the school invested in the project, drawing from reserves that had been accrued through strategic financial management over many years.

The buildings themselves were infused with symbolism, with Avondale's multi-cultural communities reflected in tilted rooflines inspired by Asian architecture and woven

panels referencing Pacific Islands tapa cloth. Paving and landscaping were designed to represent the local flight of kuaka (godwits) over the Avondale isthmus. Retaining a link to the school's history was another important consideration. Throughout the process, the design was linked to the school's past, with the long corridors and "sweeping views" of the original school buildings. The third and final stage of the rebuild included a large two-storied atrium with a dramatic, soaring roofline. Tall wooden pillars connected the floor to the ceiling. These pillars were created by laminating tōtara floorboards that had been rescued from the demolished buildings; a symbolic and literal example of the old school holding up the new.

Figure 5

Avondale College Atrium Interior



Note. The timber beams are made from wood from the demolished classrooms. From Avondale College. Used with permission.

Figure 6*Avondale College Exterior*

Note. Avondale College’s main Atrium building. From Avondale College. Used with permission.

The impact of aspirational architecture is significant; it belongs to the whole school community and inspires a new sense of belonging and identity. Current teacher Participant 7 commented that they have noticed that “having a beautiful campus, knowing that you come from a good school” has negated a sense for students “that we don’t belong in the same league” as other [private] schools. This example demonstrates the symbolic function of architecture in shaping how students perceive their place within the wider educational landscape, reinforcing a sense of belonging, pride, and legitimacy.

4.4.3 School Uniform

Avondale College’s uniform is a very visible symbol of the school, representing identity on a surface level, as well as underlying cultural values of excellence and belonging.

Over time, the uniform worn by Avondale College students has changed several times, but the school crest has been a visible symbol and point of continuity throughout. For Raffills, the way the boys' uniform was worn was of great significance, with students expected to wear their socks pulled up and have their shirts tucked in. Former student Participant 3 links the messaging around pulling your socks up to values of excellence, pride in identity and success. Participant 9 recalls the two school vans had personalised numberplates that reinforced these ideas further: WE XL and SOX UP. In the 2000s, the uniform returned to the original school colours of black and white, and in the 2020s it has evolved further with the introduction of unisex options. Participant 1 notes the pride that students exhibit in wearing their uniform and its connection to the school's history: "It's neat to see the students [being] proud of the school motto on their shirts and then being able to talk about what the core things are for them." Other tangible symbols of academic excellence can be seen in the academic badges worn on students' school uniform, which are awarded to students who achieve NCEA or Cambridge qualifications.

4.4.4 Belonging in our own way: the development of 'other' symbols and language of culture

Beyond the official mottos and symbols, the evolving nature of a school's culture can also be seen in unofficial ways. Signifying a sense of belonging and membership of the community, student-generated symbols and slogans can take on a life of their own. During their time as a student Participant 7 recalls a student-led slogan emerging that drew on the local area code of the Avondale district, combined with the second syllable of the suburb and school: '828 Dale State'. Another symbol more recently developed involves a two-handed gesture popularly used in photos to represent AD for Avondale. The concept of 'Dale State' evolved further in 2024, with the student-led sports social media team taking up a slogan initially developed by the school's 1st XV, and using it as a hashtag for all school-related sports posts: 'Defend the State.' Recent former student Participant 10 observes the slogan has an underlying meaning relating to identity and school pride: "So, yeah, it started with rugby, but it kind of became like a sport thing... it

was almost like a motto for everyone to... live up to... defend our school, defend the community around.” Together, these student-generated symbols illustrate how belonging is continually recreated within the school community through shared language and practices.

4.4.5 School Stories

Avondale's “Great Fire of 1990” has taken on almost mythical status in Avondale College’s history. The day following the fire, Raffills addressed the community of students and staff with an emotional speech, saying: “We are down but not out.” Others recalling this time evoke the image of the phoenix rising from the ashes. This event was particularly impactful for participants who had been students and staff members at the time; but was also mentioned by others who had not been there, indicating its significance in the historical stories of the school. The ongoing retelling illustrates how this story has become embedded in the school’s cultural memory.

The other historic school story that was referenced by almost all participants was the ghost story of the Blue Nurse. The story connects the present school to its past as a US Naval hospital during WW2. Participant 7 notes that telling new students about the possibility of encountering the Blue Nurse as they walk the same long corridors of Avondale College is a part of school tradition. In a recent iteration of this story, in 2025 the school's student-led rock band called themselves Blue Nurse. The story of the Blue Nurse reinforces connections to place and history, adding to a sense of shared history and belonging.

4.4.6 The HEART Values

Introduced in 2015, Avondale College’s HEART Values are an example of espoused values that reveal and reflect core ideas, both of excellence as a values-driven practice, and whanaungatanga as a foundational cultural value.

As part of the school’s engagement with the Ministry of Education's Positive Behaviour For Learning (PB4L) programme in the mid 2010s, Avondale College underwent a

process of determining and articulating a set of school values. These became known as the HEART Values: Honesty, Endeavour, Atawhai, Respect and Tenacity. The acronym connected to the idea of 'heartwood' and the heart-shaped koru from the school crest was used to represent these values visually in posters and banners. Former senior leader Participant 2 suggests that because the values felt authentic to the school community, they quickly became embedded into school culture:

“It didn't take long before... staff couldn't remember a time when it [the HEART values] didn't exist. And it felt good to the new people in the school, but it also felt right to the long-standing staff members who said, almost, I don't know what the fuss is about. We've always stood for those things.

Like Participant 2, Participant 1 also perceives the HEART Values to be authentic to the Avondale College community: “You know, they've been around for ten years, but they actually all fit together, and I think do reflect the culture of the school.” Participant 2 considers the introduction of the HEART Values to reflect a greater acceptance of diversity within school culture at that time. The value of atawhai (kindness) was regarded as particularly important in connecting the school's diverse communities; they give the example of a compassionate school-wide response to the Christchurch Mosque attack in 2019 as an example of this.

Participant 1 further articulates what they see as the connection of the HEART Values to the concepts of whanaungatanga and excellence: “Everybody in our community can live [according] to the HEART Values. You don't have to actually have to be excellent at anything to live to our HEART Values... I think they all speak to whanaungatanga...” In this way, the interconnected values espoused in the HEART values can be seen to reveal the deeper commitment to ideas about values-driven excellence (Endeavour, Tenacity); and whanaungatanga (Respect and Atawhai). That these need to be conveyed with integrity is represented by the value of Honesty.

Participants' accounts suggest that Avondale's HEART Values have become widely embedded into the culture of the school, initially through visible artifacts such as posters and videos. Subsequently, the weekly school newsletter was renamed

Heartbeat; staff were encouraged to share a 'HEART Story' with colleagues at Friday morning staff meetings; HEART Awards were established for students based on positive behaviour; weekly HEART Homeroom lessons were created to transmit school values; and The Brent Lewis HEART Award is awarded annually at Senior Prizegiving to a senior student who displays HEART values across all aspects of school life. Together, these practices suggest HEART Values have become an embedded part of the culture of Avondale College, shaping both behaviour and belonging.

Figure 7



Avondale College HEART Values

Note. From Avondale College. Used with permission.

Summary of findings: Te Rākau o Avondale College

In summary, Avondale College has a rich and complex school culture that reflects a deeply held commitment to ‘excellence’ and ‘whanaungatanga’. From these themes, the underlying values of the school’s culture, its ‘heartwood’, can be understood.

The finding of ‘excellence as a values-driven practice’, suggests that excellence is understood not merely as academic achievement but as a holistic, aspirational and values-based pursuit that encompasses personal growth, cultural participation and social responsibility. This ethos is also seen and reinforced through symbolic representations such as the school motto, architecture and uniforms. The finding of ‘whanaungatanga as a foundational cultural value’, reveals that strong interpersonal relationships, collegiality and reciprocity are highly regarded. The practice of whanaungatanga contributes to wellbeing, identity, a sense of belonging and meaningful cultural connection. Threaded throughout these findings are examples of the impact that leaders have had in shaping and transforming the culture of the school over time, suggesting that leadership is a vital mechanism for cultural transmission.

Drawing on theoretical models proposed by Schein (1985; 2009), Beare et al., (2018) and Hammond (2015), the findings can be visually presented using the conceptual framework introduced in Chapter 2, where school culture is portrayed as a tree. When related to Avondale College, at the heartwood of the tree are the core values of ‘excellence as a values-driven practice’, and ‘whanaungatanga as a foundational cultural value’. These values influence and shape all other aspects of the school’s culture. Leadership is identified as an important way that these key cultural values are protected and transmitted.

Visible elements of culture can be seen in the branches and leaves of the tree. One branch represents conceptual/verbal proclamations, seen in the ‘leaves’ of articulated aims and objectives (“our aim is excellence,” the school mission statement, and motto), language used (“828 Dale State; “Defend the State”), the school’s espoused HEART Values and school rules. Stories and heroes are other leaves on this branch.

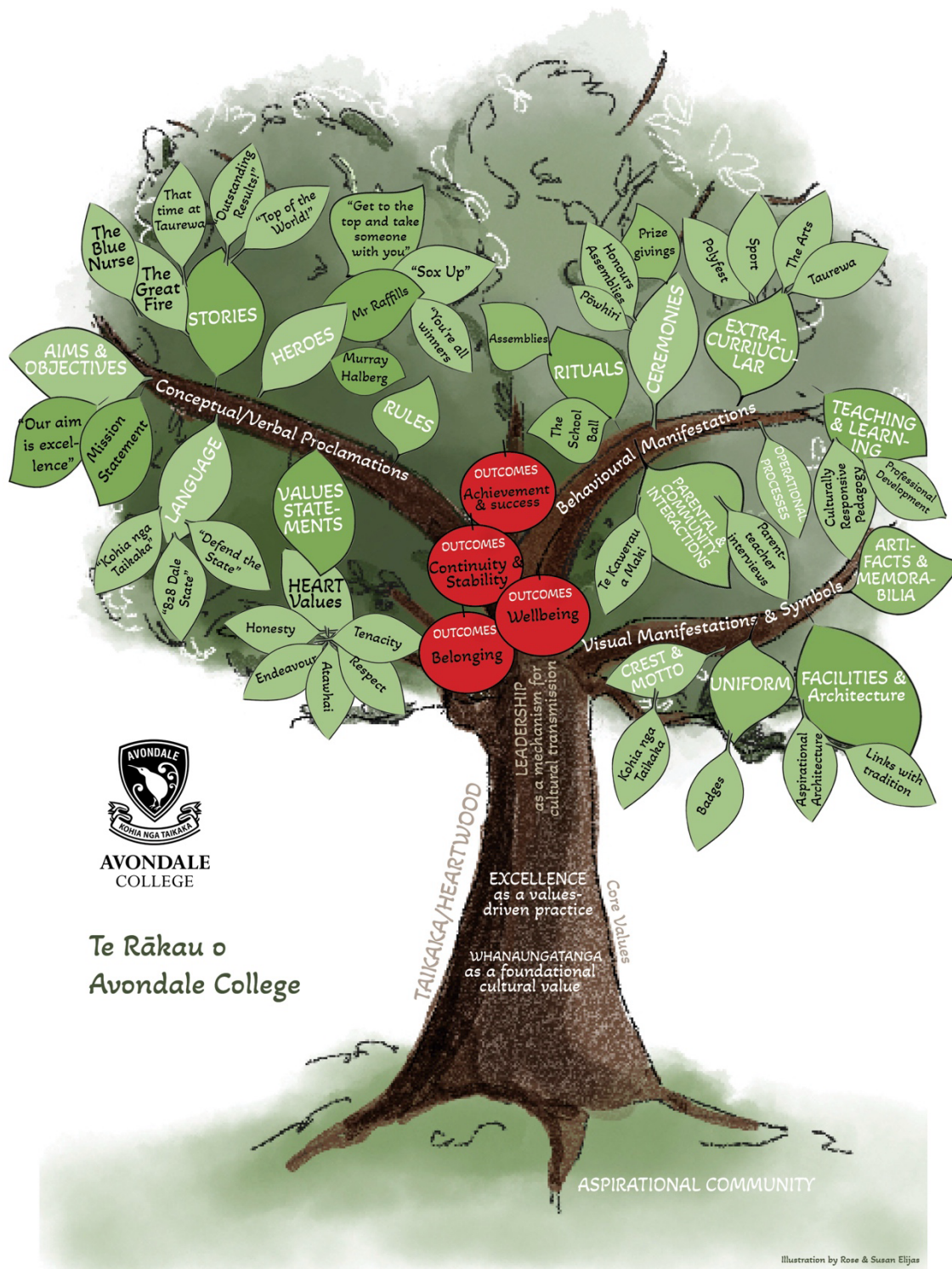
Stories reflect shared experiences like going to Taurewa Camp, as well the foundational story of the Blue Nurse, and the Great Fire of 1990. Principal Phil Raffills is identified as an enduring school hero, as is alumnus and Olympian Murray Halberg.

