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To cite this article: Ruth Boyask, Melanie Drake & Maryanne Macdonald (21 Apr 2026): Scoping community engagement in the context of Tomorrow's Schools in Aotearoa New Zealand: an integrative review of the literature, *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, DOI: [10.1080/00220620.2026.2657799](https://doi.org/10.1080/00220620.2026.2657799)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220620.2026.2657799>



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Scoping community engagement in the context of Tomorrow's Schools in Aotearoa New Zealand: an integrative review of the literature

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ABSTRACT

Schools in a democracy need community involvement; community engagement in schools needs structures to support it. This article scopes how community engagement is conceptualised and enacted within Aotearoa New Zealand's self-managing Tomorrow's Schools system between 2009–2024 through a systematic integrative review of scholarly and grey literature. Using a replicable, PRISMA-informed protocol, we identified 68 eligible sources across government, education and academic sectors, and analysed them using reflexive thematic analysis. Definitions of community engagement were rarely explicit, and reported practices clustered at the lower end of the engagement continuum, particularly communication and participation, with comparatively few examples of durable, democratic decision-making. A consistent theme arising from the review is that policy ambiguity, including an under-specified notion of 'community', can constrain meaningful engagement and may leave gains for historically underserved groups less secure. The review concludes with implications for policy and future research, emphasising definitional clarity, representative infrastructures and longitudinal, collaborative inquiry.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 14 January 2026

Accepted 5 April 2026


KEYWORDS

Community engagement; school-community partnerships; school governance; integrative review; Tomorrow's Schools; policy enactment

Introduction

Community engagement offers schools the promise of better representation of community interests and more diverse intellectual or cultural resources to resolve educational challenges. Contemporary school reform efforts are often justified on these grounds, claiming that school improvement can be driven by greater local community involvement (Guo-Brennan 2020). However, rather than enhancing democratic participation, many policies that claim to expand community engagement have instead been observed to limit it, reducing involvement to consumer choice (particularly for parents), creating opportunities for new business interests, or enforcing compliance with centralised government accountability measures (Ball 2012; Lipman 2011).

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 Supplemental data for this article can be accessed online at <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220620.2026.2657799>.

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Scholarship in this area suggests that such limited forms of community involvement tend to occur across school systems characterised by high levels of school autonomy (MacDonald et al. 2023; Whitty 1997). Ambiguous or absent structural or policy support for community engagement at the systemic level is often reflected in how practices of community engagement are distributed across the system. While autonomy theoretically allows school leaders to enact more meaningful forms of community engagement aligned with their mission and values, in practice this results in uneven patterns of engagement. Such unevenness risks exacerbating existing inequities and undermining the promise of community engagement as a systemic democratic practice.

This article presents a scoping review that examines the extent, nature and limits of school-community engagement within a self-managing school system. We are particularly interested in the extent of school-community engagement that enables social and cultural groups whose interests are underserved by schools (Mifsud 2024) to voice their concerns and contribute through knowledge and action to resolution of their issues (Winton 2020). The review analyses research on how schools involve communities in decision-making and everyday activities. It aims to shed light not only on current practices but also on how community engagement is conceptualised by school leaders and researchers, and where gaps in attention may lie.

We have embedded our inquiry into community engagement within the jurisdictional and temporal context of Aotearoa New Zealand¹ (ANZ), 2009–2024. ANZ's educational reforms offer a compelling case for international comparison, as they provide an early example of 'system-wide devolution of schooling' (Gordon 2006, 79), that has now become normalised globally (Muijs 2024). ANZ's early and radical vision of school autonomy was enacted through the enduring *Tomorrow's Schools* (1989) policy that placed management and governance responsibility in the hands of individual schools and their boards. Although increased community engagement was a key justification for the reforms, the structures intended to support such engagement were quickly dismantled, with individual school boards the only enduring structural connection from *Tomorrow's Schools* between school and community. School boards are made up of the school principal, between three to seven parent members elected by the parent community, a staff representative, and a student representative for schools with Year 9² students and above (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2024). Wylie (2009) suggested that the conceptualisation of community in *Tomorrow's Schools* was nebulous, potentially contributing to a dissolution of mechanisms for community engagement and erasure of 'community' from much of the subsequent discourse around school governance and infrastructure.

Against this backdrop, the findings from our integrative review of grey and scholarly literature report on how the authorial and reported voices in this literature, from academics to industry experts and public servants, understand and participate in community engagement in ANZ education. The review followed a systematic and iterative approach, guided by a replicable and robust protocol (Cronin and George 2023; Haddaway et al. 2022; Whitemore and Knafl 2005). The iterative element assumed importance when our original focus – community involvement in school board decision-making – proved too narrow. Preliminary searches revealed little research in this area. While this may reflect a lack of scholarly attention, it may also indicate that school boards have limited involvement in decision-making, since even early in the *Tomorrow's*

Schools reforms parent and other community board members were handing over their governing authority to the school professionals (Robinson et al. 1994). Regulatory frameworks and dominant discourses around board functions leave little space for boards or principals to cultivate a collective imaginary.

In this review, we discuss how community engagement is conceptualised, how it is experienced (or not) within schools, and evaluate the depth and breadth of empirical research informing our understanding. We consider which communities are well represented in the research, and which are overlooked. We also identify and evaluate spaces within the ANZ school system where participatory decision-making and local democracy have taken hold, despite the limitations of the national policy framework. This review aims to inform future work on the relationship between governance structures and democratic participation in schools.

Community engagement in Tomorrow's Schools

Community engagement in education is not a neutral or purely technical practice; rather it is shaped by ideological forces, regulatory discourses, and governance structures operating at multiple levels of the school system. In ANZ these dynamics are particularly evident in the context of Tomorrow's Schools, the policy framework that has defined school governance since 1989. Our review focuses on the period from 2009 to 2024, set in reference to a key article by Wylie (2009) from her influential body of work that analyses ANZ school governance reform since 1989, which remains unparalleled in its depth and scope.

