Mahi Tahi: Placing trust at the centre of lesson observation and post lesson observation conversation

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Abstract

Long Bay College places a strong emphasis on effective change leadership and trust to foster a responsive and innovative teaching environment. Founded in 1975 into what was then a rural area, the College now serves approximately 1,800 students in a suburban setting. By embracing the autonomy granted by New Zealand's 1989 Tomorrow's Schools reform, the school has cultivated a dynamic approach to education. In 2019, the school's Board of Trustees and staff committed to continuous professional development, leading to the creation of the "Tino Akoranga" approach to teaching and learning. This approach centres on personalised, research-informed education, cultural responsiveness, and cognitive science considerations, all within a framework that prioritises professional learning. To support exceptional teaching and learning, Long Bay College emphasises trust-based classroom observations and collaborative post observation conversations under the "Mahi Tahi" initiative. This initiative seeks to normalise peer observations and discussions, enhancing teaching practices on a foundation of trust, professional safety and collaboration.

Keywords: *Trust-based feedback; lesson observation; post observation conversation; collaborative practice; continuous improvement; teacher capability*

Introduction

This article considers the development of "Tino Akoranga," a contextualised educational philosophy in a New Zealand secondary school, and the subsequent lesson observation and post observation conversation methodology developed to support the transition of that educational philosophy into classroom practice. That approach, known as "Mahi Tahi—working together as one" is the most recent iteration of Long Bay College's engagement with research informed approaches to pedagogy and leadership.

Of significance in the development of the Mahi Tahi approach is the explicit consideration of trust and the role of lesson observation and post lesson conversation in school settings, a desire to support and secure classroom teachers' engagement in "open to learning" approaches considerate of their classroom practice and the high impact pedagogies described in the school's educational philosophy: Tino Akoranga. In addition to commentary on the Mahi Tahi approach, adaptations and feedback from the first two sequences of implementation in 2024 are also described. Formal consent to name the school at the centre of this leadership narrative has been given by the Principal and Board of Trustees.

The Long Bay College context

Long Bay College is a co-educational secondary school on the northern suburban fringe of the North Shore of Auckland with a growing roll of around 1800 students. Founded in 1975, the College's surrounds have changed substantially over the past 49 years from bushland and dairy farms to modern townhouses and shopping precincts. Following Tomorrow's Schools reform in 1989, New Zealand schools have had the privilege and challenge of a degree of autonomy unique to their setting, with the potential to support responsiveness to a school's local community (Ministry of Education, 2019).

In 2019 the Board of Trustees and staff of Long Bay College made commitments to ongoing professional learning, explicitly supporting research informed teaching and learning. Now in its fifth year, that commitment has iterated and developed a whole school teaching and learning philosophy known as "Tino Akoranga—Exceptional Learning." Tino Akoranga is underpinned by a philosophy of "improving, not proving" and has provided a framework for teaching across the College. As Tino Akoranga has become established, a secondary initiative known as "Mahi Tahi" has been developed. This initiative seeks to support Tino Akoranga's application in classrooms and generate high-quality learning conversations between teachers through the establishment of safe and trust-based observation. The development and implementation of both Tino Akoranga and Mahi Tahi have relied heavily on trust, vulnerability and authenticity. These values support the creation of conditions whereby the two approaches directly support classroom practice whilst also gaining the acceptance and appreciation of staff.

Tino Akoranga, a school wide approach to teaching and learning: 2018 to present

The development of whole school approaches to teaching and learning is a feature of many schools, both in the New Zealand secondary school setting as well as overseas. These whole school educational philosophies encompass a range of approaches designed to create a cohesive, supportive, and effective learning environment reflective of the values, goals, and methods that guide teaching and learning within a school. The development of culturally responsive pedagogies in a range of New Zealand schools was described by Russell Bishop (2019) in *Teaching to the North-East*.

