

# Unleashing stage potential: Improving student engagement in the performing arts

## 1 Understanding and exploring student engagement

Seven kaiako (teachers) took part in a participatory action research project exploring 10-13 year old ākonga (student) engagement in compulsory school performing arts lessons. We worked collaboratively to:

1. establish the factors that influence ākonga engagement, and
2. make changes to our practice that could potentially lead to improved ākonga engagement

Questionnaires and informal korero (conversations) with ākonga established that students want to learn:

- IN** emotionally safe environments
- WITH** caring kaiako who give them a say about their learning
- THROUGH** fun, active learning tasks
- ALONGSIDE** friends



Performing arts lessons can be

# CONFRONTATIONAL!

Collaborative and performance-based tasks are cornerstones of dance, drama and music lessons (Clarke & Basilio, 2018; Hogan, 2018). Many activities require students to step out of their comfort zone, take risks and share their work with their peers. For some 10-13 year olds these challenges are confrontational, leading to disengagement.

## 4 Boosting student engagement

The research project revealed that:

1. ākonga engagement can be improved quickly and easily
2. involving ākonga in the process leads to noticeable upward shifts in engagement
3. kaiako who implement one or more strategies and collaborate with ākonga see larger increases in engagement



## 2 Four key strategies for improving engagement

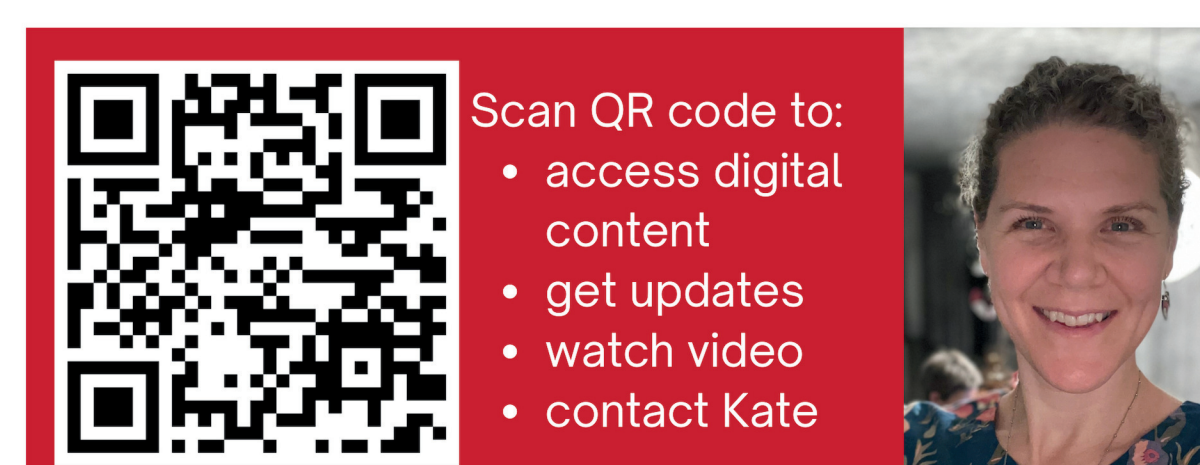
Participating kaiako set about making changes in their schools based on ākonga voice. Findings indicated that the following four strategies noticeably improve ākonga engagement:

<p><b>Create emotionally safe environments</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Eliminate peer judgement</li> <li>• Find the balance between 'too safe' and 'too risky'</li> <li>• Divide complex tasks into smaller, bite-sized activities</li> <li>• Establish clear classroom expectations</li> </ul>	<p><b>Choose fun, active learning tasks</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Choose fun, playful learning tasks</li> <li>• Maximise active, hands-on learning</li> <li>• Provide access to equipment and resources such as props, costumes and musical instruments</li> </ul>
<p><b>Build a team</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Foster a sense of teamwork in the classroom</li> <li>• Build respectful, inclusive and reciprocal relationships across ākonga and kaiako</li> </ul>	<p><b>Give students a say</b></p> <p>Involve ākonga in decision-making around:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• peer groupings</li> <li>• learning tasks</li> <li>• how they participate such as by acting, directing, or editing a dramatic scene</li> </ul>

## 3 Collaborating with students

Kaiako-participants saw the largest improvements in engagement when they collaborated with ākonga to select and implement strategies. This can be achieved by:

<p>"the power of it is actually in talking about it, discussing it and creating it"</p> <p>Sarah, teacher-participant</p>	<p><b>co-constructing class treaties</b></p>	<p><b>engaging in 1:1 conversations</b></p>	<p>"[The students] felt like they were pioneers... they were engaged in making their ideas come to life."</p> <p>Sarah, teacher-participant</p>
	<p><b>holding class-wide korero</b></p>	<p><b>sharing feedback</b></p>	



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