Earlier literature in ANZ also addressed school-community engagement since 1989, notably Biddulph, Biddulph, and Biddulph's (2003) synthesis on the influence of community and family on children's achievement, and a series of three reports published in 2008 on parents as partners in their children's learning by the Education Review Office (ERO) (cited in Mutch and Collins 2012). While these works promote an ideal of school-community relations, Wylie's work is distinctive in that it situates community engagement within the broader policy and governance structures that shape what schools can actually do. Her work highlights how the original promise of community involvement under Tomorrow's Schools was undermined, as the concept of 'community' remained ill-defined and mechanisms for engagement were dismantled.

Wylie (2009) asked, 'can a system of self-managing schools live up to its initial aims?' (p.5) in a reflection on the first 20 years of Tomorrow's Schools. In answering this question, she concluded that schools' relationships with community were quickly stripped away, and that the structure of self-management worked against schools developing 'ongoing relationships of formative and useful accountability, or challenge/support' (Wylie 2009, 22). The only enduring infrastructural mechanism for school-community engagement is internal to schools: community involvement in school decision-making is formalised through the participation of parent, teacher, student, and other community trustees elected or coopted onto school boards, alongside the school principal, who serves as an *ex officio* board member. School boards set the strategic direction and targets of schools, develop policies and procedures, and oversee curriculum, resources and well-being (MoE 2024). They are also charged with community consultation in decision-making, and parent representatives are voted onto the board by the parent body.

However, school boards are weak vehicles for democratic engagement. This is due, in part, to the limited experience of community board members with educational governance (McMillan 2012), their feelings of inadequacy regarding their capability (Flavell 2014; Haque 2014; McMillan 2012), time commitment to their governance role (Flavell 2014; Ngati Kahungunu Iwi Incorporated 2014; Smith 2021; Tomorrow's Schools Independent Taskforce 2019) and a disproportionate amount of power handed to school principals (Robinson et al. 1994).

While community is a ubiquitous term, it is also attributed with everyday value and common-sense meanings by those whose voices are often left out of educational decision-making. The idea of community involvement in education is itself a call to a redistribution of power within a democratic system. In some studies of community involvement in education, community is represented as a democratic force. Blackmore (2024) suggests that it is the community acting as leaders in their own right that makes it powerful. She offers the example of a community mobilising itself at the closure and re-opening of inner-city schools in Melbourne, Australia, rather than at the invitation of the school. International studies of relations between schools and their communities show there are often points of tension for community members (Crozier et al. 2008; Lipman 2011; Winton 2019). For example, parents' desires to work towards a broader good conflict with school practices, like school fundraising in affluent public school districts in Canada that redirect parents' efforts towards self-interest (Winton 2019). Blackmore (2024) suggests there is a limit to the communicative power of community activism, and that sustained success comes through mechanisms of state accountability, which suggests that we may not see many good examples in a strongly devolved school system.

As we have seen in Tomorrow's Schools, even though it promised a policy and governance structure designed to keep schools accountable to community these mechanisms were neither effective nor sustained. Wylie (2009) was primarily concerned with restoring relationships between schools and other schools or with government, turning away from the community that she had admonished as 'nebulous'. In considering the potential of community engagement for reforming schools, we follow a strand of thought that aims to reappraise the notion of 'community'. Wylie's conclusion that Tomorrow's Schools failed to establish adequate external relationships to support school improvement is still useful to us. The only serious attempt to dismantle the Tomorrow's Schools architecture came from the *Tomorrow's Schools Independent Taskforce*, of which Wylie was a member, in the late 2010s. Their report proposed systemic changes to the self-managing school model, notably the reduction of school responsibilities for resource management and allocation and the relocation of these to a regional middle tier of governance (Tomorrow's Schools Independent Taskforce 2019), but these were met with strong opposition from some schools and local communities (Wylie 2024). In light of these dynamics, future policy and leadership need guidance on whether meaningful community participation can be embedded, to ensure that those most affected by schooling can shape decisions and enact solutions, strengthening external relationships and improving system responsiveness.

In our review, we expected to find democratic community engagement to be ad hoc and left to the discretion of individual school leaders operating within a stratified, self-managing and inherently inequitable system based on our prior reading on Tomorrow's Schools reform. This expectation is shaped not only by the dismantling of structures

intended to support engagement and the persistence of largely ineffectual mechanisms, but also by the continued use of overly broad and ambiguous definitions of ‘community’. A lack of clarity about who constitutes the community, combined with the absence of a coherent, system-level policy on community engagement, could be expected to undermine the democratic potential of the education system. While discourses of community promise empowerment and inclusivity, a critical examination of the scope of community engagement within the ANZ school system will show what is being done in the name of community engagement as well as which voices are amplified and whose interests are served.

Methodology

Research questions

The purpose of this integrative review is to synthesise literature on how school-community engagement is defined, conceptualised and enacted within ANZ’s self-managing Tomorrow’s Schools system between 2009 and 2024. Situated in a devolved governance context where ‘community’ is ambiguously defined and mechanisms for participation have been unevenly supported, the review examines the extent, nature and limits of engagement, particularly for social and cultural groups whose interests are underserved. Specifically, we ask:

1. How is community engagement defined and conceptualised in policy and the research literature?
2. What does scoping the literature reveal about the breadth and quality of research in this space?
3. What is the focus of or reason for community engagement in school decision making in the research?
4. What kinds of activities are undertaken as community engagement?

