Whanaungatanga in the Time of COVID: Strategic and Value-Based Responses to the Challenges of COVID-19 in a South Auckland Primary School

Brendon Shaw

With the exception of Auckland hospitals, no institution has sat longer in the epicentre of the New Zealand COVID-19 hurricane than South Auckland schools. Within an educational context, these last two years of lockdowns, alert levels and traffic lights have seen paradigm shifts in how we as a school view our practice and pedagogy, as well as a change in the way we use online learning.

Looking back over the pandemic I find myself reflecting most on two things: how our delivery of online/distance learning has evolved over the last two years, and how traditional values, such as Whanaungatanga, helped us to address the Digital Divide in our community.

With the advent of online learning brought about by the lockdowns, the first analytical step we performed early on was to establish the extent to which digital devices were accessible within our school community. A digital availability survey carried out by the teachers at the start of the first lockdown revealed that almost half our families did not have a suitable device at home with which to do online work. The stop-gap solution from the school was to offer online classes for those that had devices and paper-based activities for those that did not. Upon reflection, I can see how our delivery of both has evolved over the last two years.

The online teaching we offered at the start of the pandemic could best be described as "emergency online teaching" (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020; Hodges et al., 2020). This form of instruction is, as the name suggests, an ad-hoc reaction to an emergency, resulting in online delivery that has been put together quickly, and often without uniformity or strategy. Before COVID-19, my school had been moving to

uniformity and standardisation around the usage of devices in class but had not even begun to look at standards around online delivery.

Two years of COVID has helped us to move from emergency online teaching to a more structured version of online delivery through trial and error, conversations, and collaboratively creating systems and structures. As our systems improved, so did student engagement and technical knowledge of students and staff. It also increased the trust between the school and students when it came to device care. Since returning back to face-to-face classes, we have started a pilot programme where students can take devices home and bring them back the next day, which is proving to be successful and helping to extend digital learning into the home.

Our use of paper-based activities in the first lockdowns was also created under emergency conditions and suffered from issues. A problem we immediately faced was due to the paper activities having to be picked up from school. Several issues arose from this solution: families that did not have transport options were not able to pick up the work from the school, families that had COVID-affected members had to isolate and were not able to collect the work, and paper-based activities were school year based, not ability based, resulting in many students receiving work that was either too easy or too difficult. To address this, our creation of paper activities over the last two years has become more flexible and encourages the usage of "low floor, high ceiling" activities that are more accessible to a wider group of learners. We also began to deliver paper-based activities directly to the homes of students who were unable to pick up.

Once recovered from the first lockdown and with students back in classes, questions arose around such things as how we could improve online delivery, how best to deal with device distribution and how to better design paper-based activities. All of these were important and helped us to clarify and standardise systems around the delivery of online/distance learning, but nothing had been done that addressed the results of the digital availability survey we had performed. As a community it was clear that our students had a low ownership of devices with which to learn on. Our reality reflected the research, an obvious Digital Divide existed between the device availability of our low decile community and those of higher decile ones (Cullen, 2001). Some within the school felt the issue of device availability was urgent and needed immediate attention.

New leadership within the school agreed with the pressing nature of device availability, and with the support of the Board of Trustees a shift in attitude towards devices was made. Devices would no longer be "extra" to our students, but a guaranteed tool available to them as an integrated part of their education. By the time

the third lockdown occurred in mid-2021, funds had been released, hundreds of devices purchased, and we were a one-to-one device school.

One could consider that this act of transitioning to one-to-one devices cured the Digital Divide, but a series of issues still remained. Academics have argued that the Digital Divide is more than just device accessibility but also includes access to connectivity, training, teacher support and tech support (Bendici, 2020; King-Lee, 2021). The lesson we quickly learned was that it was not enough just to provide a service, we also had to create and maintain a robust system of maintaining that service. Not transitioning to one-to-one devices sooner meant we were unprepared for some of the issues that our school faced while juggling online learning and the integration of so many new devices.

The most prevalent of these issues was that our I.T. staff did not increase to keep pace with the huge increase in device ownership. Device numbers in our school tripled, yet the support team was the same size. To address this, teacher aides and support staff became ad-hoc I.T. staff and were integrated into our delivery and support system for the devices. This had the dual benefit of not only helping ease the work on our dedicated I.T. staff but also upskill the teacher aides' I.T. skills.

Another issue faced by staff and families with the devices was a lack of clarity about who to turn to when it came to troubleshooting hardware and software issues. Over time a clearer system was developed that included the teacher aides in their new roles, teaching staff working from home, and I.T. staff working remotely and on site. The continuous communication between teacher, school and home helped to tighten the troubleshooting system and chain-of-command I.T. support systems. Because of this new trouble shooting system, syndicate and school-wide best practices were also able to be set up for conventions around username and password storage, account resets and video conference invitations. Practical steps such as these are crucial in setting up and maintaining systems that can help address the Digital Divide, however, to understand the underlying causes of such a divide, we need to take a more critical approach.

Ultimately, the Digital Divide is not a technology issue but a social justice issue, and one that speaks to inequality not only across digital spheres but social, economic and inequality of opportunity. Because of this, our school's commitment to providing digital equality ended up connecting to and expanding upon deeper and broader value-based goals and commitments we have endeavoured to implement as a school.

The socio-economic and cultural demographics of our school are typical of our South Auckland setting. Higher than national average numbers of Māori and Pacific Island students make up a large quantity of our student body and it is these particular groups that are some of the most underrepresented in both Internet connectivity and

device ownership in New Zealand (2020.org.nz, 2020). This digital inequality, coupled with decades of governmental neglect (Truebridge, 2019) had the potential to exacerbate the already existing inequality present in South Auckland.