A second branch represents the behavioural manifestations of rituals and ceremonies such as school prizegivings and assemblies; ways of teaching and learning, including culturally responsive practices and professional development opportunities for staff; operational processes; and parental and community interactions such as parent-teacher interview evenings and connections with local iwi. Extracurricular activities are rarely mentioned in research about school culture but are included here as they are a significant behavioural aspect of Avondale College's school life.

The third branch represents the visual manifestations and symbols of the school, including its unique crest and motto; artifacts and memorabilia; uniform, with badges representing academic excellence; and the school's well-resourced facilities and aspirational architecture. Outcomes of school culture are represented as fruit of achievement and success, continuity and stability, wellbeing, and belonging.

Figure 8

Te Rākau o Avondale College



Note. Original illustration by Rose Elijaš and Susan Elijaš

Chapter 5: Discussion

This chapter synthesises the study's findings in relation to the literature, examining how key values, cultural dynamics and leadership practices shape Avondale College's school culture. The two major thematic findings provide a useful organising structure for this chapter. In addition, the concept of leadership/kaitiakitanga is seen as a mechanism for cultural transmission. The significance of continuity, challenge and change is also discussed. In preparing for future change, the importance of understanding the school's culture is highlighted. Understanding culture plays a key role in positioning Avondale College for the future. As kaitiaki of culture, leaders can use culture strategically to sustain belonging, support improvement, and navigate future winds of change.

5.1 Returning to the Research Questions: Interpreting the Heartwood

The purpose of this study is to examine the culture of Avondale College: to gain an understanding of the underlying 'heartwood' at the school's core that has shaped its character over time; and to explore how understanding the culture of the College can help to guide its future. This purpose is reflected in the research question:

What do stakeholder narratives at Avondale College reveal about the underlying values ("heartwood") of its culture since 1989? How can understanding the culture help position the college for the future?

Eleven key Avondale College community members were purposively selected to reflect a range of experiences and roles held within the school community since the school became self-governing in 1989. Interview transcripts were then analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis, viewed through a lens of organisational culture theory. The process of inductive and deductive coding and analysis led to the development of two significant themes. These themes are: 'Excellence as a values-driven practice'; and 'Whanaungatanga as a foundational cultural value'. These values are both reflected and reinforced by tangible elements including symbols, behaviours and verbal

proclamations. Leadership is also identified as a key mechanism by which culture is shaped, strengthened and transmitted.

This chapter explains what the findings reveal about Avondale College's school culture, how they relate to existing theory, and why they matter in practice. The second part of the research question will also be considered throughout this discussion: how understanding the culture of the school can help position Avondale College for the future. This includes drawing on cultural strengths in readiness for the unknown; and using cultural understandings to strategically plan for the future.

5.2 The Heartwood of Avondale College

5.2.1 Excellence as a values-driven practice

This study finds that one of the key aspects of taikākā/heartwood of Avondale College is excellence as a values-driven practice. Here 'excellence' is broadly defined: seen as achieving the best possible outcomes across a broad range of activities, including but not limited to academic achievement. A key component of aiming for excellence is having high expectations and aspirational goals. Students achieve excellent outcomes across a range of spheres with support from teachers and community. This finding is examined in further detail below.

Academic excellence is a priority

Academic achievement is highly valued at Avondale College. Current senior leader Participant 1 considers it to be the "core business" of the school, and it has been an important strategic focus of school leaders for many years. The prioritisation of academic achievement is seen in the way the school's governors and senior leaders have implemented strategic measures to improve students' academic outcomes and opportunities. Because New Zealand schools are self-governing, some of these measures are specific and unique to the school, contributing to its unique character. At Avondale these include offering Cambridge International qualifications alongside

NCEA; the development of specific programmes to track and report student achievement; performance drivers and accountability measures aimed at creating a high-performing culture; and the recruitment and professional development of highly qualified, effective teaching staff.

Academic excellence is also a key aspect of the identity of the school. Outward manifestations of culture send clear signals about what is valued by a particular school (Beare et al., 2018). That academic excellence is valued is revealed and reinforced by symbolic and behavioural manifestations such as the school's honours board, the academic badges and certificates awarded to high achieving students in Honours Assemblies and end-of-year prizegiving ceremonies; and in conceptual/verbal proclamations where stories of academic success are widely shared and celebrated through school newsletters, social media and billboards in the local community.

This finding aligns with academic research that indicates there is a strong correlation between school culture and academic achievement (Bryk et al., 2010; Lee & Shute, 2010; Phillips, 1996; Wagner, 2006). Brown (2004) argues that a school's success can be attributed to its culture. This is because a school's underlying norms, values and beliefs influence the processes that are prioritised to achieve its goals (Brown, 2004; Deal & Peterson, 2016). School culture shapes educational environments, impacting the way learning and collaboration takes place among students and staff (Plaku & Leka, 2025). It enhances (or hinders) school effectiveness and productivity. Teachers and students are more likely to succeed in a culture that fosters hard work, commitment to valued ends, an attention to problem solving, and a focus on learning for all students (Peterson & Deal, 2002).

These findings are significant because Avondale College's focus on academic achievement for all students reveals a fundamental commitment to the purpose of education in preparing young people for success in their future lives. The recurring idea across the narratives that education should be meaningful and student-centred underscores the fact that students will pursue individually different pathways on leaving college. For some this will involve further academic study, for others it will mean

different vocational pathways. Academic qualifications are an important measure of success of the school's effectiveness in achieving academic goals, and in recent years Avondale College students have achieved results above national norms, across all measures, including year level qualification achievement, university entrance, and across variables of ethnicity and gender (Avondale College, n.d.). The cultural impact of sharing these success stories is significant, building a collective sense of pride and efficacy amongst students, staff and the wider community.

Avondale College's decision to offer Cambridge International qualifications alongside NCEA qualifications is a point of difference to many other state schools and signals a valuing of academic excellence through an internationally recognised academic qualification. The introduction of Cambridge can also be understood in the context of the "mistrust" between schools and the Ministry of Education identified by Wylie (2024), with Cambridge qualifications being regarded as a more prestigious, challenging and academically robust pathway than NCEA. Concerns about the inequity of creating a 'two-tiered' system within the school are sometimes raised, particularly in relation to the much higher cost of Cambridge exams. Within Avondale College, Cambridge students are generally perceived to be among the more academically capable students. However, Avondale's NCEA curriculum offers students a much broader choice of subjects, particularly in the Arts and Humanities. At Avondale College, around 20% of senior students choose the Cambridge International pathway, suggesting that having a choice of qualification is valued by the community.

This study also found that the school's academic focus is supported by the prioritisation of having highly qualified staff who are skilled in teaching practice. As both former and current senior leader participants noted, there are committed, high-performing teachers at Avondale College. Prioritising the recruitment of highly qualified teachers can be seen to underlie the decision to recruit teachers from the UK when suitable candidates in New Zealand were unable to be found. Professional development of staff has also been a way that the college has enhanced teacher effectiveness. For example, in the mid-2000s, the gaining of digital skills was

encouraged. Laptops were given to staff who independently achieved digital qualifications; another example of the performance drivers put in place to create a high-performance culture. In the 2020s, regular whole-staff professional development sessions have been implemented for teachers. These strategic leadership practices are perceived to have directly impacted teacher effectiveness and positive student outcomes.

This finding directly corresponds to research on teacher effectiveness and impact on student outcomes. Amidst a range of important educational variables, Hattie (2009) demonstrated that teacher effectiveness is the most significant factor contributing to positive outcomes for students in the classroom. Therefore, having a school culture that values effective teachers is of critical importance. Bishop (2023) further showed that effective leaders care for and have high expectations of their teachers' learning. The leadership practices described by participants at Avondale College, including targeted recruitment, structured professional development, and the use of performance drivers, reflect this emphasis on teacher learning as being central to student success.

Participants' accounts suggest that cultural competence is a core attribute of what Avondale College understands as excellence in teaching, shaping expectations for collegial relationships as well as interactions with its diverse student body. At Avondale College cultural competency is not only an espoused value but part of normative behavioural expectations of staff. Avondale College's diverse, multicultural staff means that teachers come from a range of backgrounds and bring with them a variety of educational experiences and teaching norms. Establishing shared cultural practices that unify staff from a range of backgrounds is increasingly important in this context. Former senior leader Participant 2 noted the tensions that initially arose amongst existing staff when faced with new recruits that came from the UK but also found that these dissipated as staff found common ground in shared collegial goals for teaching and learning. Similarly, current senior leader Participant 1 stated the ongoing challenge of creating a shared culture amongst a large diverse staff community and highlighted

the importance of the value of respect in acknowledging that sometimes differences are unable to be resolved. This provides a key insight into how high expectations of shared cultural norms and behaviour are shaped and sustained within a diverse environment, where cultural competency is seen as being one of the fundamental attributes of a being a skilled teacher.

New Zealand's unique cultural setting means it is important for all teaching staff to engage with principles outlined in the Treaty of Waitangi, to consider issues of equity as they relate to taurira Māori, to understand how mātauranga Māori is recognised and embedded within the New Zealand Curriculum, and to embrace culturally responsive practices in their classroom to support the success of a diverse and multicultural student body. Offering thoughtful induction processes and ongoing professional development that addresses these issues is extremely important for establishing shared expectations and norms of behaviour in the culture of the school. Collectively, practices such as effective teacher recruitment, professional development and induction that encourage cultural competency have the potential to directly influence student engagement and success.

In a school culture that champions excellence and prioritises academic achievement, with real-time data tracking making students' progress highly visible, tensions can arise around the impact on teachers' workload, and their sense of efficacy and wellbeing. This tension was articulated by several participants who were or had been teachers. These pressures reflect broader concerns in New Zealand about teacher workload, particularly given the demands of NCEA's internal assessment requirement. The Education Review Office (2024) reported that schools found NCEA Level 1 to be "unmanageable for leaders and teachers," citing the growing demands of internally assessed standards on teachers and reporting requirements placed on school leaders. These tensions have ongoing implications for Avondale College and highlight the importance of adopting a balanced approach that sustains the school's commitment to excellence while drawing on principles of whanaungatanga, ensuring care and connection within the school community remain at its heart.

High expectations are foundational

While undeniably important, academic achievement is not the only measure of success at Avondale College. Having high expectations and aiming for excellence are also significant aspects of the 'heartwood' of excellence as a values-driven practice. The aspirational aspect of aiming for excellence can be seen in Participant 1's statement: "Whatever situation we are in, we aim to do what we're doing as well as we can possibly do it." This statement reveals the underlying belief that every community member can (and should) endeavour to achieve success in its various forms. Of importance is having high expectations and aiming to achieve set goals, as articulated in the school's marketing tagline, "Our aim is excellence." This was also a key message articulated by Raffills, who personally encouraged students to lift their expectations beyond their circumstances ("get to the top"), as also seen in the example of the student who won the scholarship to the University of Cambridge. It can be further seen in the visual symbol of the school uniform, and the expectations around how it is worn. Although the uniform itself has changed and evolved over time, high standards are nonetheless expected and reinforced by staff; wearing the uniform with pride is seen as a reflection of the value of excellence.