Method

This article presents findings from a systematic integrative review of literature. An integrative review is an exercise in robust sense-making, intended to synthesise current knowledge from diverse communities of practice, in this case both scholarly research and government sources, to open new research directions (Cronin and George 2023). We followed methods outlined by Whitemore and Knafl (2005), Cronin and George (2023) and the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) (Haddaway et al. 2022) with the assistance of a librarian experienced in systematic and integrative reviews, to establish a replicable and robust protocol for the review.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Four eligibility criteria were applied to determine publications to be included in the review. First, articles had to present either empirical data or robust theoretical insights

and policy directives from expert sources. Thus, peer-reviewed scholarly articles, conference papers, industry and government publications, master's and doctoral dissertations, editorials in scholarly journals, books and book chapters were included. Book reviews, newspaper articles, non-text media, and blog posts, such as those by Thrupp and McChesney (2019) on the Tomorrow's School's Taskforce Report, were not included. A variety of methodologies were employed by publications in the review, and publications were assessed for methodological quality and categorised according to an integrative review protocol. While we drew upon a hierarchical evidence classification system (de Souza, Silva, and Carvalho 2010), it needed substantial adaptation for educational research. Our adapted version assessed rigour using three levels, used as categorisation codes and broad descriptors of overall quality. The second criterion was that all records needed to discuss ANZ schools which have school boards, whether primary, intermediate or secondary, and whether state-funded or state-integrated schools. Third, records were restricted to the period 2009–2024 to establish a comprehensive snapshot of recent practice. Some papers published in 2009 and just beyond may have reported results from earlier years, for example Mutch and Collins' (2012) paper cited data published by ERO in 2008. Thus, the empirical evidence covered within this integrative review may go back further even though the included publications start from 2009. The fourth and final criterion was that articles had to be published in English. We acknowledge a potential bias or limitation here as none of the contributing researchers spoke te reo Māori or Pasifika languages sufficiently to explore research published in these languages. To ameliorate this bias as much as possible, particular attention was given to obtaining kaupapa Māori research on community engagement with school decision-making, where it had been published in English and met other selection criteria. For example, we were able to include the English language appendices of *Kei Ahoatea Te Aho Matua – Pre-publication Version* (Waitangi Tribunal 2024).

Search procedures

Recognising that there are a variety of stakeholders in ANZ education who each represent 'communities of practice' (Cronin and George 2023), we searched five scholarly databases (ERIC, Education Source EBSCOhost, JStor, Index New Zealand (INNZ), DigitalNZ) and five stakeholder websites (Education Counts, MoE, ERO, Te Whakarōputanga Kaitiaki Kura o Aotearoa New Zealand School Boards Association (formerly NZSTA), and New Zealand Council of Education Research (NZCER)) for relevant publications. In addition, we hand-searched four scholarly journals which we knew likely to contain relevant literature published by ANZ scholars having found some through preliminary searches: New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies, Journal of Educational Administration and History, New Zealand Annual Review of Education, and MAI Journal: New Zealand Journal of Indigenous Scholarship. Finally, we utilised author networks to identify any further relevant texts. The search was conducted in August 2024. We interpreted the definition of community participation in school decision-making within the context of *Tomorrow's Schools* broadly. That is, we included research which explored communities engaging in school decision-making whether as a result of community, school, or policy initiative. We included seminal overviews of ANZ education policy and self-managing schools (e.g. Haque 2014; Wylie 2012). In this

manner we were able to explore a variety of conceptualisations of community involvement in school decision-making, to create a comprehensive and balanced representation of current literature.

The terms used to identify articles for the review are listed in [Table 1](#). Boolean operators (AND, OR) were used to ensure that at least one term from each column appeared in the full text of an article, with wildcard operators allowing for multiple word endings. In our writing we use the current spelling of the terms Māori and whānau³, yet in the search we used the terms without their macrons to return literature published both with and without a macron. Spelling of words in te reo Māori has changed over time. The databases and websites included in the search had significant variability in search capability, hence some adjustments to the algorithm were required. E.g. IINZ and DigitalNZ had capacity for only one set of search terms in any given search. Other websites e.g. Education Counts were manually searched by title and summary for relevant search terms.

A total of 660 publications were identified for potential inclusion, with 584 of these coming from the five databases searched. In addition, 46 publications were identified from the five websites searched, and another 30 publications from other sources e.g. citation tracking and manual journal searches. From the full list, 12 records were found to be duplicates, and 324 sources were identified to have been published outside the search time frame (ie. before 2009). A total of 8 records were in the New Zealand Education Review which we classified as a news periodical, and so these were deemed ineligible for inclusion. Following this stage, title and abstract screening was applied to identify sources within the remit of the integrative review. Where it was not clear after abstract reading whether an article was relevant, the full text was screened for relevance. During this process, 42 records were excluded to their publication types, e.g. book reviews, blogs or newspaper articles. A further 148 records were found to not be focused on ANZ state or state-integrated schooling, and 57 records did not address research questions relevant to the integrative review protocol. One record (*Ngā Kura o Aotearoa: New Zealand Schools (2021)* (MoE 2022)) was found to have been superseded by a more recent report (*Nga Ara o te Matauranga: the pathways of education 2022 report* (MoE 2023a)) resulting in 68 records included in the final integrative review. The Prisma Chart below was created using Haddaway et al.'s (2022) algorithm as a model to present the screening process ([Figure 1](#)).

Analytic method

Initially, six papers were analysed individually in NVIVO1.6 by two reviewers using an emergent thematic coding method. All three authors then examined the results of this process and determined our coding matrix for each of the research questions based on

Table 1. Keyword search query table.

Search Term 1	Search Term 2	Search Term 3
(community, family, parent, whānau, Maori) AND (involv*, participat*, engag*)	school govern*, school board, board* of trustees, board* of governors, self managing, self-managing, decentralis*, tomorrow's schools	Aotearoa, New Zealand