In 2018, following a survey of its school community, Long Bay College committed to visibly developing and demonstrating to its community the high value it placed on high quality classroom practice. This led to the school embarking on a two-year exploration that sought shared understanding across the teaching staff of what constituted "good" teaching and learning. Informed by local and international research, and other school settings, this quest included extensive professional reading, together with student and staff surveys conducted by a "best practice" working group. This working group comprised staff from across the school including senior leaders, middle leaders, and teachers with additional "within-school" leadership roles. All of those involved had

strategic roles related to the development of curriculum and pedagogy initiatives at the college. That alignment in roles informed their selection to be part of the working group.

A foundational consideration as to what "good" teaching and learning looks like was Graeme Aitken's (2009) "effective learning time" model. This model values active student participation in learning, instructional quality, curriculum alignment, and effective classroom management. The Long Bay working group engaged with the wider teaching staff to develop a range of specific principles that were applicable across the school. A key and early finding was the high value placed on a diverse range of instructional approaches that were explicitly considerate of students and subjects. Mindfulness and concern over the establishment of approaches that could anchor the school pedagogically were also described. Prescriptive approaches were perceived as likely to have limited portability across a wide range of learning areas.

The collectively high value placed on pluralistic approaches led the working group, Heads of Faculty and wider staff to develop the College's three principles of exceptional learning: Tikanga, Ako and Mahara (see Appendix, Table 1).

During 2019, the College commissioned both internal and external reviews of classroom practice. The reviews identified differences between espoused and in-use practice, and variable understanding of culturally responsive and cognitive science-based pedagogies and their application to the classroom. A perceived deficit in professional learning prompted the College to commit to an ongoing whole school professional learning programme that aims to develop classroom practice through shared school-wide approaches that can be contextualised to specific learning areas and classrooms. The internal frameworks supporting pluralistic approaches to classroom practice are outlined in the Tino Akoranga guide (Heneghan & Wing, 2024).

The resulting professional learning programme iterated through 2021 to 2024 in response to the school's strategic plan and staff needs. The publication of Russell Bishop's *Teaching to the North-East* (2019) and *Leading to the North-East* (2023) provided further scaffolds and sources of expertise in supporting teachers in linking the theoretical to the practical. Additionally, the research base of Bishop's works directly informed Tino Akoranga related professional learning. The "North-East" teaching construct provided a useful support for staff in visualising best practice and developing their teaching practice.

Figure 1 (see Appendix) describes the connections between Tino Akoranga, north-east pedagogies (Bishop, 2019), and the effective formative assessment strategies described by Wiliam and Leahy (2015). The diagram connects the principles of Ako and Mahara with relational pedagogies, and evidence informed formative assessment strategies.

Key drivers of a change journey: Trust, vulnerability and authenticity

Trust is critical for schools to achieve strategic progression (Le Fevre, 2014). Without it, teachers may hesitate to engage with new initiatives and pedagogical improvements, feeling unsafe to

experiment in their practice due to the risk of revealing vulnerabilities. For teachers to meaningfully engage with the shifts represented by Tino Akoranga and Mahi Tahi, they needed to trust in the new direction and the leaders guiding it. They had to believe that these changes would benefit their students, feel secure in trying new approaches, and be supported in their aim to improve, not prove, their practice (Ponticell, 2003).

Regular staff surveys conducted throughout the development of Tino Akoranga highlighted a positive perception of the approaches embedded within the College. This positive sentiment increased in staff surveys from 2021 to 2024, indicating growing confidence in the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) and middle leaders as facilitators of professional learning. Extended feedback over time from the staff of the College reinforced this, revealing the high value placed on transparency, shared understanding, and connections to classroom practice.

Building trust requires time to gather perspectives and respond to concerns. At the outset of the development of the dedicated professional learning programme at the College, a mindfulness of the wider staff was considered: a teacher's time needing to be considered individually and collectively to be "well spent," and the professional learning needing to be portable to the classroom. Engaging staff from the outset of the development of what would become Mahi Tahi was supportive of transparency and shared understanding. The connection to Tino Akoranga and an "improving not proving" mindset was foundational. The College's intended development of observation and post observation approaches was not a secret. Updates and considerations related to the approach were shared in both staff, middle, senior and Board meetings and open to discussion. Sustaining the high regard for the professional learning approaches developed at the school between 2019 and 2024 was essential in fostering goodwill and trust across the school. This commitment to transparency, mutual collaboration, and feedback engagement was critical for establishing a trusting environment.