This finding is strongly supported by academic research which demonstrates that high expectations are an important factor in a successful school culture. Lee and Shute (2010) argue that a school climate that reinforces high expectations for students develops a collective sense of efficacy that leads to success. Hattie (2023) likewise makes a strong case for having high expectations for all students as this has an impact on student achievement. Conversely, having low expectations of students ('deficit thinking') limits student achievement (Bishop, 2023; Hattie, 2023).

These findings highlight the importance of Avondale College teachers and leaders continuing to purposefully identify and reject deficit explanations for poor student performance. The belief that all students have the potential to achieve success in its various forms means that setting aspirational goals is an important aspect of countering systemic barriers to achieving these. The cultural impact of having high

expectations is also significant: it shapes school culture, creating a shared system of belief that success is attainable by all. Avondale College's leaders have played a critical role in establishing, modelling and transmitting these cultural expectations over time, as seen by the examples of inspirational speeches to the whole school alongside personal notes to individuals; by the implementation of strategies and performance drivers designed to increase expectations and opportunities for students; and by the development of culturally responsive practices that support positive outcomes for all. In practical terms, maintaining and strengthening practices such as goal setting and rejecting deficit thinking can play an important part in continuing to ensure success across Avondale College's diverse student population.

Success isn't just about academia

At Avondale College, a broad view of success is celebrated. This includes academic achievement, but also encompasses personal growth, achievement in co-curricular activity and cultural engagement.

This finding is supported by Hoy and Miskel (2013) who suggest that schools contribute much more than academic achievement, and that focusing on such a narrow outcome fails to account for the wide range of things that comprise positive school performance. Similarly, Hattie (2023) calls for "a richer, wider and more worthwhile basket of goods to define the value of schooling," (p.153). He lists attributes such as attitudes, physical outcomes, belongingness, respect, citizenship and the love of learning as important outcomes of education. Many of these positive outcomes identified by Hattie arise through involvement in the wider life of the school at Avondale College. High engagement, leadership and co-curricular achievement are positioned as success markers in the school's culture. Participation in Polyfest is valued as an indication of achievement and leadership, reinforcing the underlying belief that involvement across multiple areas is one measure of 'success' at Avondale.

While many scholars note the importance of factors outside the classroom, research on the relationship between extra-curricular activity and positive academic outcomes

for students is limited. Bishop (2023) notes that there is some evidence that participating in kapa haka will improve Māori students' learning by promoting their wellbeing. But more when it's about success outcomes and owning identity: being proud of being Māori. At Avondale College, participation in extra-curricular activity such as sports, the performing arts, Taurewa Camp, and cultural performance groups and events such as Polyfest are regarded as having a positive impact on belonging, pride in culture, and personal growth, with a perceived connection between these and positive outcomes inside the classroom.

A broad view of excellence as a values-driven practice means that skills that build a sense of agency and resilience and support students in their future lives are also valued at Avondale College. As noted by Participant 2, these are skills that are hugely important for the future, and lead to resilience, belonging and life-long learning. This idea connects with Hattie's (2023) argument that future employers don't require students to know a lot of information but rather value the ability of knowing *how* to learn, how to learn with others, how to teach others, and how to work in teams to share knowledge. Building a school culture that values twenty-first-century skills such as creativity, critical thinking, problem-solving, communication and collaboration is essential for Avondale College students' future success beyond school. For this reason, initiatives such as the school's Innovation Academy where students are able to independently gain internationally-recognised IT qualifications outside of NCEA or Cambridge qualification pathways is of huge benefit. Similarly, Careers programmes that support skill-based learning such as the Gateway programme, or extra-curricular programmes (like sports teams or the school show) that develop creativity, resilience, communication and other 'soft' skills continue to be of value. Involvement in Polyfest or kapa haka provides multiple opportunities for students to not only develop these types of skills, but also has significance for issues of identity, equity, inclusion and belonging. In summary, Avondale College's broad view of success adds strength and depth to the heartwood concept of excellence as a value-driven practice.

Not achieving excellence

In a school culture that aims for excellence the question arises: what of those who do not or cannot achieve top academic results? Are students who don't get excellent results or fail to achieve academic success diminished or marginalised? It's a question directly raised by Participants 4 and 6 in relation to the achievement of tauira Māori at Avondale College. Participant 4, a board member, notes that Māori students achieve at both ends of the scale and suggests that work needs to purposefully continue in this space so that all tauira Māori are supported to achieve their goals. Participants 4, 5, 1 and 2 all give examples of how issues of equity for Māori and Pasifika students have been proactively addressed by the school over the years. Participant 1 notes the School Board has prioritised engaging with equity issues for priority learners, and this strategic governance has led to gains over time. Collectively, these statements reveal an ongoing commitment to ensuring equitable and successful outcomes for all students. However, it is a complex issue. While achievement rates for Avondale's tauira Māori are well above national averages for Māori students, (and indeed have at times been higher than national averages for all students regardless of ethnicity), they are nonetheless below rates for students of some other ethnicities at Avondale College (Avondale College, 2025b; Ministry of Education, n.d.-c). Participants 1, 4 and 6 acknowledge that more work is needed to further consider ways of supporting Māori students at Avondale College.

A link can perhaps be made with Bishop's (2023) case study of Keri Keri High School, in which he observed that achieving Level 2 NCEA wasn't the only measure of success for tauira Māori: a sense of identity and cultural pride was also gained by these means. Additionally, supporting academic success for tauira Māori was another way for the school to authentically respond to parents' aspirations for their children to be successful.

The issue of equity is a critical one for Avondale College's identity and its values-driven culture. The school's 'heartwood of excellence' emphasises high expectations and success for all students; therefore, ignoring those who don't achieve academically is

contradictory to its foundational values. Achievement rates for Māori that are above national averages is on one hand, cause for celebration. On the other, the fact that they are below those of some other ethnic groups suggests the existence of other systemic challenges, and the need for ongoing culturally responsive strategies. Avondale College's promotion of a broad view of excellence (academic, cultural, personal growth) further means that success must be inclusive not elitist. As Bishop (2023) points out, demonstrating commitment to equity builds relationships with whānau, iwi and the wider community, aspects that strengthen Avondale's identity as a culturally responsive school. As noted by board member Participant 4, the school has made concerted efforts to 'paddle the waka' in the right direction and it will be interesting to observe the outcomes of some of the more recently established initiatives such as the expansion of the Whānau Home room classes, the establishment of the parent-led group, Te Kuaka, and the creation of the Māori Success Evening which recognises and celebrates achievements of taurira Māori beyond just the academic sphere.

Ongoing efforts to purposefully address issues of equity for Māori students may contribute to improving overall achievement, strengthening cultural responsiveness, and preventing systemic bias in the future.

5.2.2 Whanaungatanga as a foundational cultural value

Another significant element of taikākā/heartwood at Avondale College is that of whanaungatanga as a foundational cultural value. This value is revealed by the finding that Avondale College has a culture that is built on strong interpersonal relationships, collective identity, and meaningful cultural connection. Relationships between members of the school community/ies, are valued, as is the sense of belonging and collective identity that comes through this connection. Relationships and belonging are built and reinforced through shared values, rituals, and respect for diversity. The commitment to whanaungatanga as a foundational cultural value is reflected by the school's journey towards culturally responsive practices, authentic engagement with

local iwi and commitment towards a bi-cultural ethos in the context of Aotearoa New Zealand.

The finding that whanaungatanga is a foundational cultural value at Avondale College is an important one as it offers a New Zealand-specific context to the research about school culture, relationships and belonging. In an educational setting, whanaungatanga involves the purposeful fostering of strong, respectful and supportive relationships to create an environment where learners feel connected and valued. It is not limited to familial ties but extends to all interactions that build trust and collective responsibility for learning and wellbeing (Bishop & Berryman, 2006; Macfarlane et al., 2007; Ministry of Education, 2011; Bishop, 2023). Although it is a distinctly Māori concept, elements of whanaungatanga can be seen in international school culture research. For example, Korpershoek et al. (2020) found that positive relations with teachers and peers is vital for students' engagement and achievement at school. Furthermore, a caring school culture facilitates a sense of community and a feeling of belonging among students. Hattie (2023) defines belonging as the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included and supported by others in the school social environment, and identifies it as an important component of student wellbeing and success.

At Avondale College, whanaungatanga, relationships and belonging are important aspects of the school's heartwood. This sense of belonging is evident in the narrative of recent former student Participant 10, whose positive relationships with teachers contributed to a sense of agency in their role as student representative on the Board of Trustees. Positive peer relationships led to an enhanced sense of community as evidenced by fellow students cheering each other on in sports teams and at other school events. Current teacher Participant 7 similarly observed how involvement in extra-curricular activities created a sense of belonging among students. Participant 5's leadership of the Samoan Group helped to build a culture where students were proud of their shared group identity; one where norms of excellence in performance were developed and widely celebrated. These are important examples in the way that they

illustrate the positive relationships built through involvement in school activity, which leads to an enhanced sense of belonging and wellbeing for community members.

Conversely, Participant 7 noted that students who do not participate in these extra activities do not feel the same sense of identification with the school community. Students who do not find 'their place' in this large school can feel disconnected and less likely to engage in the classroom. Current senior leader Participant 1's observation that students who are involved in events such as Polyfest are often also more engaged with their academic work and in school leadership roles is underpinned by research that links the perception of belonging with the facilitation of students' engagement, commitment to schooling and academic success (Korpershoek et al., 2020; Hattie, 2023).

At Avondale College, it is clear that involvement in extracurricular activity helps to create a sense of belonging which further leads to engagement in other areas of the school. While not 'core business', it does also provide opportunities for teachers to build positive relationships with students outside the classroom. This is an important consideration for future strategic direction. Creating opportunities for students to connect and gain a sense of belonging is an important mechanism for enhancing positive outcomes for students in and beyond the classroom.

Having a collegial sense of belonging and shared purpose is also important amongst teachers at Avondale College. Participant 7's observation that building stronger collegial relationships also builds a sense of belonging amongst staff, is extremely relevant. Teachers who report high levels of job satisfaction tend to be more motivated and committed to the school's mission (Meredith et al. 2022). It is important to recognise that sub-groups of teachers exist within the overall culture of a school, and that this can particularly be the case in large schools (Meredith et al. 2022; Stoll, 2000). Informal subgroups are the "social neighbourhood" (Meredith et al., p. 53) within which individual teachers directly interact; and it is this informal subgroup that defines teachers' perceptions of the school as a workplace. Similarly, Stoll (2000) points out that "webs" are often formed by subsets of teachers in large secondary schools with

different beliefs, attitudes, norms and social relationships. Departmental divisions can prove powerful barriers to whole-school communication and collegiality. Purposefully building a shared culture and resolving potential inter-group conflict is essential to the development of shared values, and this is a necessary prerequisite of school improvement.

The value of whanaungatanga also carries with it a sense of obligation or responsibility towards community members. This is demonstrated in part by those who return to the college to 'give back' through tutoring other students in cultural, musical or sports groups, by helping with Taurewa camps, or offering expertise in governance roles. This is significant because a strong, interconnected community further supports positive student outcomes and a sense of belonging. The other aspect of reciprocity is the inherent obligation of the school to fulfil its promise of education towards its students. As noted by Beare et al., (2018), schools have a responsibility to clarify and coordinate various aspects of school culture in order to educate the children who place their faith and futures in the school's care. An understanding of this is revealed by the emphasis that both former and current senior leaders place on education being 'meaningful'; students have the right to assume their secondary school education will prepare them for future life. A tension emerges when this 'responsibility' is not met, as seen by some of the concerns expressed by participants about Māori and Pasifika achievement.

It is important to note that while nearly all participants' narratives highlighted positive collegial relationships and gave examples of these, there were also stories shared where, for a variety of reasons, relationships were not positive. At times, people experienced conflict with others or felt unvalued, or overworked, or unsupported. In a school of Avondale College's size, with so many variables, such tensions are perhaps inevitable. (Hoy & Miskel, 2013) note that "it is through individuals that organisations act" (p.190). Organisations are made up of human beings, each guided by their own values and norms. This makes the task of creating a cohesive, collective culture challenging, something pointed out by Participant 1, who also noted the importance of the value of respect in navigating relational and inter-cultural tensions. The existence of

relational tensions also highlights the important task of continuing to work towards establishing and reinforcing a shared culture where both excellence and whanaungatanga are regarded as foundational. Again, this is an area where leadership is key, but also where established community members influence culture through sharing established norms with newer colleagues, students and families.