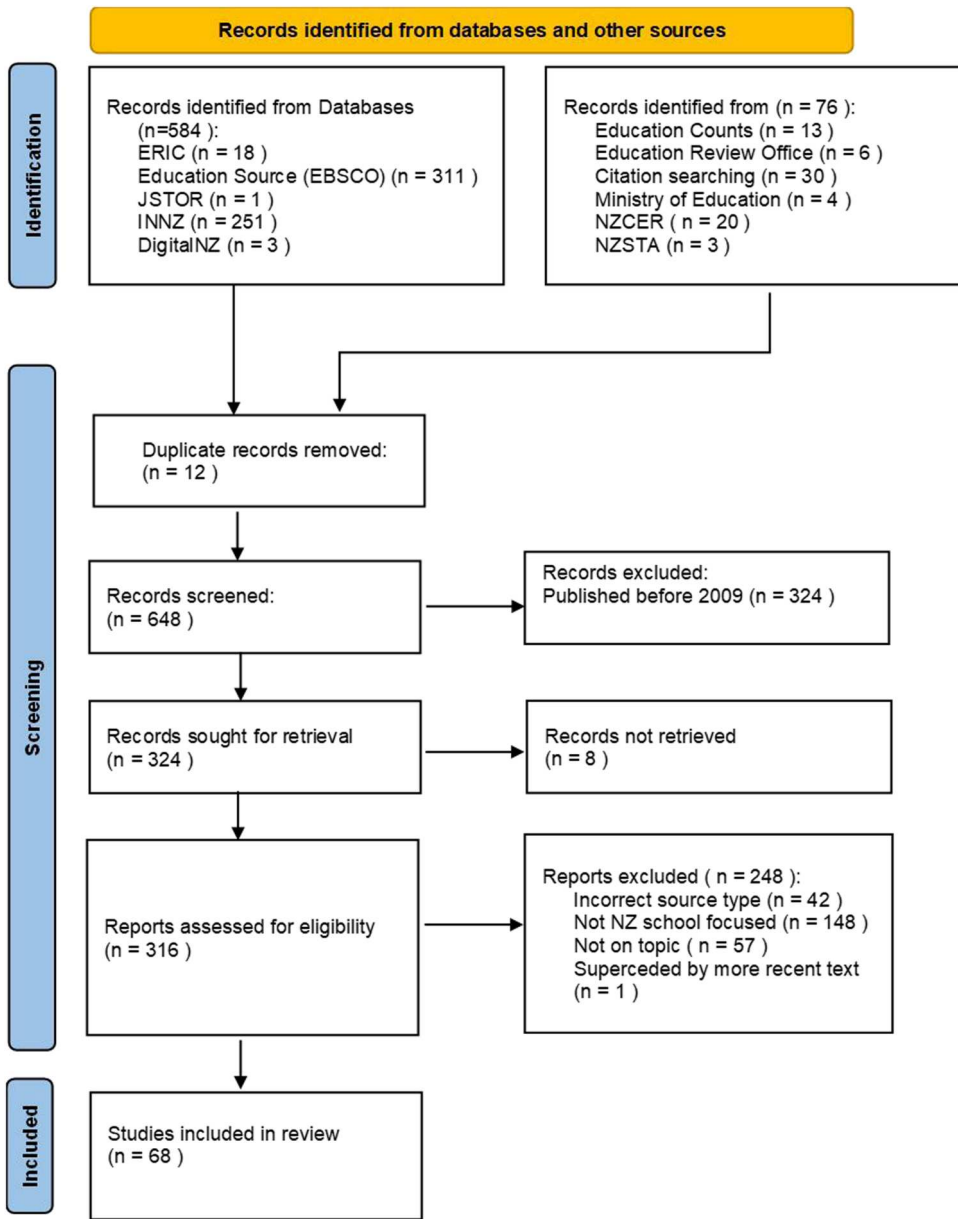


Figure 1. Preferred reporting items for systematic review and metaanalyses (PRISMA) flow diagram. Haddaway et al. (2022). Full Summary Table of Sources included in Appendix (see [online supplemental data](#)).

the strongly correlated results which emerged from the inductive process. The remaining papers were coded individually by the reviewers, with occasional double review to ensure consistency. Coding followed a reflexive thematic analytical method (Braun and Clarke 2019) to identify underlying themes and motifs across the literature. This approach involved the researchers reading and often re-reading the literature to generate codes

reflecting frequent motifs and keywords, and later refining these codes, using NVIVO1.6 software. On five occasions during analysis the researchers met to engage in an iterative process of reflexive discussion, resulting in collapsing some codes for economy and clarity and further refinement of other codes where unique sub-themes were apparent. Codes and themes were examined for consistency and parsimony using the Cluster Analysis tool in NVivo.

Findings

Definitions and conceptualisations

Definitions of ‘community engagement’ were rarely explicit in either policy or the research literature reviewed. Instead, related terms such as *school-community partnerships*, *whānau and community partnerships*, *public engagement in education*, and *parental engagement* appeared frequently, reflecting the breadth of conceptualisations across sources (e.g. Bull 2010; DePetris and Eames 2017; Smith 2021). Generally, there was broad agreement that engagement with community, whānau or parents is desirable because it is associated with improved learner wellbeing, social and behavioural outcomes (MoE 2022; Mutch and Collins 2012).

Mutch and Collins (2012) observed that in ANZ, collaborations between whānau and schools (both formal and informal) have long been commonplace and typically occur in three ways. ‘The first is for decision-making purposes, the second is through participation in and collaboration towards common goals, and the third for sharing information’ (p.169). A similarly explicit, tripartite definition appeared in advice provided by New Zealand School Trustees Association to school boards (2024), framing engagement as the interaction between boards and their school communities. NZSTA (2024) identifies three main types of engagement:

Communication – an email newsletter about your school’s new curriculum goals.

Consultation – your board wants to change the school uniform policy and needs to know if the community supports the decision.

Collaboration – the community helps your school develop its local history curriculum.

Bull’s (2010) earlier framework offers nuance by positioning engagement on a continuum, ranging from one-way communication (schools informing parents) to authentic consultation that influences school decision making.

Policy language has also shifted over time. Under the Labour-led government from 2017–2023, the discourse emphasised partnership with whānau and communities. This language was embedded in the National Educational Learning Priorities (NELP), which were in force until November 2025. The NELP (Priority 2) stated that schools in ANZ should:

Have high aspirations for every ākonga, and support these by *partnering with their whānau and communities to design and deliver education* that responds to their needs, and sustains their identities, languages and cultures.

(MoE, 2023a, p.16, emphasis added)

However, a change in government in 2023 has moved education policy further away from an agenda of partnership, with no evidence of community engagement in current priorities.