Vulnerability also plays a significant role in implementing new initiatives. As practices are introduced and tried, teachers may feel increased vulnerability (Le Fevre, 2014). The Senior Leadership Team at Long Bay College recognised the need to ensure teachers felt safe and supported during the changes instigated by Tino Akoranga. Two years of development informed the initial design of professional learning approaches and the introduction of the initiative at the College.

Mahi Tahi enhances opportunities for vulnerability by providing a space for professionals to openly discuss their practice and collaboratively solve teaching challenges. This process not only requires vulnerability but also cultivates it (Harvey et al., 2019). The Mahi Tahi approach encourages leaders to model vulnerability. Senior leaders experienced the observational component first, participating as both classroom practitioners and observers. This allowed them to share their own challenges and collaborate with others to explore next steps, reinforcing a culture of vulnerability within the school. The specifics of this modelling are discussed later in this article.

Mahi Tahi fosters relationships focused on growth, creating fertile ground for vulnerable conversations (Allen et al., 2005; Leck & Orster, 2013). Its conversational framework, based on

the "Open to Learning" model (Robinson & Le Fevre, 2011), allows teachers to engage in honest discussions while maintaining a supportive environment.

Professional learning is considered authentic when it is directly relevant to teachers' daily practices (Borko, 2004). The formative assessment aspects and classroom grounding of exceptional learning principles support this authenticity. Learning opportunities that tackle specific classroom challenges are more likely to be viewed as valuable (Borko, 2004). Linking these opportunities to the College's strategic plan enhances their relevance and legitimacy.

The visibility of senior and middle leaders in prioritising professional development, providing essential resources, and actively participating in learning fosters a culture of continuous improvement, consistent with Bryk et al. (2010). These approaches form part of an extended professional learning sequence. The act of observing classroom practice must resonate authentically with staff, ensuring that both observation and post observation conversations are engaged with in a manner that fosters trust and support.

Moving it off the page: Taking professional learning and development from the staffroom to the classroom

Recognising that classroom observations can be challenging for teachers if not implemented effectively, the SLT formed a working group to develop supportive practices for observing and discussing classroom approaches. This group reviewed research literature on lesson observation, identifying its value, challenges, and effective practices across various educational contexts.

The benefits of lesson observation for teacher and school development are well-documented. According to Darling-Hammond and Richardson (2009), post observation feedback is crucial for highlighting strengths and areas for improvement. Observations help educators identify effective teaching strategies that can be replicated and allow for a systematic analysis of teaching practices, ultimately fostering high-quality instruction (Marzano et al., 2011).

The working group also considered challenges highlighted in the literature. Kelchtermans (2009), for example, discussed the negative effects of critical feedback on professional identity and self-efficacy. Conversely, Wang et al.'s (2002) research showed that observations lacking in depth also created tension and limited perceptions of agency.

As a result, the SLT considered approaches that would promote self-efficacy and agency, that would provide opportunity for focused conversations about practice and that would intentionally seek to foster trust and safety in the staff engaged with the observation and post observation constructs.

Initial development (2022–2023)

The Principal and SLT recognised the potential for conflating the new initiative with existing accountability constructs within the school, which could undermine the core principle of improving

not proving. This was a significant consideration at the outset of the initiative's development. A working group was thus established to review research literature on lesson observation.

A variety of lesson observation and teaching inquiry models were considered. "Learning Walks" are structured, non-evaluative classroom visits aimed at gathering evidence of teaching and learning practices. According to City et al. (2009) and Kachur et al. (2013), these walks are tools for promoting collaborative reflection and dialogue among educators about effective instructional strategies and identifying areas for professional development.

"Walkthroughs" represent a similar methodology, designed as structured, non-evaluative visits conducted typically with classroom teachers and middle or senior leaders. The goal of walkthroughs is to provide constructive feedback that fosters professional growth rather than assess performance. Research indicates that these sessions are usually brief, lasting from a few minutes to half an hour, and occur regularly. This low-stakes approach, highlighted by City et al. (2009), contributes to a culture of continuous improvement and open dialogue regarding teaching practices.