In the context of Aotearoa/New Zealand, there is sometimes criticism that that institutions tend to incorporate Māori worldviews superficially or performatively. While this critique highlights the possibility of cultural tokenism in schools, the findings of this study show that at Avondale College the concept of whanaungatanga is a deeply embedded cultural value. Whanaungatanga is lived and enacted across many aspects of school life, as seen by the positive and supportive relationships between community members, sustained engagement with whānau, and reciprocal community connections. Culturally grounded practices such as involvement in Polyfest are embedded, authentic and valued, and leadership actions prioritise care, belonging and wellbeing. Having said that, it is also important to acknowledge that the embedding of whanaungatanga is an ongoing process rather than a completed state. While participants' accounts demonstrate that significant progress has been made in this area over time, instances of staff disagreement, differing levels of cultural understanding and the challenges of aligning diverse perspectives in such a large institution highlight the complexity of sustaining authentic cultural practice at scale.

Aiming for “the North-East” (Bishop, 2023): When Excellence and Whanaungatanga work together

The finding that both excellence and whanaungatanga are strong elements of the heartwood of Avondale College is an important one. The link between these two values is also symbiotic; both contribute to the other and are key factors underpinning positive student outcomes. Brown (2004) notes that developing a sense of community through relationship building *and* promoting high achievement are salient factors in building a

culture of school success. Similarly, Bishop (2023) demonstrates that developing quality relationships with learners *and* using evidence-based pedagogy for effective teaching (what he frames as “teaching to the North-East”) are critical for student success.

In practice, this study’s findings that Avondale College has a culture with both values-based excellence and a commitment to whanaungatanga at its core is significant because it leads to sustained positive outcomes for students. Belonging and positive relationships increase engagement, which leads to better learning outcomes. It also supports equity: strong relationships help reduce barriers for Māori, Pasifika and other minority students, ensuring excellence is inclusive and attainable for all. Through whanaungatanga, teacher-student relationships are enhanced, building the social trust necessary for engagement and success within the classroom. Through relationships and belonging, students can build the social and emotional skills that are essential for life beyond the classroom. The sense of shared identity and pride that comes with success in its many forms helps to sustain a positive school culture over time. As scholars tend to agree that culture is a foundation for achievement, this study indicates that having whanaungatanga and excellence as values at the heartwood of Avondale College is perhaps one reason why Avondale’s students have achieved positive outcomes in many areas over time. This includes achievement in sport, music, drama and cultural performance as well as academia. Nurturing and sustaining the heartwood values of whanaungatanga and excellence could enable to the school to continue to support positive student outcomes in all its many forms in the future.

5.2.3 Leadership as a mechanism of cultural transmission

While not a core cultural value like excellence or whanaungatanga, also present in the findings is the idea that leadership is an important mechanism for the nurturing and transmission of cultural values. Leadership emerged as a significant influence across participant narratives, but it did not function as a standalone cultural value. Instead, leadership operated as a mechanism through which core values of excellence and whanaungatanga were enacted, protected, and transmitted.

In te ao Māori ‘kaitiaki’ refers to a guardian, protector, or steward. It embodies the responsibility of caring for and safeguarding people, natural resources and places (Moorfield, n.d.). Traditionally, kaitiaki are spiritual guardians who watch over specific areas. In contemporary usage, it also applies to individuals or groups who act as caretakers of the environment, culture, or community. With this concept in mind, Avondale College’s leaders can be seen as kaitiaki/stewards of school culture.

The finding that leaders are kaitiaki/stewards of school culture is supported by research that shows that principals play a decisive role in shaping and managing school culture (Hattie, 2023; Plaku & Leka, 2025; Schein 2009). Deal and Peterson (2016) further suggest that effective school leadership is about inspiring belief and purpose in others and shaping meaning through the use of stories and symbols. In the context of te ao Māori, Bishop (2023) also calls for leadership that approximates concept of a rangatira – where principals draw their community together as whānau to serve the collective goals, interacting in ways that support learning.

In the timeframe that this study addresses, Avondale College has been led by three very different principals who have demonstrated a shared and deep commitment to working with and building a school culture that supports the best possible outcomes for students. Each principal has built on the work of the previous leader to develop their own priorities within a generally stable school culture, guided by heartwood values of excellence and whanaungatanga, with the goal of supporting positive student outcomes.

Participants’ narratives construct a picture of principal Phil Raffills as a visible, relational, sometimes confrontational leader who expressed high expectations of student behaviour and academic achievement. A commitment to the underlying value of excellence was seen through his emphasis on wearing uniform correctly (“socks up”); and articulated statements such as “Get to the top but take someone else with you.” The second part of this phrase (take someone else with you) highlights the relational value of whanaungatanga, where others are supported and uplifted through positive relationships and connection. This underlying value of whanaungatanga is also

seen by his vocal support of students and symbolic relational acts such as writing personal notes or attending school performances and sports matches.

Academic excellence was also a key priority of former principal Brent Lewis, who implemented a series of strategic systemic innovations designed to create a high-performance culture. Bishop (2023) argues that effective leaders are primarily outcomes and performance focussed, and this is something that participants identified in Lewis' leadership. Underpinning these strategic shifts and performance drivers was a commitment to improving student outcomes, further reflecting and reinforcing excellence as a values-driven practice. Aspirational excellence is also seen symbolically through the school rebuild and uniform redesign in the 2000s and 2010s. The development and articulation of the school's HEART Values during this time further reinforces the connection to underlying heartwood values of excellence (as reflected by the espoused values of endeavour and tenacity) and whanaungatanga (atawhai and respect).

The components of effective school culture are many and complex. Identifying gaps and tensions in school culture that are undermining student achievement is an important and ongoing task for school leaders. Gay (2018) notes that achievement gaps require the continuing search for solutions, some of which may be found in culturally responsive teaching; something she (and others) suggest is a possibility worthy of pursuit. Participants note that this is an area that has been prioritised under the leadership of current Principal Lyndy Watkinson and the School Board through the forging of meaningful relationships with local iwi, Te Kawerau ā Maki, to support an authentic sense of the school's identity in relation to te ao Māori. Other measures such as the introduction of whānau homeroom classes, an annual Māori Success Evening, and whole-school PLD around culturally responsive practice are further supporting positive student outcomes in conjunction with aspirational goals of excellence, combined with the relational values inherent in whanaungatanga.

Peterson & Deal (2016) note that culture is revealed in the way leaders handle crises and accomplishments. Each principal has navigated key events which have

significantly impacted the school and its wider community. During Phil Raffills' tenure, what has become colloquially known as 'The Great Fire' of 1990 destroyed much of the school and subsequently led to the building of a new stadium, performing arts centre and technology building. Deal and Peterson (2016) suggest that effective school leadership is about shaping meaning and inspiring belief and purpose. They propose that leaders must act as symbolic figures who shape meaning through stories and symbols. Phill Raffills provided iconic leadership throughout this time, with symbolic language promising the school would rise from the ashes to achieve new heights of success. The community was mobilised in fundraising towards new buildings, and the resulting large gymnasium was named after alumni and Olympian Murray Halberg, himself a symbol of overcoming challenge to achieve success. Symbolism was also enacted following Raffills' death in 2000, with a memorial plaque placed in the school grounds under a tōtara tree. Symbolism and ceremony combine each year at the school's Senior Prizegiving when the Phil Raffills' memorial prize is awarded to a high achieving senior student who "gets to the top but takes someone with them."

In the 2010s, under the principalship of Brent Lewis, the remainder of the school buildings commissioned by the US Navy during WWII reached the end of their life, resulting in an ambitious three-phase rebuilding project that saw these remaining structures completely rebuilt. As noted by many scholars (Deal & Peterson, 2016; Hoy & Miskel, 2013; Schein, 2009; Stolp & Smith 1995) artifacts such as architecture can reflect and reinforce deeper ideas about what is valued by the members of the community. These artifacts can be easy to observe but difficult to decipher; they contain underlying meaning and assumptions that may not be easily discernible to members outside the group (Schein, 2009). The rebuilt school incorporated visual symbols that related to the multi-cultural aspects of the school community, including Asian-inspired rooflines, Pacific Islands-inspired 'tapa' panels, and paving that echoed the flight of the kuaka (godwits) over the Avondale isthmus. Repurposed timber was used in the timber beams in the atrium in a literal example of the old school supporting the new. The new school buildings are rich in symbolism and story. Like Raffills, Lewis' legacy is also recognised symbolically at the Senior Prizegiving ceremony, through the

awarding of the Brent Lewis HEART Award to a senior student who has displayed commitment to the school's values of Honesty, Endeavour, Atawhai, Respect and Tenacity.

Crisis was also a feature of the early years of Lyndy Watkinson's principalship. In her first years as principal, Watkinson navigated the Covid-19 pandemic which led to multiple school closures in 2020 and 2021, along with a huge impact on student and staff wellbeing. Hoy and Miskel (2013) suggest that faculty trust is built by principal behaviour that is considerate, supportive and collegial and participants' accounts suggest Watkinson's leadership during this time has gone a long way towards establishing trust and a shared sense of common purpose amongst staff. Community relationships were also enhanced during this time through acts of caring, which saw essential items delivered by the school to families in need. Ongoing commitment to the values inherent in whanaungatanga can be seen in subsequent initiatives post-Covid, such as the further development of restorative practices within school, and the expansion of the school's Health Centre to provide easily accessible health and wellbeing services to the large community of students and staff.

In summary, leadership has acted as a mechanism by which cultural values of excellence and whanaungatanga have been established, interpreted, challenged, strengthened and shared over many years at Avondale College. Crises and challenges have provided opportunities for leaders to articulate core values and to enhance a sense of community and belonging. Building on tradition and implementing changes that further support these values has reinforced and transmitted a relatively stable school culture with excellence and whanaungatanga its core.

5.2.3 Culture in Motion: Continuity, Challenge, and Change

While secondary schools in New Zealand may outwardly share many of the same characteristics, in reality each school has its own character or personality, its own school culture that has built up over time (Hoy & Miskel, 2013; Deal & Peterson, 2002; Schein, 1985). An individual school's culture is initially based on the beliefs, values and

assumptions of its founders (Schein, 1985; Stoll, 2000). At Avondale College these foundational beliefs are reflected most simply and profoundly today in the symbol of the school's crest and motto: Kohia ngā taikākā: Collect/Seek/Gather the heartwood, which have been in place since the school's establishment in 1945. As previously outlined, the whakataukī speaks of seeking and drawing together the things that are of value. It reflects a core idea of aspirational excellence that has been more recently articulated in the school's marketing material as "Our aim is excellence." The school crest and motto are enduring symbols of tradition that link the school of today to its foundational past.

Schein (1985) and Stoll (2000) suggest that in the middle stage of an organisation's (or school's) development, the school is established but growth and renewal may be needed due to internal change or external contexts. At this point, the most important aspects of the culture are embedded and increasingly hidden and change becomes more difficult because culture is more implicit and harder to articulate and understand. Eighty years after its establishment, Avondale College can be seen to be in this middle phase; the school is well established in the community and the school's special character is defined, yet not always easy to articulate. Culture is multi-faceted and complex; it shifts and moves across implicit and explicit levels over time. Nonetheless it is possible to identify basic assumptions and core values relating to excellence and whanaungatanga, which are reflected and reinforced by visible symbols such as uniform and architecture; in behavioural rituals such as assemblies and prizegiving events; and in stated aims such as the school's mission statement and HEART Values.