For us as a school, we could see a solid connection between the need to access technology within our community, and the need for access to other more basic needs. The same teams that delivered and distributed the digital devices were also delivering school-purchased food parcels, supermarket vouchers and books. In many cases the homes that were most in need of digital assistance were also in need of other financial and social support. Addressing the Digital Divide then, came hand in hand with our attempts at addressing the social divide as well as embodying our school values of Kindness, Whanaungatanga (connection) and Tautua (service).

These values then, became much more than just words on a noticeboard, but guiding principles that helped us navigate the pandemic over the last two years. Showing kindness, connecting with community, and looking for opportunities to serve have been touchstones for us to fall back on when making decisions about what would be best to do.

Of these values, one I witnessed again and again was the traditional Māori value of Whanaungatanga. Although meaning different things to different people, I have always considered the value of Whanaungatanga to be primarily about connectedness and maintaining relationships. During the pandemic this was for me the most important value to maintain, yet cruelly one of the aspects of life that we were most robbed of, as lockdowns and restrictions kept us from each other, isolated in our own bubbles.

Whanaungatanga in a wider context is also about connecting to the community, and when looking at which teachers were able to make the quickest and most significant connections with families over the pandemic, I believe that teachers from the Māori Bilingual classes had an advantage over teachers from the mainstream classes. Teachers from the Māori Bilingual group are the living embodiments of Manaakitanga, Aroha and Whanaungatanga, and through their already deep connections with whānau, they were in a better position to connect to families.

This was especially true at the start of the 2022 school year where most students were beginning the year online, but in a new class with a teacher they had never met. In this case the bilingual classes already had built in relationships developed over years of wānanga and whanaunga building with their students and family. These teachers already knew which parents were essential workers or who not to call in the morning because they work late nights. This level of "knowing the learner" is baked into Māori education communities, and in many cases the Bilingual Māori teachers were intimately aware of not only their students' digital and educational needs, but their personal, financial and pastoral needs also.

Reflecting back on the importance of Whanaungatanga during the pandemic I can now see it in many things we did. Senior leadership going to the supermarket and buying groceries, administration staff separating that shopping into food parcels, classroom teachers driving to students' houses to drop off the food parcels, and also delivering a device that had just been prepared by a teacher aide. These acts were the real-world consequences of Whanaungatanga and not just words on a page or a term used in speeches. Traditional Māori values and the community-based nature of Māori relationship building, became a powerful tool in helping to bridge the gap not only between the school and the community, but also between those who were easily adapting to digital learning and those who were not.

While we made many positive steps in our implementation of digital learning, there is much we could have improved upon. It is clear to me now that we should not have waited for a pandemic to create uniform approaches to I.T. best practice. A strong digital support network for teachers, students and families should have been a priority from the beginning and while uniformity of practice has been a goal, there is still work to be done in orienting new staff and reminding current staff of what I.T. best practice looks like at our school.

I sit writing this reflection from a point of relative comfort in comparison to the often stressful and exhausting last two years of being a South Auckland teacher during the pandemic. Cases wise, our community has been among the hardest hit in New Zealand and the hangover from the effects of so much trauma will take years to unpack.

Despite the heaviness of these last two years, I also look back at examples of things we have worked hard at and areas we have progressed. I can see a clear progression over time from emergency online teaching to a more structured and quality system of online/distance delivery. I am also proud of the improvements we have made in addressing the Digital Divide in our school community, and I find it empowering to see how effective traditional Māori values such as Whanaungatanga were in helping to address that gap.

As I continue in my career as a teacher, I will continue to look for ways to bridge this divide and also keep looking for how traditional values from my culture can help my students thrive and succeed in even the most challenging of times.

References

2020.org.nz. (2020). Digital inclusion research. From: www.2020.org.nz

Bendici, R. (2020). Closing the digital divide: Educators work to ensure digital equity for all students by shifting mindsets and improving professional development. District Administration. Florida, U.S.A.

Bozkurt, A., & Sharma, R. C. (2020). Emergency remote teaching in a time of global crisis due to CoronaVirus pandemic. *Asian Journal of Distance Education*, 15(1), i-vi.

Cullen, R. (2001). Addressing the digital divide. Online information review.

Hodges, C. B., Moore, S., Lockee, B. B., Trust, T., & Bond, M. A. (2020). The difference between emergency remote teaching and online learning. https://vtechworks.lib.vt.edu/bitstream/handle/10919/104648/facdev-article.pdf?sequence=1

King-Lee, D. (2021). Mobile in the Library. Library Technology Reports, 57(2), 12.

Truebridge, N. (2019). South Auckland neglected under super city - Goff. Radio New Zealand. From: www.rnz.co.nz/news/ldr/403132/south-auckland-neglected-under-super-city-goff

Brendon Shaw

Born in Northland but raised in Southland and Canterbury, Brendon Shaw (Ngā Puhi) currently works as team-leader for Māori Bilingual classes at his South Auckland primary school. After 15 years teaching abroad in Asia and Latin America, Brendon returned to Aotearoa to teach in his home country and re-connect with Māori culture and language. His master's project is centred around Place Based Learning and his research interests tend to focus on Te Reo Māori in the classroom, as well as improving engagement between schools and mana whenua. You can contact Brendon via email:brendonshaw.pub@gmail.com