In the absence of consistent policy, earlier definitions provide clarity on what community engagement could or should entail. Yet, Bull (2010) noted that most schools operate at the ‘informing parents’ end of the spectrum (p.2). Later in this article, we revisit Bull (2010) and Mutch and Collins’ (2012) frameworks to show that the activities identified in our review align with their typologies, from shared decision-making on policy and curriculum development to one-way communication through newsletters (Berryman and Ford 2014; NZSTA, 2024).

Breadth and quality of the evidence base

The review retrieved 68 sources addressing community engagement in ANZ schools, encompassing all types of state and state-integrated schools and a wide range of stakeholders. Of these, 24 were authored or commissioned by the MoE or the ERO, 13 by the New Zealand Council for Educational Research (NZCER), and 31 by university-affiliated scholars. This distribution reflects strong governmental involvement (NZCER is a government funded research institute) alongside academic contributions.

Sources fell into three broad categories (Appendix, see online [supplemental data](#)):

- Empirical research (n = 44), presenting original data to address defined research questions;
- Non-empirical research (n = 15), including theoretical papers, discussion articles, literature reviews, and analyses of secondary data;
- Non-research materials (n = 9), such as policy guidance and one tribunal decision.

Six of the non-empirical sources examined the enactment of Tomorrow’s Schools or the Independent Taskforce review (e.g. Thrupp 2019), while five offered future-focused or theoretical perspectives (e.g. Coulter 2023). Three books provided broader commentary on New Zealand education, incorporating observational data but remaining primarily conceptual (Haque 2014; Wylie 2012).

Empirical studies varied in scale and rigour. Eight were large-scale, detailed and methodologically rigorous, a further ten were smaller but carefully described their designs, and 26 raised questions due to sparse data or limited methodological detail. Quantitative studies were relatively few, dominated by surveys and centrally collected statistics, with only one longitudinal study identified (Robinson, McNaughton, and Timperley 2011). Qualitative approaches were more common, including interviews, focus groups, documentary analysis, and case studies, with six studies employing Kaupapa Māori or other Indigenous methodologies (e.g. talanoa).

Empirical studies reflected some attention to cultural diversity, though unevenly. Almost half of the 44 sources focused on specific cultural groups: nine on Māori education, eight on Pasifika⁴ education, and two on specific other ethnicities (Korean and Muslim). A small number addressed broader ethnic diversity or included multiple minority groups within larger projects. While Māori and Pasifika representation in the

research was demographically proportionate and aligned with Te Tiriti o Waitangi⁵ obligations, deliberate attention to other minority ethnicities was rare.

Participants spanned a wide range of roles: 18 sources collected data from parents and whānau, 24 from school leaders and teachers, nine from students, and 10 from board members, with some studies canvassing more than one of these categories. Study sizes varied from single-school case studies to large-scale surveys, with eight sources reporting over 1,000 participants. Research covered all schooling levels, including primary, intermediate, secondary, and early childhood settings.

Overall, the literature on community engagement in ANZ schools is broad but uneven. While empirical studies dominate, their methodological quality varies widely, and theoretical contributions remain limited. Cultural responsiveness features prominently, yet representation of diverse communities and large-scale, longitudinal evidence is scarce. The dearth of robust research may indicate gaps in scholarship and funding, but it also may reflect the limited and uneven enactment of community engagement in practice, an issue that receives closer attention in the following sections of this article.

Focus and rationale for community engagement in school decision-making

From the 44 empirical sources retrieved in the review, four interconnected subthemes emerged: Culture and Community, Student Ākonga, School Practices, and Governance, each reflecting distinct but overlapping motivations for community engagement in school decision-making.

Culture and community

Cultural responsiveness and meaningful whānau consultation emerged as central rationales for community engagement activities occurring in schools. Twenty-eight empirical sources identified cultural responsiveness as a key driver of community engagement activities. Some emphasised practices that affirm community identity, such as Kapa Haka, Mātauranga Māori, and other visible cultural expressions (e.g. DePetris and Eames 2017; Whitinui 2010), while others highlighted consultation with cultural representatives, including parents, whānau, hapū, iwi, Kāhui Ako (Communities of Learning), as essential to culturally responsive practice (e.g. Chu-Fuluifaga and Reynolds 2023). Despite this emphasis, the NZCER 2019 National Survey of English-medium schools found that fewer than 10% of trustees reported Māori or Pasifika provision as a specific focus of community consultation (Wylie and MacDonald 2020), indicating significant variability across schools.

Beyond cultural responsiveness, parental involvement in school was frequently (n = 23) framed as vital for building community (whanaungatanga). Some of these sources described parental involvement as requiring active participation rather than passive attendance at school events (e.g. Hornby and Witte 2010), citing practices such as volunteering at schools (Tuifagalele et al. 2024). Several other sources noted barriers to meaningful involvement, even though consultation was desired by school leaders. School boards were identified to rarely be demographically representative of their student population (Tomorrow's Schools Independent Taskforce 2019). Constraints included parents' limitations in time, resources or sufficient information to effectively contribute to school decision-making. This was particularly the case for schools serving lower socioeconomic

or ethnically diverse communities, where parents might be working two jobs or shift work, be single parents, have limited experience relevant to governance roles, limited experience of the ANZ education system, or be uncomfortable working alongside school staff (e.g. Flavell 2014; McMillan 2012). These findings suggest that while culturally responsive practices are broadly acknowledged as fundamental to meaningful community engagement, variability in parent circumstances and school leadership priorities mean that some school communities continue to face much bigger practical challenges to realising authentic whānau involvement. This indicates the need for further consideration of how educational policies and systems might ensure equitable opportunities for collaborative partnerships that actively include socioeconomically and culturally diverse communities in school decision-making.

Student ākonga

Twenty-nine empirical sources identified student achievement, attendance and wellbeing as key motivations for community engagement. These initiatives typically aimed to strengthen home-school communication and improve individual student outcomes within existing educational frameworks. Common practices included parent-teacher meetings, shared goal setting, open days, celebration events, and whānau or parent groups (e.g. Bull 2010; ERO 2013; Hornby and Witte 2010; McMillan 2012).