The findings of this study indicate that Avondale College has developed a relatively stable and enduring school culture, sustained through continuity of leadership, governance, and shared values over time. Current senior leader Participant 1 notes the continuity of investment in "core language" around 'kohia ngā taikākā', and aiming for excellence. They identify links to the past in today's school culture, acknowledging that the school's HEART Values were based on other shared values that predated them. Participant 1 acknowledges the aspirational nature of the diverse and "hardworking"

community that the school serves, and that this has been there for a long time. Similarly, former senior leader Participant 2 acknowledges that the culture of the school they stepped into had been built by those who had come before, and that as a senior leader they had the opportunity to build upon this and improve certain aspects. As both leaders recognise, there are many elements of Avondale College's culture that are well-established, with strong links to tradition and the way things have operated over many years. This is significant as it demonstrates that the school has a relatively stable, enduring culture that has developed over time. In part this may be attributable to the long tenure of Lewis who was principal for 19 years, followed by Watkinson who had been a staff member and deputy principal for eight years prior to being appointed principal in 2020. Notable continuity has also been seen in the school board during this time, with some members contributing to the governance of the school over many years. This is especially significant given the context of New Zealand's self-governing schools, where strong boards and school leaders can have a huge impact on individual school cultures and outcomes for students.

Deal and Peterson (2002) suggest that shared learning experiences solidify core values as a school evolves, and as people solve problems and conflicts, cope with tragedies, recognise accomplishments and celebrate successes. In the 36 year period that this study specifically addresses, Avondale College staff and students have engaged with numerous 'shared learning experiences', for example, navigating changes to curricula and assessment brought about by the mandatory implementation of NCEA in the early 2000s, and by the school's choice to offer Cambridge International Examinations in 2011. These shared experiences have solidified the values inherent in the school's expressed commitment to academic achievement and aspirational goals for student success. Other shared learning experiences have arisen through extra-curricular activities such as Taurewa Camp and cultural, sporting and performance opportunities. These have reinforced values of excellence beyond academic achievement; the idea that success is also connected with cultural and personal achievement. As previously noted, tragedy, crises and challenge have also made an impact during this time. Having the heartwood of whanaungatanga and excellence at its core has helped the school

navigate periods of uncertainty and change with relative stability, guided by a deeply held commitment towards providing students with the best possible opportunities for future success.

One way that the culture of an organisation in its mid-stages develops is when new beliefs, values, and assumptions are brought in by new members and leaders (Hoy & Miskel, 2013; Schein, 2009). Sometimes these changes are influenced by greater societal changes. An example of this is Avondale College's developing response over recent years to culturally responsive perspectives, as evidenced by the journey towards an increasingly bi-cultural ethos. This journey recognises the importance and place of Māori culture and perspectives in the context of Aotearoa New Zealand, both at Avondale College and in wider society. Several participants acknowledged the importance of this journey, and also that the school has a way to go yet, but there has nonetheless been an identifiable shift in school culture in this area over time. A recent example of this can be seen in the school's response to the government's announcement that the obligation for School Boards to uphold Treaty principles was to be removed. The school issued a public statement confirming its ongoing commitment to upholding these principles, regardless of whether they were required to by law or not. As in-school discussions and social media commentary indicate, this stance has been widely supported by Avondale College staff and its wider community and reflects an underlying commitment to inclusive and authentic culturally responsive practice at the College.

A school's culture is also impacted by its socio-economic context. Hattie and Larsen (2020) argue that education cannot be separated from its social context, and socio-economic conditions shape both student experiences and the culture of schools. Inequalities such as poverty, family background and access to resources affect the purposes and practices of schooling. In 2025 a moderate level of socio-economic challenge exists for Avondale College students compared to those in other schools nationwide (Education Counts, 2025). With the autonomy granted to school boards under Tomorrow's Schools, Avondale College has benefited from many years of

strategic financial governance, where careful management and business initiatives such as its international student programme have generated revenue above that granted annually by the Ministry of Education. As a result, school-generated money was able to be added to Ministry funding for the rebuilding project in the mid-2010s. Both the former and current senior leader participants articulated their belief that the purpose of sound financial management is to provide opportunities to support positive student outcomes. Resources enable the school to balance equity issues within the school community generally, as well as at an individual level when needed. In a well-resourced school with considerable autonomy over operational spending, the underlying values inherent in a school's culture have a significant impact on how funding decisions are made, for example how individual departments are resourced, what professional development opportunities are offered to teachers, and how (or whether) extra-curricular activities are provided for students. At Avondale College, resources have been carefully managed: classrooms are well resourced; multiple extra-curricular opportunities are offered, with the associated cost to students of many of these activities (including Taurewa Camp and Polyfest) offset by Board contributions. However, Hattie (2023) argues that it is not the amount of money that is spent but *how* it is spent that has the most impact on student outcomes. When there is a focus on spending to develop teacher expertise, the positive effects on student achievement are higher. Opportunities for professional development are offered to Avondale College teachers both through weekly on-site PLD sessions, and through off-site programmes and workshops. Positive outcomes for students are supported by the way these resources are allocated.

School size impacts the culture of a school, particularly in relation to curricular opportunities, and the sense of belonging among community members. Hattie (2023) notes that many large secondary schools set up schools-within-schools to engender a sense of belonging. This is not a structure that Avondale College uses; however, in recent years, the school has created a space for Māori students through the establishment of the whānau homeroom class, which is perceived to be working well in providing taurira Māori with a place to connect and build relationships, in accordance

with principles of whanaungatanga. However, within the daily school structures, these opportunities exist for other students only within the regular homeroom class system and in timetabled classes. Therefore, the impact of extra-curricular activities as a mechanism for creating a sense of belonging is of particular significance. This was clearly demonstrated in narratives relating to involvement in sport, the arts, Taurewa Camp and Polyfest. The array of extra-curricular activities offered at Avondale College provide students with multiple places to find others with similar interests and to gain a sense of belonging; this is an important consideration for future strategic decisions around resourcing these opportunities for students.

The other issue relating to school size is that of Avondale being a 'big ship to steer'. The slow pace of change is an issue that arose in several participants' narratives. This may be indicative of a stable core culture that means unnecessary change is not undertaken lightly and that serious consideration is given to changing the way the school operates. However, the flip side of a stable culture is that it can be resistant to innovation and risks stagnation. Sometimes the pace of change can be in the eye of the beholder. Participant 7 noted that significant change in culturally responsive practice has taken place over recent years, but that other (newer) colleagues have seen this progress as slow. Participant 7, who has been at the school a long time points out that comparatively, this has happened quite quickly.

Conversely, when the school needs to effect rapid change, it can. Current senior leader Participant 1's example of the change to digital teaching and learning during Covid is a salient one. Challenging and changing the (stable) core values and underlying basic assumptions of a school is extremely difficult. However, if the values inherent in change processes align with the underlying core values of the school, then change is possible, and this can happen quickly. Perhaps part of the reason that Avondale College teachers were able to so quickly get on board with switching to digital technology almost overnight is that this change aligned with deeper shared values around excellence and a professional commitment to supporting student achievement and success despite the challenge of rapid change.

The overall stability of Avondale College's core culture means that it is potentially well placed to navigate future external change. In the current climate where government-led curricula and qualifications are undergoing significant change, Avondale College's underlying cultural commitment to excellence and whanaungatanga means that it is in a good position to navigate the pathways ahead, with positive student outcomes held as the ultimate goal.

5.3 The Roadmap: Positioning Avondale College for the Future

The second part of my research question is: How can understanding the culture help position the college for the future?

Deal & Peterson (2016) suggest that a school's past can be used as a roadmap to the future. The importance of understanding and valuing what has gone before so that future pathways can be navigated successfully is also expressed in the Māori whakataukī:

Kia whakatōmuri te haere whakamua.
I walk backwards into the future with my eyes fixed on my past.

Erickson (1987) notes that understanding a school's culture gives the basis of hope for educational change: "When we make visible the ways in which humans form the distinctive shapes of their lived history through implicit and explicit choice, we see what people have made, they can change" (p. 24.). However, Hattie & Larsen (2020) also make the point that change is not necessarily needed if things are going well.

The findings of this study suggest that since 1989, Avondale College's core culture has been relatively stable, drawing on heartwood of excellence as a values-driven practice, and whanaungatanga as a foundational cultural value. This has provided the school with a stability of culture that has stood it in good stead amidst external challenge, crisis and change.

Some future considerations have been integrated throughout the preceding discussion; however, there are several points of discussion that I would like to highlight as to how

understanding the school's culture can further help influence the College's future strategic direction.

5.3.1 Understanding that leaders are cultural kaitiaki/stewards

The concept of leadership as a mechanism of cultural transmission is significant. Leaders shape and reinforce culture (Plaku & Leka, 2025; Schein, 2009). Leaders have the potential to transmit and reinforce cultural values through the 'visible' aspects of culture - symbols, cultural storytelling, rituals and ceremonies. Purposefully finding ways to share and strengthen the school's cultural values of whanaungatanga and excellence will help to reinforce them, while building a shared sense of community and connection amongst members. Practically, this understanding can help inform the review of existing practices, rituals and ceremonies to ensure they align with these heartwood values. However, and importantly, leaders are not the only stewards of culture. As community members gain a greater sense of belonging and connection to the school, they in turn transmit and reinforce cultural norms and values (Deal & Peterson, 2016). Finding further ways for other leaders, staff and students to share and celebrate the school's culture will help to reinforce core values at a deeper level.

5.3.2 Harnessing the power of storytelling

Storytelling is a powerful tool of cultural transmission. The whakatauki/motto of Avondale College, Kohia ngā taikākā, is itself drawn from a story shared through Māori oral tradition, and this story's connection to the school values has been retold every year since the very first the *Taikaka* yearbook. In turn, the stories shared by the participants of this study can be regarded as taonga/treasures in the way that they reveal the heart of each individual storyteller and those things that are of value to them. Deal and Peterson (2016) suggest that inviting community members to 'gather around the cultural campfire' to tell stories provides a rich opportunity for cultural connection. Understanding what these core values are enables all community members to more purposefully consider ways of sharing the stories that sustain and shape culture. Creating opportunities for staff to tell their stories in group settings can foster a sense

of common purpose and communal endeavour. Inviting students to share their experiences in authentic and meaningful ways can enhance their sense of belonging and connection to the school community.

5.3.3 Maintaining belonging in a large, diverse school

As a large, diverse school, Avondale College has many strengths: it is able to offer a broad curriculum, dual qualification pathways, and many extra-curricular opportunities. However, students are less likely to feel a sense of belonging in a large school (Hattie, 2023). Establishing and maintaining a sense of belonging in such a large, diverse school as Avondale College is a challenge that requires proactive attention. Involvement in extracurricular activities is one of the ways that students find a sense of belonging; similarly, initiatives such as whānau homerooms for Māori students are significant. Considering ways of increasing these opportunities for students to feel connected and valued is of importance, especially to ensure that students' lived experiences reflect the espoused core values of connection and belonging inherent in the concept of whanaungatanga.

5.3.4 Using culture strategically for improvement

Understanding that both excellence and whanaungatanga are at the heartwood of Avondale College culture may help inform the school's future direction. Avondale College governors and leaders have the opportunity to align future strategic direction with these values. Aligning change strategies with existing values shared by community members increases the buy-in from stakeholders and potential for success (Rossman et al., 1988; Stoll & Fink 1996). As demonstrated by Bishop's (2023) "North-East" framework, aiming for both excellence and whanaungatanga has the potential to lead to optimal student outcomes. Keeping both values in mind helps to establish a balanced approach to future change initiatives that will support student success in a range of areas.

In a culture that positions excellence as a foundational value, it is certain that Avondale College will continue to look at ways of improving its systems and processes in the future. However, it would be wrong to suggest that transformative change is easy. Bishop (2023) notes that schools are complex places, so it is unreasonable to expect solutions for improvement and transformative change to be simple. Sometimes change processes in schools are promoted but not effectively implemented at the ground level, or not sustained over time (Bishop, 2023). Diehl (2024) highlights the importance of engaging both declarative and procedural aspects of culture in order to implement sustained improvements. Stoll (2000) notes the importance of improving problem-solving capacities of schools in order to navigate future change. She argues that if schools are to continue to be effective in the future they need to build structures which promote interrelationships and interconnections (both key concepts relating to whanaungatanga), while simultaneously developing cultures that promote both collegiality and individuality. "Although it sounds paradoxical, not only must the school's culture promote group learning, it must honour individual "mavericks," because creativity and novelty will be required to deal with an unknowable future and prevent "groupthink"" (p. 13.). These findings have important implications for future change initiatives at Avondale College: they must be more than espoused but also practiced; they should be ideally aligned with core values and bring others on the journey, so that successful implementation might occur. Furthermore, to achieve lasting change, it is important to understand and respect the different interpretations that people bring to educational initiatives, and to foster shared meanings anchored in norms that enable sustainable school improvement.