Another potential model, "Teaching as Inquiry," is defined as a systematic, reflective process in which teachers examine their own practices to enhance student outcomes. This method involves identifying a focus area, gathering data, analysing findings, and making evidence-based changes to drive continuous improvement (Timperley et al., 2014).

Despite their potential benefits, the efficacy of Learning Walks, Walkthroughs, and Teaching as Inquiry can be limited. One key issue is the lack of fidelity in their implementation, which can lead to failure in achieving the intended outcomes and may even become counterproductive. If walkthroughs are perceived as evaluative rather than supportive, they can cause anxiety and resistance among teachers (Kachur et al., 2013).

When approaches are imposed without adequate teacher input or buy-in, they may be seen as compliance exercises rather than opportunities for professional growth. Such perceptions can undermine the legitimacy of these practices and result in limited engagement from educators (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). In environments where trust is low, initiatives focused on instructional development can be met with suspicion. For example, if teachers believe walkthroughs are used for monitoring rather than support, they may react defensively and disengage.

Understanding the potential benefits and limitations of the three approaches outlined above, the SLT engaged in discussions with Heads of Faculty regarding current lesson observation practices. They specifically considered how the College could create methods for assessing the development of classroom practices that align with both whole school and faculty-specific professional learning. Although it was common for Heads of Faculty to visit the classrooms of their staff, doing so in a way that was not well understood or perceived as supportive could undermine relational trust.

As the SLT considered how these approaches would relate to the College's formal evaluative constructs, the context of the Professional Growth Cycle became crucial. All New Zealand teachers

participate in these cycles, which support ongoing professional development and formal registration. At Long Bay, these cycles include scheduled lesson observations and evaluative discussions with a professional peer, focusing on an individual teacher's broader professional growth.

Given the potential for conflation between the new approaches and the Professional Growth Cycles, the leadership emphasised the distinction between them. The working group, Heads of Faculty, and Senior Team agreed that integrating these approaches could be perceived by staff as contradicting the College's commitment to improving not proving, prompting a need for careful and thoughtful implementation strategy.

The development of the initial pilot (Term 2–Term 3, 2022)

Discussions across senior and faculty leadership groups, as well as within the working group, established that any approach taken by the college to implement observations and post-observation conversations needed to be aligned to the college educational philosophy and to its staff. The engagement of outside providers in an instructional coaching capacity was considered but felt to be of limited value. Jacobs et al. (2017) found that resistance to external coaching can arise if teachers perceive that external coaching is not tightly aligned with their needs or lacks credibility within their context. Another consideration in the decision not to utilise external coaching expertise lay in the need to scale across the school in order to impact the wider practice of teachers, and the prohibitive financial outlay in doing so. The development of approaches by the staff of the College, for the staff of the College and bespoke to the College, had the potential to avoid this pitfall. Furthermore, internally designed programmes have the potential to integrate and leverage off established norms and practices and develop the capability and capacity of a wide range of staff.

Naming and defining the approach (Term 3, 2023)

Translated from Te Reo Māori, "Mahi Tahi" means "we work together as one." This concept is prevalent in many New Zealand educational contexts, emphasising collaboration and collective responsibility. The integration of Te Ao Māori constructs is a hallmark of practice at the College, exemplified by programs like "Atawhai"—the College's pastoral programme and "Tino Akoranga" the intention to honour and esteem Te Ao Māori.

The Mahi Tahi approach consists of two main components: classroom visits and post observation conversations. Classroom visits focus on one class at a time, allowing for a targeted approach to developing specific aspects of practice outlined in Tino Akoranga. Observations align with the broader collective professional learning focus of the school. During the Mahi Tahi sequence, the teacher selects formative assessment strategies as described in Tino Akoranga to frame the initial focus. Notably, the observation process does not rely on a dedicated observation form. Instead, it aims to immerse the observer in the lesson, providing a rich context for feedback.

Visits are pre-organised and accompanied by discussions regarding relevant contextual elements of the class. This context is crucial, as it can mitigate observer misconceptions, help

teachers feel more at ease during the observation, and allow teachers to share potential areas of focus in their practice. Each visit lasts between 15 and 30 minutes. This timeframe ensures that the visit is meaningful, allowing the observer to gain a clear understanding of the teaching practices employed. It underscores the observer's commitment to engaging with the visit rather than treating it as a mere box-ticking exercise.