However, the effectiveness of these efforts varied, often depending on the level of parental involvement achieved. Some studies noted that parents tended to perceive their role narrowly, focusing on responsibilities for their child's achievement rather than broader involvement in school decision-making (e.g. Chu-Fuluifaga and Reynolds 2023; MoE 2023b, 2022).

Generally, there was a consistent theme that student achievement, attendance, and overall wellbeing, were held in high regard by parents and whānau, and attending to their child's experience of these was a great motivator for engaging with schools (Chu-Fuluifaga and Reynolds 2023; Flavell 2014). These findings suggest that while student-focused engagement is widely prioritised, structural and practice constraints continue to shape the scope and nature of participation.

School practices – operational involvement

Thirty-one empirical sources identified school practices and administrative matters, particularly curriculum input, resourcing and pedagogy ($n = 14$), alongside home-school communication initiatives ($n = 17$), as common focal points for community engagement. Twelve sources suggested that involving community members in curriculum, resourcing and pedagogy initiatives resulted in educational content and methods that better reflected local cultural values and needs, particularly for ākonga Māori⁶ (e.g. ERO 2021; Whitinui 2010). However, other studies highlighted tensions when community views diverged from national curriculum objectives, including cases where religious or politically charged community opinions led to exclusionary curriculum practices (e.g. Lomax and Rata 2016; Sheehan 2017). These examples underscore the complexity of balancing local input in curriculum with system-level priorities.

There were sources that noted communities often had limited influence on pedagogical innovation, with institutional inertia constraining meaningful engagement (e.g. Flavell 2014; MoE 2023a). Seventeen sources emphasised the critical role of consistent,

transparent communication through various platforms, such as newsletters, digital media, and informal interactions in enhancing trust and community participation. They also revealed that whilst some schools used inclusive approaches such as parent barbecues, marae hui and bilingual newsletters (e.g. Hornby and Witte 2010; Kitchen 2011; Mutch and Collins 2012), many schools maintained a predominantly informational, one-way approach, limiting opportunities for genuine dialogue and meaningful collaboration (e.g. Flavell 2014; Smith 2021).

Reciprocity and Mutual Learning Only a handful of studies documented engagement that moved beyond consultation to reciprocal learning. DePetris and Eames (2017) describe a collaborative environmental-education initiative in which teachers, students, whānau, and local iwi co-designed inquiry projects, shared expertise, and jointly evaluated outcomes. Such two-way models position community members and educators as co-learners and co-decision makers, illustrating how mutual learning can deepen trust and move engagement further along the continuum toward shared decision-making.

The literature in this area suggests schools can cultivate more robust community engagement by embedding inclusive approaches in curriculum design, pedagogy, and communication. Nonetheless, established norms and limited dialogue often hinder the potential for deeper collaborative practice, pointing to the need for systemic support to move beyond tokenistic involvement toward authentic partnership.

Governance

Governance encompasses the structures, processes, and relationships through which communities participate in school decision-making. Thirty empirical sources examined governance as a focus of engagement, noting that while boards sought community participation in decision-making, traditional structures often limited genuine input, particularly meaningful influence and cultural inclusion of Pacific and Māori communities. Twelve sources highlighted community involvement in administrative and operational decisions, such as budgeting, staffing, and strategic and event planning to enhance school transparency, responsiveness, and accountability (e.g. Bull 2009; Ngati Kahungunu Iwi Incorporated 2014). Notably, some sources highlighted the reluctance of parents to be involved in major operational or strategic decisions (Bull 2009; MoE 2023b, 2022), while others pointed to hierarchical governance structures and weak consultation as a constraint on authentic community involvement (e.g. Bull 2009; Mutch and Collins 2012).

Barriers to community involvement

Fourteen sources recorded community engagement activities driven by democratic principles, noting that practical implementation often fell short of intentions (e.g. Cardno, Handjani, and Howse 2018). In some examples, community engagement initiatives appeared tokenistic, limiting real influence (Smith 2021). Although policy documents emphasised boards' role in representing communities (NZSTA, 2024; MoE, 2024), boards rarely reflected the ethnic demographics of their schools (McMillan 2012; Tomorrow's Schools Independent Taskforce 2019). Flavell (2014) reported specific challenges for Pacific communities, where mismatches between school practices and parental values reduced active participation. Four studies underscored the importance of Te Tiriti o Waitangi and Māori sovereignty, emphasising Māori self-determination and

tikanga⁷ Māori in governance (e.g. Ngati Kahungunu Iwi Incorporated 2014; Santamaría et al. 2015).

Equity and socio-economic contexts

Boards in low-decile schools often reported limited specialist financial and strategic expertise, a gap that widened principals' decision-making authority and narrowed opportunities for marginalised voices to shape governance (Wylie 2012). Flavell (2014) further reports that, for many Pacific families, mismatches between school practices and parental values reduced active participation, illustrating how socio-economic and cultural factors intersect to constrain engagement.

Although governance is widely portrayed as central to community engagement, sources revealed persistent tensions. Broader societal goals did not always align with local community priorities, ethnic representation on boards was limited, and community input was not always regarded as integral to school governance, with mechanisms and structures for involvement inconsistently distributed. In some cases, community involvement even introduced divisive or misaligned agendas. For example, Sheehan (2017) found strong public opposition to the inclusion of curriculum on colonisation and wars between Māori and the Crown. Lomax and Rata (2016) noted that amongst faith groups, sexuality and gender curriculum can be highly contentious and at odds with pluralist and liberal societal ideals. Overall, governance emerges as a contested space where aspirations for inclusive decision-making are moderated by structural constraints and competing interests, highlighting the need for approaches that respect local contexts and diverse stakeholder needs.

Observed Engagement Activities

Previous scholarship claims that community engagement activities in ANZ fall along a continuum, from information-sharing, through participation and collaboration toward common goals, to shared decision-making (Bull 2010; Mutch and Collins 2012). To examine the kinds of activities documented in the empirical research retrieved for this review, we applied a three-level scheme based on Mutch and Collins' (2012) definition. Professional judgement was required where activities spanned more than one level, and inter-coder discussion served as a reliability check.