5.3.5 Preparing for future winds of change

As noted by Hattie and Larsen (2020), until recently, Western traditions of schooling have remained the same in many ways for the past 200 years or so. However, rapid change is now occurring. Today educators are increasingly being asked to take on extra responsibilities, including caring for the emotional wellbeing of students, considering aspects of culturally responsive practice, as well as attending to the core business of

teaching and strategies of learning. Other societal and educational challenges are arising with the development of technology, including the use of social media, and the rise of artificial intelligence and its implications for teaching and learning.

In New Zealand, state schools have been self-managing since 1989, with government agencies playing a more limited supporting role than in other countries. Nonetheless, the impact of government-mandated structural changes on local schools is significant. Currently, there is an ongoing tension as aspects of what is taught and how it is taught are being re-centralised through curriculum reforms; these are all factors that contribute to what Wylie (2024) identifies as schools having a “corrosive mistrust” of the Ministry of Education (p. 663). While bodies such as NZSTA (formerly known as the New Zealand School Trustees Association, now operating as Te Whakarōpūtanga Kaitiaki Kura o Aotearoa) have been established to provide greater support for school boards, some boards still struggle and require state intervention through mechanisms like Commissioners or Limited Statutory Managers. All of these elements significantly impact the individual cultures of New Zealand schools.

Adding to the ‘cultural layer cake’ of the educational setting specific to Aotearoa New Zealand are issues of bi-culturalism; the wider consideration and implementation of the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi, and the obligations of individual school boards to support equitable outcomes for taurira Māori. With New Zealand schools following traditional Western education systems, the individualistic practices of the dominant European culture are at odds with the collectivistic principles of Māori culture. Further complexity arises with the diversity of a large multi-cultural population in an Auckland city school like Avondale College. In this setting, the culturally responsive approaches inherent in the principle of whanaungatanga take on real importance to support meaningful and positive outcomes for all students.

Avondale College has been fortunate to have had many years of strong governance and stable leadership, where strong heartwood values have been enabled to grow and develop. These core values of excellence as a values-driven practice and whanaungatanga as a foundational cultural value are made visible in the school’s

behavioural practices of celebrations, ceremonies, rituals and extra-curricular activities, in symbols such as uniform and aspirational architecture, and articulated through stories, the school's motto, mission statement and HEART values. Positive outcomes are seen in high academic achievement and success in many areas, the stability of the school's culture, as well as in the sense of belonging and wellbeing shared by community members. With these aspects in mind, it appears the school is well placed to draw upon the strong heartwood values at its core to navigate future winds of change and the unknown challenges ahead.

Conclusion

6.1 Summary of Purpose and Findings

For over 80 years, the motto/whakataukī embroidered on the jerseys of countless Avondale College students has been ‘Kohia ngā Taikākā’ (*Seek/Collect the Heartwood*). It exhorts its community to pursue excellence, to seek that which is of most value in life. The purpose of this research is to discover what are those underlying values, the taikākā/heartwood, inherent in the unique culture of Avondale College, and further, to consider how understanding these might help identify the strengths that create continuity and stability while shaping a forward-looking strategic direction.

This aim was outlined in the research question:

What do stakeholder narratives at Avondale College reveal about the underlying values ("heartwood") of its culture since 1989. How can understanding the culture help position the college for the future?

This study also adds to the body of research on school culture, giving insight into how dimensions of culture impact a school’s identity, goals and outcomes specifically in the context of Aotearoa, New Zealand.

A supplementary outcome of this study is the enhancement of the community’s collective knowledge, sense of whanaungatanga and connection through the preservation of historically significant memories and stories. Developing a richer picture of the history and cultural foundations of the school ultimately benefits the wider school community.

Eleven significant Avondale College community members were purposefully selected to represent a range of roles and experiences from the past four decades, including school board members, leaders, teachers, operations staff, parents and students, with many participants having held more than one role over time. Their stories and recollections were gathered through semi-structured interviews. Using a process of Reflexive Thematic Analysis and the lens of organisational culture, patterns of shared meaning were identified, from which several key themes were developed. The first major theme is 'Excellence as a values-driven practice'. Avondale College has a culture that exhibits a deeply held commitment to excellence. This is reflected by a focus on high academic achievement and aspirational goals and encompasses a broad view of success that incorporates academic achievement, personal growth and cultural participation. This ethos is also seen and reinforced through symbolic representations such as the school crest and motto, architecture and uniforms.

Another significant theme is: Whanaungatanga as a foundational cultural value. Avondale College has a culture that is built on strong interpersonal relationships, collective identity, and meaningful cultural connection. Relationships and a sense of belonging are built and reinforced through shared values, rituals, and respect for diversity. The commitment to authentic cultural responsiveness in the context of Aotearoa New Zealand is reflected by the school's more recent journey towards a bi-cultural ethos.

Leadership also emerged as a significant influence across participant narratives, but it did not function as a standalone cultural theme. Instead, leadership is seen to operate as a mechanism through which core values of excellence and whanaungatanga are enacted, protected, and transmitted.

These findings were further viewed through the lens of organisational culture theory which suggests school culture exists in levels or layers, with deep cultural values and basic assumptions held at its core, and more surface aspects of culture revealed by visible aspects such as verbal/conceptual manifestations, behaviours and symbols.

Drawing on theoretical models proposed by Schein (1985; 2009), Beare et al., (2018) and Hammond (2015), a conceptual framework, *Te Rākau o Avondale College* was constructed that imagines Avondale College's culture as a tree. At its core is the heartwood: the immutable values of 'excellence as a values-driven practice', and 'whanaungatanga as a foundational cultural value'. These values influence and shape all other significant aspects of the school's culture. Leadership is identified as an important mechanism for transmitting these key cultural values. Visible elements of culture can be seen in the branches and leaves of the tree. One branch represents conceptual/verbal proclamations, seen in the 'leaves' of articulated aims and objectives, language used, values statements, school rules, stories and heroes. A second branch represents the behavioural manifestations of rituals, ceremonies, extracurricular activities, ways of teaching and learning, operational processes and parental and community interactions. The third branch represents the visual manifestations and symbols of the school, including its crest and motto, artifacts and memorabilia, uniform, facilities and architecture. Outcomes of school culture are represented as fruit: achievement and success, continuity and stability, wellbeing, and belonging. Firmly grounded in an aspirational community, this tree has strength to stand against the winds of future change and challenge.

Understanding the school's culture in this way helps us to 'make sense of the world'. It allows us to see where strengths lie, but also where challenges exist; this has significance when considering how to navigate future change in a meaningful and effective way.

6.2 Implications

This research has implications for Avondale College, for school leaders more broadly, as well as for the wider research community.

For Avondale College, the implications are outlined in answering the second part of the research question: *How can understanding the culture help position the college for the future?* The following aspects are of particular relevance. Firstly, understanding that

Avondale's leaders are cultural kaitiaki, the guardians and stewards of Avondale College's culture. They have the power to transmit and reinforce the cultural values of excellence and whanaungatanga through visible mechanisms such as behaviours, symbols, stories and other spoken practices. Harnessing the power of stories allows for the shaping and sharing of culture. Understanding that whanaungatanga is a core cultural value also helps to shape strategic decisions about cultural behaviours and operations, ensuring all students, staff and families feel a sense of connection and belonging in this large school. Recognising that both whanaungatanga and excellence are at the heartwood of the school further means that strategic change can be aligned with these values, enhancing the potential for the successful implementation of measures designed to improve outcomes for students. Finally, understanding that values of excellence and whanaungatanga have been part of the heartwood of Avondale College for many years allows the school to feel a sense of stability and confidence in navigating future change and challenge.

This study also has implications for school leaders at a broader level. It reinforces the idea that culture can be seen as a strategic asset, where positive cultural values can be purposefully transmitted and reinforced through visible symbols, behaviours and verbal proclamations. It also shows that narratives and stories from within the community can be used as a powerful diagnostic tool, revealing both the visible and the invisible aspects of a particular school's culture. It also highlights the risks of the misalignment of espoused and lived values, reinforcing the importance of ensuring both declarative and procedural aspects of change initiatives are enacted to support sustained transformative improvement.

Finally, this study has wider implications for research about school culture. It highlights the value of narrative-based culture studies, and the use of Reflexive Thematic Analysis methodology. It also contributes to the school culture literature in a New Zealand context, offering context-specific insights into one large, multicultural Auckland secondary school. Because this school is located in Aotearoa, Māori whakataukī and concepts are an integral part of the cultural analysis, adding to the richness and depth

of cultural insight.

6.3 Reflexivity, Scope, and Trustworthiness

As a cultural insider of the Avondale College community, I have been in the unique and privileged position of being both an observer and commentator on the school's culture in this study. Being an insider has allowed me to fill in some of the gaps between narratives, and to consider some of the more hidden meanings that may not have been as visible to a cultural outsider. As Schein (2009) points out, some of the more surface levels of culture are rich with meaning that is not immediately obvious to those outside the community. This is one way that being a cultural insider has been of benefit to this research.

Engaging in reflexivity throughout the research process has enabled me to consider and attempt to limit any preconceived ideas or bias that I may have brought to this project. This has been an important safeguard for the trustworthiness of this study as I have striven to understand and 'own my perspectives' throughout (Elliott et al., 1999). As noted by Braun & Clarke (2022) and others, the process of interpretation is never impartial or detached; it is always filtered by the interpreter's perspective and conditioned by the prevailing social and institutional power arrangements. For this reason, I took care to ensure I adhered to Braun & Clarke's criteria of quality and trustworthiness: coherence, transparency, reflexivity and resonance.

While this study identifies shared values of excellence and whanaungatanga at the 'heartwood' of Avondale College's culture, it is important to acknowledge that these values are not experienced uniformly by all members of the school community. Participants' narratives reveal a culture that is dynamic and at times challenging and contradictory, shaped by different perspectives, historical shifts and uneven experiences.

Some participants highlighted tensions in leadership styles, describing periods of strong direction that also generated strain or a sense of constraint amongst staff members. Others highlighted gaps between institutional goals and culturally responsive practices, particularly with regards to Māori representation and authentic engagement. Historical accounts also revealed inequities and assumptions that had impacted Māori and Pasifika students, highlighting the fact that some aspects of the culture have evolved over time rather than remaining consistently positive.

These findings suggest that school culture is not a fixed or fully coherent entity, but an evolving and sometimes contradictory state. The repeated idea of there still being “work to be done,” particularly with regards to culturally responsive practice, highlights the fact that school culture exists as an evolving and dynamic entity.

As almost all researchers of school culture note, this is a complex and complicated field of study. Even Schein (2009) notes that capturing a whole culture is probably impossible. With this in mind, I acknowledge that this study has several limitations. Firstly, it draws on a relatively small sample of participants whose perspectives represent individual experiences rather than those of the entire Avondale College community. Identifying patterns of shared meaning across participants’ narratives is of significance; however, I acknowledge that these accounts cannot and do not capture every viewpoint within the school community. While participants were purposively selected to ensure representation of different roles, ages, ethnicities, and forms of participation, many voices remain unheard. Due to the study’s focus on capturing historical aspects of continuity and change in the school’s culture over several decades, current student voices were not included. Despite the small sample, the interviews generated more data than could be included in this master’s thesis. My choices about what aspects to include and what to leave out were guided by my supervisor and Braun & Clarke’s (2022) advice to focus on the data that was most relevant to the research question, but this does mean that some aspects of participants’ accounts were unable to be included in the written findings.

