

Contributing to change? Responding to future-focused issues through education outside the classroom

How can educational experiences in public spaces such as museums, libraries, and eco-sanctuaries support learners to address pressing social, cultural, and ecological issues?

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Our project

This project investigated how the cross-curricular themes of future-focused issues and active citizenship (Ministry of Education, 2007) are conceptualised and enacted through education outside the classroom. It involved working with four primary and two secondary teachers, 151 ākonga in Years 3-10, and 21 educators from 10 providers. We explored how closer collaboration between teachers and informal educators, and stronger connections across classroom and informal learning experiences, could support children and young people's critical, creative, and democratic engagement with issues that face them and society.

Our questions

- What meanings and practices do teachers, educators, and students associate with future-focused issues and active participation through education outside the classroom?
- What forms of collaboration between teachers and educators support learners to respond to future-focused issues critically and creatively?
- What kinds of learning experiences enable learners to make connections across formal and informal educational settings, explore wider societal debates, and offer spaces for response?

What we did

Using a collaborative action research methodology, the project tracked ākonga learning across pre-during-, and post-visit learning experiences. The team gathered, analysed, and reflected on pre-/post-visit focus group interviews, during-visit observations, and pre-/post-visit student work samples. Alongside the focus on ākonga learning outcomes, we documented how teachers, educators, and ākonga conceptualised education outside the classroom, future-focused issues, and active participation, and how teachers and educators collaborated. The data was analysed using a combination of thematic and cross-case analysis.

Thanks to our partners

Teachers from: Corinna School, Newtown School, Berhampore School, Wellington East Girls' College

Educators from: Dowse Art Museum, City Gallery Wellington Te Whare Toi, Zealandia Te Mara a Tane, New Zealand Police Museum, Wellington Museum Te Waka Huia o Ngā Taonga Tuku Iho, Pukeahu National War Memorial Park, National Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington Zoo, Capital E Nōku te Ao, New Zealand Parliament.



What we learned

A powerful and coherent learning arc is central to successful outcomes. (In this project, learning arcs are defined as the intentional connections made between pre-, during-, and post-visit learning to support critical and active citizenship.) Ākonga who experienced impactful learning arcs:

- explored a rich overarching question, provocation, or idea about an issue that felt genuinely puzzling or urgent to them.
- developed four capabilities: making meaning with disciplinary concepts, navigating perspectives and representations, using emotions as a productive force for change, and contributing as citizens.
- were given input into the learning direction, learning processes, and visit site selection by their teachers.
- felt that visits had fueled their inquiries and interest in social, cultural, and ecological issues they had identified and that had meaning to them.

Effective collaboration between teachers and educators plays a vital role in developing a powerful and coherent learning arc.

Learning arcs were strengthened when teachers and educators:

- took part in shared planning discussions that anchored, interrogated, and enriched connections to the overarching question. The discussions strengthened educators' knowledge of students.
- integrated the four capabilities at strategic points across the learning arc to enable ākonga to explore and respond to social, cultural, and ecological issues.
- focused on what ākonga could do with the learning by nurturing the 'contributing as citizens' capability. This enhanced a sense of belonging and skills for, and understandings about, social action.
- made selective and rich use of visit sites to promote critical thinking, including exploring perspectives that were shared and missing at each site.
- made the coherence between pre-, during-, and post-visit learning explicit to ākonga. Visits made clear conceptual connections to the overarching question, and the experience was capitalised on in the post-visit phase.
- clearly communicated with each other to be responsive to evolving learning designs, especially shortly before the visit. The sharing of planning documents was essential.
- negotiated their roles to build and maintain relational trust.

Implications

Effective collaboration between teachers and educators to develop such learning arcs requires time and support. The findings from this study suggest a need to move away from 'off-the-peg', student volume-focused approaches to education outside the classroom towards approaches in which teachers, educators, and ākonga all contribute to constructing the learning arc. Additionally, there is a need to further prioritise connections to pressing issues, such as those noticed and felt keenly by many ākonga in this study, and to create opportunities for ākonga to contribute to change through the extraordinary range of learning experiences and resources that exist outside the classroom in Aotearoa.