Thirteen sources explicitly discussed information-sharing activities undertaken by schools. These were typically one-way, such as school newsletters and parent questionnaires, or dialogic but still limited to the transmission of information, for example, parent-teacher interviews. Such practices generally required minimal time from parents (e.g. Hornby and Witte 2010; Kitchen 2011).

Twenty-five sources reported participation and collaboration toward shared goals, though not at the level of significant decision-making. Examples included volunteering in classrooms or extra-curricular activities like sports and camps, participating in community fundraising events, and taking part in cultural week (ERO 2023; Lomax and Rata 2016; Tuifagalele et al. 2024). These activities strengthened school-home relationships and often demanded substantial time or effort on behalf of parents.

Fourteen sources described shared decision-making activities. These included serving on boards or advisory groups, co-developing curriculum or professional development,

and contributing to school hiring decisions or public policy consultations (ERO 2021; Sheehan 2017). In each of these cases, significant time and effort, and often specialist knowledge, was required. While some cases illustrated how parents enhanced schools’ capacity to achieve national education goals (e.g. ERO 2021), others demonstrated how parents can promote narrower or exclusionary agendas, at odds with broader public interest (Lomax and Rata 2016; Sheehan 2017).

Continuum level	Empirical sources 25 (n)	Typical activities observed
Information-sharing	13	Newsletters, parent–teacher meetings, fundraising updates, school websites, assessment data sharing, text alerts
Participation / Collaboration	25	Classroom volunteering, home-learning supervision, cultural-week contributions, sports and extra-curricular support, community fundraising events
Shared decision-making	14	Board or sub-committee membership, ‘Friends of the School’ advisory groups, Kāhui Ako planning sessions, co-developed curriculum and professional development initiatives

Bull (2010) claimed that information-sharing, as a routine feature of school life, was by far the most common type of community engagement occurring in ANZ schools. Yet, within our review, relatively few empirical studies examined it in depth, perhaps because it is taken for granted as baseline practice. When information-sharing studies are combined with participation / collaboration studies (13 + 25 = 38), they greatly outnumber those focusing on shared decision-making (n = 14), underscoring a persistent mismatch between aspirations for community influence on governance and everyday school practice. Barriers such as time constraints, language differences, divergent cultural norms, and uneven access to information kept engagement at an information-sharing level. Most documented activities cluster at the information-sharing and participation ends of the continuum, with genuine decision-making comparatively rare. Addressing structural barriers is therefore critical if schools are to progress consultation and shared action to realise a fuller democratic promise of community engagement.

Discussion

Policy to fill out the hollow community

The context in which schools enact community engagement reflects the legacy of government policy and governance systems since *Tomorrow’s Schools* (1989), when community engagement was promoted as central to governance reform yet subsequently failed as mechanism of change. While there has been ongoing criticism of *Tomorrow’s Schools* the only attempt at substantial reform through the *Tomorrow’s Schools Review* faltered in 2019, and even then, focused upon a ‘middle tier’ between school and central government as the critical impetus for strategic oversight and school challenge rather than community participation. Our review identified how ‘community’, in policy, research and practice has been interpreted in the prevailing policy context, and we evaluated the quality of engagement occurring in practice. While schools demonstrate willingness to engage with communities, the nature and impact of these initiatives vary widely.

The review shows that research and practice have improved for Māori and Pasifika communities as education policy has shifted its focus to cultural responsiveness. Engagement for these communities has increased alongside policy initiatives like the recognition of Kura Kaupapa Māori⁸ within Tomorrow's Schools, education strategies like Ka Hikitia – Ka Hāpaitia⁹ (MoE, 2024), and the Action Plan for Pacific Education 2020–2030 (MoE 2023a). Yet very recently, policy directions have decentred Māori knowledge, language and protection of rights under Te Tiriti o Waitangi, indicating that these gains are fragile. Since our review shows community engagement for these communities emerged in response to policy, we can only conclude that continuance in schools will falter without policy support.

For Māori and other groups historically underserved by colonising structures, community engagement must be an ongoing project rather than a temporary priority. At the same time, our review highlights that some groups such as dis/ability interest groups, LGBTIQ+, recent immigrants, or faith communities are consistently absent, not only from schools' engagement efforts but also from the research base itself. In the light of massive societal changes in migration and human rights-based activity these are groups who we should expect to find represented in the research and practice of school/community engagement. The fragility of gains for some communities and absence for others underscores the consequences of leaving 'community' ill-defined: it creates space for dominant interests to prevail under the guise of collective representation.

Thrupp and McChesney (2019) argue that policy reform of *Tomorrow's Schools* towards greater public oversight of schools might have secured broader support had it appealed to the local sentiment of 'our school, our community' that underpinned the original 1989 reforms, even if that sentiment was largely illusory. Instead, proposals framed around addressing disadvantage and marginalisation may have alienated middle-class communities whose primary concern, as Thrupp (2007) notes, is preserving their own advantage. Thrupp suggests that a community-oriented approach could have made change more palatable to those whose socio-economic interests are most often served by schools. The same argument can apply to ethnic or other identity-based social groups, where the oppressive nature of normative identities like New Zealand European, heterosexual couplings or able bodies can be shifted when these identities are understood as part of the actual diversity within communities, and their assistance in creating more democratic engagement may be leveraged. This raises a critical point: when community disappears from governance discourse, attention narrows to groups already prioritised by policy. For example, only one source had a focus on diverse ethnicities other than Māori and Pasifika even though students from who are neither from these backgrounds nor New Zealand European make up 25% of the national school population (Figure.NZ n.d.), highlighting some who have been left out, even before considering the heterogeneity contained within any category of ethnicity.