A further limitation is the context-specific nature of this study. The findings relate uniquely to the culture of Avondale College and are therefore not generalisable to other schools. However, the study design is potentially replicable in similar contexts.

Importantly, this research addresses a gap in the academic literature, where there is a scarcity of empirical studies examining secondary school cultures in Auckland, New Zealand. A notable strength of this study is the richness and nuance of its insights, drawn from multiple stakeholder perspectives.

Finally, on a personal note, in qualitative research, Lichtman (2023) observes that the researcher shapes the research and is, in turn, shaped by the research. That I have been personally enriched by this research was particularly evident recently when I was tasked with organising the school's 80th Jubilee celebrations. It was a pleasure to sift through photographic archives and memorabilia before the event, to meet alumni and hear their stories about their time at the school, and to share these stories with our current school community. It made me newly aware of the deep and special connections to the past traditions of the school that I have as a current and long-standing community member. Beare et al., (2018) and Deal and Peterson (2016) suggest that every school has what they call 'cultural high priests.' These are "the go-betweens, the creators of folklore. They mediate culture and meaning, they help to build the emotional bonds which hold the tribe together and, in so doing, they emphasise the closeness of community and the uniqueness of belonging" (Beare, et al. 2018, p. 191). I was astonished to recognise myself in this description.

Personally and professionally, this research has provided me with a richer understanding of the importance of school culture, of Avondale College's commitment to both excellence and whanaungatanga, and of my own role as a community member and leader. Looking ahead, I find myself thinking about new ways of telling the stories of the school, and of building community and connection to the past, present and future. Today, the school's whakataukī, Kohia ngā Taikākā, remains as relevant as it was in 1945 in its exhortation to seek and gather those things that are of most value: the true heartwood of life. The phrase uses an active verb; the process of gathering the

heartwood is one that is ongoing, taking us from our past and present into the future. It is a whakataukī that has relevance and application to almost every aspect of life.

6.4 Recommendations for Future Research

Avondale College leaders and teachers suggest there is a link between involvement in co-curricular activities and academic achievement beyond the more obvious benefits of belonging. This is an area that has had little research and is a rich area for future investigation, particularly in a New Zealand context where extra-curricular activity is a widespread and often integrated part of secondary schooling.

Many global school culture studies focus heavily on teaching culture, and don't consider the impact that student culture or other sub-cultures have on a school's environment. While this study has touched on some of these points, it was not possible to explore these more specific aspects in depth. Future research that focused more purposefully on the perspectives of students or other subcultures in schools would add to the depth of understanding of school culture as a whole.

Finally, this study did not include the perspectives of current students, who are an important part of the present lived school culture experience. While some student perspectives were included, these were presented by one recent former student or mediated through the perspectives of adults and school leaders. It would be valuable to conduct future research that focused on the experience of current students, particularly with regards to how they perceive the values of excellence, whanaungatanga and belonging at Avondale College.

Kohia ngā Taikākā.

Susan Elijaš

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Appendices

Appendix A: Ethics Approval



Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEK)

4 July 2024

Jennie Watts
Faculty of Design and Creative Technologies

Dear Jennie

Ethics Application: 24/175 Kohia ngā Taikākā / Collecting the Heartwood: What the stories of the school community reveal about the culture of Avondale College, 1989-2024.

Thank you for submitting your application for ethical review. We are pleased to advise that the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEK) approved your ethics application at their meeting on 1 July 2024, subject to:

1. Provision of the names of the potential participants that are already identified;
2. Revision of the recruitment protocol so that a School administrator sends out the Information Sheet and Consent Form on behalf of the researcher, rather than giving participant contact details to the researcher;
3. Clarification of whether wider recruitment will take place so that other participants might take part and provide different experiences of Avondale College;
4. Provision of the future use of data as it is inconsistent across the application;
5. Clarification of whether the School or participants will be offered a copy of the audio recording as taonga to be archived;
6. Clarification of the identification of participants in research outputs as it is inconsistent across the application. Consider how identification of the participants may strengthen the research findings. Of note the Consent Form states that participants will be identified;
7. Provision of a Researcher Safety Protocol that is appropriate to potential venues used during interviews;
8. Amendment of the Information Sheet as follows:
 - a. AUTEK recommend one Information Sheet for the research so that all participants receive the same information about the research;
 - b. Replacement of "chosen" with "invited";
 - c. Revision of how to agree to reflect the response to the condition about sending out the Consent Form with the Information Sheet;
 - d. Clarification if a person's home is a possible venue for an interview;
 - e. Reconsideration of the privacy section to reflect the response to the condition above (and the contents of the Consent Form).

Please provide a response to the conditions in a memo and attach any altered documents, such as the Information Sheet, Consent Forms, Survey.

A revised EA1 is not required unless specifically requested in the conditions.

Please reference the application number and study title in all correspondence.

The Committee is always willing to discuss with applicants the points that have been made. There may be information that has not been made available to the Committee, or aspects of the research may not have been fully understood.

When the conditions have been met, you will be notified of the full approval of your ethics application. Full approval is not effective until all the conditions have been met. Data collection may not commence until full approval has been confirmed. If these conditions are not met within six months, your application may be closed, and a new application will be required if you wish to continue with this research.

If you have any enquiries about this application, please contact us at ethics@aut.ac.nz.

(This is a computer-generated letter for which no signature is required)

The AUTEK Secretariat

Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee

Cc: s.elijas@avcol.school.nz

Appendix B: Participant Information Sheet



Participant Information Sheet

Date Information Sheet Produced:

03 October 2024.

Project Title

Kohia ngā Taikākā / Collecting the Heartwood: What the stories of the school community reveal about the culture of Avondale College, 1989-2024.

An Invitation

Hi, I'm Susan Elijas, Communications Manager at Avondale College, and part time student at Auckland University of Technology in the Master of Communication Studies programme. For my Master's thesis I'm conducting research that looks at the way the school culture unique to Avondale College is revealed by the stories, recollections and experiences of some of the people who have studied and worked there over the past 35 years.

I would really value your contribution to this project and hope you will consider being one of my participants.

What is the purpose of this research?

I am trying to find out what the stories of the Avondale College community of students, staff, parents and stakeholders, past and present, reveal about the underlying culture and values of the school.

The College's motto: Kohia ngā Taikākā (Collect the Heartwood) exhorts its community to pursue excellence, to seek that which is of most value in life. This research aims to gather the 'stories, myths and legends' from a range of students, leaders and staff members who have been part of the school community since 'Tomorrow's Schools' was introduced nationally in 1989. Through these narratives, it is hoped an understanding of the underlying values and assumptions (the "heartwood") of Avondale College's unique school culture will emerge. This research will further enhance the community's collective knowledge, sense of whānaungatanga and connection.

Aims of this research are:

To collect, record and preserve historically significant memories and stories from the Avondale College community of stakeholders about their time at the College

To build up a picture of the history and culture of the school

To explore what these stories reveal about the underlying values and culture of Avondale College in the past 35 years

I intend to interview eight key people in the school community (past and present) whose narratives are relevant to the research question and objectives. This will include teachers, administrators, students, Board members and senior leaders who represent a diverse range of perspectives and experiences at the College.

I will ask participants to share their recollections, experiences and stories, guided by semi-structured, open-ended interview questions in a relaxed, informal setting. These interviews will be recorded, with participant consent, to ensure these narratives are captured accurately.

The results will be presented as a summary of findings (Master's thesis).

Some of the stories shared may also be included, with your permission, in a published book celebrating the College's 80th anniversary in 2025.

How was I identified and why am I being invited to participate in this research?

I am inviting you to participate in this research because you've been a key member of the Avondale College community.

I'm very interested to hear your recollections, thoughts and stories about the College from your unique perspective and sphere of involvement.

How do I agree to participate in this research?

If you agree to take part in this research, please let Rochelle Smith, our Principal's PA at Avondale College know (email: r.smith@avcol.school.nz or phone (09) 828 7024) and she will send you a Consent Form by email.

Your participation in this research is voluntary (it is your choice) and whether or not you choose to participate will neither advantage nor disadvantage you.

You are able to withdraw from the study at any time. If you choose to withdraw from the study, then you will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to you removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of your data may not be possible.

What will happen in this research?

We will arrange a suitable time and place to meet for an interview. This could be at Avondale College, or at a location more convenient to you, such as your home. I will ask you a range of questions – about 15 or so – designed to encourage you to share your memories, experiences and perspectives of your time at Avondale College.

Prompts such as historic photographs, artefacts (such as an item of uniform) or an Avondale College yearbook may be used.

With your consent, I will make an audio recording of our interview so that I can capture your narrative accurately. You will have the opportunity to review the transcript of the interview, and to delete or amend any statements if preferred.

Data from the interviews will be analysed, critically evaluated, interpreted and discussed to provide insight into the expression of the values and underlying assumptions that have contributed to the development of the 'way things are done' at Avondale College, within the wider context of organisational (school) culture.

Results will be presented as a summary of findings (Master's thesis).

Some of the stories shared may also be included, with your permission, in a published book celebrating the College's 80th anniversary in 2025.

The data I collect will only be used for these purposes.

What are the discomforts and risks?

It is possible that some of the memories recalled in our interview are not pleasant or positive ones for you, and you may experience some discomfort or distress as a result.

Anonymity is not able to be offered in this research project. Participants have been invited to take part because they have had a significant role to play in the life of the College. It is anticipated that the research findings will be strengthened by identification of the participants and the roles they have held.

How will these discomforts and risks be alleviated?

Your participation is completely voluntary. Should you feel any discomfort or distress stress about what you are sharing, you can stop at any time during the interview. You'll have the opportunity to review the interview transcript and can make any changes at that point if you'd like to.

Should the lack of anonymity be an issue, withdrawal from the study is possible at any time. If you choose to withdraw from the study, then you will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to you removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of your data may not be possible.

What are the benefits?

This research has several benefits. Firstly, it benefits Avondale College. Recording the stories of the school's stakeholders augments the information provided by public records, statistical data, photographs, yearbooks and other historical materials. Your contribution to historical record helps round out the story of the past and potentially helps inform future strategic direction.

Secondly, I hope that this endeavour will be of benefit to you personally and to the wider Avondale College community as a whole. The act of sharing stories connects us in a "shared cultural quest" helping us find meaning in our lives and establishing relationship (or 'community') with others. These ideas closely relate to the Māori concept of 'whānaungatanga' - relationship, kinship, sense of family connection - a relationship through shared experiences and working together which provides people with a sense of belonging.

Finally, this research benefits me personally, as I hope to achieve a Master's qualification as a result.

How will my privacy be protected?

The privacy of contact details of participants will be respected and protected by the researcher. Data collected will be saved on an encrypted file on the AUT server for seven years, then destroyed.

What are the costs of participating in this research?

It is likely that the research interview will take one to two hours of your time.

What opportunity do I have to consider this invitation?

Please take up to one month to consider whether you would like to be involved or not.

Will I receive feedback on the results of this research?

Yes, I anticipate I will be able to share a one or two page summary of the findings with you, and if you would like to have a copy of the recorded interview, this will be available for you as well.

What do I do if I have concerns about this research?

Any concerns regarding the nature of this project should be notified in the first instance to the Project Supervisor, Dr Jennie Watts, jennie.watts@aut.ac.nz (09) 921 9999 ext 6464

Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Executive Secretary of AUTEK, ethics@aut.ac.nz, (+649) 921 9999 ext 6038.

Whom do I contact for further information about this research?

Please keep this Information Sheet and a copy of the Consent Form for your future reference. You are also able to contact the research team as follows:

Researcher Contact Details:

Susan Eljas s.elijas@avcol.school.nz

Ph. 021 244 5459

Project Supervisor Contact Details: Dr Jennie Watts, School of Communication, Auckland University of Technology, jennie.watts@aut.ac.nz or (09) 921 9999 ext 6464

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 4 July 2024 AUTEK Reference number 24-175

Appendix C: Consent Form



Consent Form

Project title:

Kohia ngā Taikākā / Collecting the Heartwood: What the stories of the school community reveal about the culture of Avondale College, 1989-2024.

Project Supervisor: **Dr Jennie Watts** *Researcher:* **Susan Elias**

- I have read and understood the information provided about this research project in the Information Sheet dated 03 October 2024.
- I have had an opportunity to ask questions and to have them answered.
- I understand that notes will be taken during the interviews and that the interview will also be audio-taped and transcribed.
- I understand that taking part in this study is voluntary (my choice) and that I may withdraw from the study at any time without being disadvantaged in any way.
- I understand that I will be identified as a participant in the research findings
- I understand that if I withdraw from the study then I will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to me removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of my data may not be possible.
- I agree to take part in this research.
- Stories shared during this interview may also be included in a published book celebrating the College's 80th anniversary in 2025 (please tick one): Yes No
- I wish to receive a copy of the audio recording of my interview (please tick one): Yes No
- I give permission for the researcher to provide a copy of the audio recording of my interview to the school as a taonga to be archived (please tick one): Yes No
- I wish to receive a brief summary of the research findings (please tick one): Yes No

Participant's signature:

Participant's name:

Participant's Contact Details (if appropriate):

.....

.....

.....

.....

Date:

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 4 July 2024. AUTEK Reference number 24-175

Note: The Participant should retain a copy of this form.

Appendix D: Sample Questions

1. Can you tell me about your earliest memories of involvement with Avondale College?
2. Why did you choose to connect with Avondale College?
3. How has the school environment changed since you first were involved here?
4. Can you describe any significant events or moments in the school's history that stand out to you?
5. How would you describe the vibe or atmosphere of the College?
6. What have been some of the defining characteristics of the school community?
7. How has the school culture or atmosphere influenced your involvement?
8. Can you share any memorable experiences with students, teachers or staff members?
9. In what ways have you seen the school supporting students' personal and academic growth?
10. In what ways has the school supported the professional growth of staff members?
11. How has the school addressed challenges or obstacles?
12. Can you recall any traditions or rituals that are meaningful to the school community?
13. How have the curriculum or educational programmes evolved during your time at Avondale College?
14. How important are the co-curricular activities in the life of the school?
15. Have there been any changes in the physical infrastructure or facilities of the school that you noticed?
16. How does the school engage with parents, families, and the broader community?
17. Can you share any anecdotes or stories that reflect the spirit or ethos of the school?
18. How do you think your experiences at this school have influenced your life beyond your time working here?

Appendix E: Coding Samples

The following table provides a partial example of the list of codes that led to the development of the theme: Whanaungatanga as a foundational cultural value.

E.1 Example of Codes & Explanations: Whanaungatanga as a foundational cultural value

Code	Explanation
Alumni involvement	Past students contributing to the school community and maintaining connection.
Authentic cultural practice	Cultural engagement that is genuine, meaningful, and grounded in lived experience.
Belonging through co-curricular involvement	Students forming connections through activities beyond the classroom.
Celebration rituals/practices	Shared events that reinforce identity, unity, and belonging.
Co-curricular connection	Relationships built through shared participation in school activities.
Collegiality	Supportive professional and/or personal relationships among staff grounded in mutual respect.
Community-based leadership	Leadership shaped by and responsive to the wider community.
Community connection	Strong relationships between school, families, whānau, and local groups.
Cultural celebration and pride	Joyful recognition and honouring of cultural identity.
Cultural identity	A shared sense of who we are shaped by culture and heritage.
Cultural inclusion and belonging	Different cultural identities feel seen, valued, and included.
Cultural representation	Visibility of diverse cultures across school spaces and practices.
Cultural respect and belonging	Belonging reinforced through recognition and respect for culture.
Culturally responsive leadership	Leadership that honours cultural identity and responds to diverse needs.
Culture of inclusion	A school ethos where everyone is welcomed and valued.
Culture of involvement	Active participation as a norm for staff, students, and community.
Culture of support	A caring environment where people help one another to thrive.
Emerging bi-cultural ethos	Growing recognition of Aotearoa's dual cultural foundation.

Emotional investment	Personal commitment to relationships, community, and shared purpose.
Expectation of cultural responsiveness	A shared belief that cultural awareness is essential practice.

E.2 Sample of coding

Following is an example of codes ascribed to an interview fragment.

Interview text	Code
<p>... and, you know, out of the goodness of her heart, she would get together some kids to go and perform... little invites came from the community, yeah, and so when I came in, you know, I helped her, and I said, Look, I don't mind taking the group, knowing that that would be a good platform to bring these groups together that, you know, were having friction. So that's how I saw Samoan group. And it wasn't so much performance. It was to bring them together, to bring them back to the values of our people.</p>	<p>Positive student/teacher relationships Community connection Emotional investment Respect and belonging through cultural validation Cultural celebration and pride Belonging through co-curricular involvement Strategic change Value of respect Student-centred ethos</p>

E.3 Sample of coding: Whanaungatanga sample

Following is an example of one code collation with text examples.

Belonging through co-curricular involvement	That sort of co curricular side of the school and different people find their little places. [COVID challenges]
Belonging through co-curricular involvement	And you know, even just as a parent, that the difference that my two children in their school experience had in terms of that sense of belonging to Avondale. So Harrison was telling me that last year he took his friend Joe, who he was at school with here, but to see, I think must have been the school show, because Liam was in it, and so they went to see it, and both he and Joe afterwards are, like, we really should have joined in more at school, like we didn't really do anything .
Belonging through co-curricular involvement	but some of his friends don't have that same sense of belonging as Liam and his theater and music friends or the kapa haka kids or sport kids
Belonging through co-curricular involvement	we see that the students who are involved in Polyfest the same as, you know, the students who are involved in our other co curricular activities. You know that their, their in their engagement in that activity at the moment is high, but they tend to also be the students who have got high engagement in other areas of school.
Belonging through co-curricular involvement	the focus on drama and music helped me gain much more confidence. So I got into music and choir and things like that.
Belonging through co-curricular involvement	I think the more you get involved, the more you feel that there's a community
Belonging through co-curricular involvement	Kids not able to do the things that connect them . So they're not able to do group work in class. They're not able to do the show. They're not able to play certain sports.
Belonging through co-curricular involvement	So went from Avondale was a bit player at the festival to being the player. And that was a very deliberate thing, too, to have those kids owning a place in the school,
Belonging through co-curricular involvement	Our kids were going off and conquering the world, as you know, and universities here couldn't get in, because all the places won all those awards did really well. And you know, ended up on TV.
Belonging through co-curricular involvement	It brought back so much joy celebration for kids, individually, parents.
Belonging through co-curricular involvement	ook, if you're going to teach the Samoan language, what better platform or group to support that, then have the Samoan group alongside you to that's where you'll have your culmination of all your students and everything that you'd like to do. And they go hand in hand.
Belonging through co-curricular involvement	From my perspective, for me, it was a very helpful platform to help support the Pacific kids, the Samoan kids in our school. Because really what went well for Samoan also, I felt helped the school to also think of the other island groups, yes, yeah. And I do think that recognizing the transfer of those of that strength into the classroom was what I believe Avondale has picked up well,
Belonging through co-curricular involvement	So that's how I saw Samoan group. And it wasn't so much performance. It was to bring them together, to bring them back to the values of our people.

E.4 Examples of candidate themes

176

A relational and community-centred culture (whanaungatanga)

Cultural responsiveness and inclusion

Aspirational and achievement-oriented ethos (excellence)

Leadership and organisational change

Tensions, resilience and work in progress

E.5 Example of theme development

Initial Codes	Initial Themes	Final Theme
High expectations Aspirational culture Achievement focus	Academic excellence	Excellence as a values-driven practice
Relationships Sense of belonging Whānau connection	Connection and belonging	Whanaungatanga as a foundational cultural value

Māori term	English meaning
Aotearoa	New Zealand
atawhai	kindness, compassion
iwi	tribe, tribal group
kaumātua	respected elder(s)
kaitiaki	guardian, steward
kaitiakitanga	guardianship, stewardship
kapa haka	Māori performing arts
Kohia ngā taikākā	“Collect/Seek/Gather the heartwood”
kairanga	weaving
kuaka	bar-tailed godwit
marae	communal/ceremonial complex
mātauranga Māori	Māori knowledge, ways of knowing
mana whenua	people with authority over the land (local guardians)
mokopuna	grandchild(ren)
pepeha	Set form of words to express identity/affiliations
rangatira	chief/leader (“weaver of people”)
rākau	tree
rohe	region, territory
taikākā	heartwood (especially of tōtara)
taitea	sapwood
taonga	treasure(s)
tāuira / tauira	student(s), learner(s)
Te Kawerau ā Maki	local iwi (mana whenua) of Avondale
Te Tiriti o Waitangi	the Treaty of Waitangi
te ao Māori	the Māori world/view
te reo Māori	the Māori language
tōtara	tōtara tree (Podocarpus totara)
waiata	song, chant
whakataukī	Māori proverb
whānau	extended family; family group
whanaungatanga	relationships, kinship, belonging through reciprocal care
whaea	respectful address for a woman/teacher (Aunty/Mrs)

Appendix G: Artificial Intelligence Declaration Template


ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE DECLARATION TEMPLATE

Artificial Intelligence Guidelines:

Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools, including generative AI tools approved for use by AUT ([AI Tool Register](#)), can be used as learning tools when preparing to write your research proposal or research component. AI tools also have capability to assist with data modelling, data analysis and data visualisation. However, the research component you submit for examination must be substantively your own work. AI tools cannot solely be used to generate content when writing or creating an artwork/artefact, as this constitutes plagiarism. The formal guidelines for appropriate use of AI on the [AI Hub](#) must be followed. Also refer to the [Using Artificial Intelligence in your Research: Self-Assessments, Checklists, and Sample Text](#), for examples and sample text.

If you do plan to use AI tools, this declaration should be submitted with the initial research proposal, Confirmation of Candidature, and when you submit your research component for examination. You must complete the template below for each AI output used detailing the following:

- Chapters where AI was used in any way
- Purpose of AI Use
- AI Tool(s) Used
- Prompts Used. Post-AI Processing Methods

<i>Specify the chapter number(s) in your research proposal/research component where AI was used.</i>	
Chapter number(s):	1-7
<i>Briefly explain why the AI tool was used (e.g., idea generation, summarization, data analysis, image creation, etc.).</i>	
Purpose of AI Use:	Reading research assistance. Transcription of interviews. Organising material. Proofreading/editing.
<i>Clearly state the AI tools used.</i>	
AI Tool(s) Used:	Copilot. OtterAI for transcription (Note: used in 2024, prior to release of AUT guidelines on trusted tools)
<i>Exact prompts or queries entered into the AI tool. Include all relevant variations.</i>	
Prompts Used:	For example: "Create a structural summary of this article's main findings" "Identify scholarship relating to school culture in a New Zealand context" "Provide a written transcript of this recording of Speaker A and Speaker B" "Sort this glossary alphabetically" "Check spelling" or "suggest options for headings"
<i>A summary or description of the AI-generated output. (Optional: attach output in an appendix.)</i>	
Output Received:	A structured summary was provided, giving clarity as to whether this article had relevance to my research and whether I should read it in full. Some suggestions of scholarship were provided Transcriptions of recorded interviews were provided (participants details were not included or uploaded) Tables were sorted Editing suggestions were provided for spelling, grammar, headings and chapter organisation in my thesis text
<i>Describe how the AI output was used, edited, or transformed.</i>	
Post-AI Processing Methods:	I chose to read or not to read certain articles. I checked transcriptions for accuracy prior to analysis, and deleted the online transcription account I accepted or rejected editing suggestions
<i>You may use this free text box to explain the intent for the use of the AI generated content. For example, rather than stating what prompt(s) were used, you may articulate the purpose for which the prompt was used (supported by examples) here:</i> I discussed the use of AI with my supervisor, understanding its potential risks and biases. I read and adhered to the guidelines outlined in the AUT Postgraduate Handbook.	
STUDENT DECLARATION	
<i>By signing you are confirming that the AI use stated in the table(s) above are accurate and follow AUT's recommended guidelines detailed in the AI Hub and Postgraduate Handbook.</i>	
Susan Ellias	
Student Name:	Signature: 
	Date: 12/02/26