The vagueness of community engagement has allowed individual interests to dominate. A clear example is parental engagement through school choice, which disproportionately benefits middle-class families (Ball 2003; Gewirtz, Ball, and Bowe 1995; O'Neill 2024; Whitty 1997). These choices reinforce educational hierarchies, creating 'good schools' for some while marginalising others. This dynamic contrasts with Mutch and Collins (2012) observation that informal and formal collaborations between whānau

and schools have long been commonplace; removing policy frameworks that enable such collaboration risks eroding opportunities for representation among communities whose needs are only beginning to be addressed.

Our review suggests that gains occur where research and policy give guidance to educational leaders, reflecting the interrelationships between research, policy, and practice. Yet without clearer definitions and systemic supports, the promise of community engagement through sustained, reciprocal school community partnerships that involve joint planning, action, and evaluation risks remaining hollow.

Redefining community engagement for policy and practice

For policy to support meaningful engagement, a more refined conceptualisation of community is needed. Wylie's (2009) observation that the community remained 'nebulous' under Tomorrow's Schools still holds true: who constitutes the community? Our review shows that this ambiguity persists, limiting the usefulness of community engagement as a policy concept. While our analysis of who *has* been included as 'community' in the literature offers some clarity, robust and equitable policy requires an explicit definition of community and their engagement at the system level.

For example, DePetris and Eames (2017) describe an 18-month environmental restoration initiative. The project was led by the Department of Conservation and undertaken in partnership with a non-government organisation, a Māori Trust Board, a district council, and five education institutions. This was a rare example of a successful project addressing a common interest, involving a large number of organisations with different expertise and goals. Yet each educational organisation was able to interpret the overall project in a contextually appropriate way and benefit from the partnership.

While community engagement is evidently difficult to realise, it remains central to the vision of schooling as a democratic public good (Boyask 2020). Reflecting upon the restrictions of the partially decentralised and marketised school system in Sweden, Dodillet and Christensen (2020) describe their expectations for democratic parental involvement:

Our expectations concerning our role as parents were not limited to being used as tools to fulfil official school policies. Instead, we expected to be involved in discussions about how to plug the gaps that these policies leave. We expected our ideas and objections to be considered, and to thus be taken seriously as competent, collaborative partners in the education of our children. We wanted to identify shortcomings in existing policies and thus to contribute to better solutions for the future. We could also imagine participating in or even organising protests against existing school policies in order to improve the working conditions of our children and their teachers (381).

Looking forward, a democracy must consider how schools mitigate a systemic drift away from community participation and collective action. While many commentators on Tomorrow's Schools opt to move policy away from the notion of 'community', we see potential in bringing it back to consideration. Although academics have long noted its conceptual ambiguity, 'community' retains social value and everyday resonance for those whose voices are rarely heard in decision-making (Studdert and Walkerdine 2016). It acts as a rallying call. One way forward may lie in extending our analyses to redefine community-school engagement, based in an understanding of how it is

enacted in current policy and practice, as well as developing clear guidance on questions such as: who constitutes the community? who can represent them? how are competing interests weighed? before establishing structures for engagement.

Our scoping of the research reveals a field shaped by policy ambiguity and governance constraints: strong descriptive accounts of culturally responsive practices and aspirations for whānau-focused engagement coexist with sparse empirical work on board-level decision-making, limited comparative and longitudinal evidence and gaps in representation. This imbalance suggests that principal-centred authority and fragmented structures have constrained both democratic engagement and the research agendas that might evaluate or improve it. This has implications for researchers, who must attend to diversity in the questions they ask and research methods they use, and for government, which must fund different kinds of research to inform inclusive policy.

Conclusion

Our integrative review revealed how community engagement in ANZ education is understood and enacted in the realms of school governance, student activity, and school practices within the context of Tomorrow's Schools (2009–2024). Some suggest that improvement needs to come from within the systems (Mutch and Collins 2012) while others suggest more systemic change (Wylie 2012) will improve the efficacy of education for marginalised groups.

Community engagement in ANZ's school system is not structurally enabled to avoid tokenism and the privileging of dominant or self-interests. In this, it is common with other jurisdictions that have experienced devolution in school systems that claim to be democratic (Dodillet and Christensen 2020) while 'masking' centralised control in governance (Mifsud, 2016); and there is a sense of inevitability in our finding that community participation and engagement in ANZ schooling is ad hoc and weighted towards 'lower level' communication rather than consultation or collaboration.

The literature on community engagement in ANZ schools demonstrates the clear interplay between policy and practice. Not only do government initiatives drive practical outcomes, but absence of government policy appears to ensure stagnation. If schooling is to be treated as a democratic public good, policy must do more than encourage partnership rhetorically; it must define who constitutes the 'community' by considering the various roles of groups within communities and how they interact and contribute. Democracy is messy, and transparent, fair processes and mechanisms to hold power to account are needed to ensure that competing interests can be negotiated and social justice upheld (Blackmore, 2024). Our review carries clear implications. For policy and practice: define 'community' and 'engagement' at a systems level; strengthen layered infrastructures beyond boards; invest in capability, time and resourcing, including for the researchers who can inform change and educational leaders who enact it. For research: expand beyond piecemeal casework to joined-up, comparative, longitudinal, and co-led studies with iwi, hapū, Pacific and other identity-based communities; develop metrics that capture the depth, breadth, and durability of engagement; move beyond celebrating the 'good examples' and test what governance arrangements address these persistent gaps to reliably produce inclusive participation, accountability and collective problem-solving at scale. Without conceptual clarity, representative

structures and sustained attention, community engagement will remain rhetorical rather than a driver of democratic schooling.

Notes

1. Aotearoa New Zealand [ANZ] is a commonly used bilingual name for New Zealand.
2. Refers to the ninth year of compulsory school, when students are around 13 years of age.
3. Whānau is the smallest societal unit in a Māori ontology and roughly translates to family grouping.
4. ANZ contains a sizeable population of people with heritage connections to Pacific nations including The Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Niue, Samoa, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu and other places.
5. The Treaty of Waitangi, New Zealand's founding document.
6. Māori learners.
7. protocol and customary practice.
8. Māori language and culture immersion schools.
9. The Māori education strategy.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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