Each classroom visit is followed up within 36 hours with a conversation between the teacher and observer. This timing is based on findings from studies by Sullivan et al. (2012), Myung and Martinez (2013), and Randall (2020), that suggest delays in follow-up can hinder teacher reflection and heighten anxiety regarding the subsequent discussion. To minimise this possibility and maximise potential learning, consistency in post observation feedback is important. The trust-based discussion questions in Table 2 (See Appendix) provide a structured approach to observation and feedback that fosters a supportive environment conducive to professional growth.

These questions were adapted from the trust-based observation approach developed by Randall (2020). This approach seeks to encourage inquiry mindedness (Timperley et al., 2014) as teachers are encouraged to consider their next steps. A supportive scaffold was also developed to suggest certain verbal and non-verbal communication cues alongside the two reflective questions. This scaffold derives from Robinson and Le Fevre's (2011) development of "Open to Learning" conversations and is summarised in Table 3 (see Appendix).

A further scaffold supporting post observation conversation, effectively a hybrid of open to learning conversations and the key questions underpinning the trust-based observation approach can be seen in Figure 2 (see Appendix). This shows the starting point for the post observation conversation, with successive steps supporting its progression, together with specific prompts and guidance for the observer. These support staff to be mindful of trust and maintain a focus on the development of teaching practice. Prior to implementation, staff engaged in professional learning around the overall approach and the trust-based questions and open to learning conversations involved.

Each teacher-observer pairing committed to three sequential observations and post observation conversations, the iterative nature of which is illustrated in Figure 3 (see Appendix). The sequence begins with the teacher being observed selecting a specific approach from Tino Akoranga. This is followed by an observation of classroom practice, with a class nominated by the teacher, at a time suited to that teacher. Significantly, the nature of iteration is led by the teacher who is the focus of the observation. A Mahi Tahi sequence is completed after three cycles of focus setting, observation and post observation conversation.

Board engagement

Securing the support of the college's Board of Trustees has been critical to the success of Mahi Tahi. Having developed a theoretical framework grounded in research literature and building on

the prior commitments made by the Board in the development of Tino Akoranga, the working group presented Mahi Tahi to the Board in Term 4, 2023. The proposal was approved with a multi-year commitment, alongside financial resourcing to support delivery.

The initial pilot (Term 4, 2023)

The rollout of Mahi Tahi scheduled for Term 1 2024 aimed to familiarise senior leaders with its processes. The pilot included professional learning that outlined the approach, emphasising the critical elements of building trust and safety. Participants engaged in practising Mahi Tahi conversations through various scenarios, allowing them to apply the approach in multiple contexts while becoming comfortable with the questions and strategies involved.

Following this, the senior leadership team was invited to implement a Mahi Tahi sequence alongside a member of the Mahi Tahi working group. They were set to observe three lessons focusing on specific formative assessment strategies employed by the teacher. This sequence was designed to enhance leaders' capabilities to observe and discuss lessons in a manner that would prepare them for the upcoming 2024 Mahi Tahi rounds with other staff. The observed teacher provided guidance during these cycles, gently challenging any practices that diverged from established best practices. A strong relational trust between the observed teacher and senior leaders was crucial for success, alongside a reciprocal, open to learning attitude.

The pilot also allowed for further refinement of Mahi Tahi. Observations highlighted the importance of adhering to scheduled times, as no-shows or tardiness could undermine relational trust. Additionally, maintaining the non-judgmental and non-advisory nature of Mahi Tahi conversations was vital; unsolicited advice or judgments that strayed from the observation focus diminished engagement and positivity towards the process. These insights were instrumental in shaping the professional learning and development (PLD) for the initial sequence in 2024.

Mahi Tahi – Sequence One (Term 1, 2024)

The next phase of the Mahi Tahi sequence commenced in Term 1 of 2024, with the wider staff briefed on the scope of this phase and a review of research related to lesson observation. Informal feedback from staff indicated that this briefing was well received, appreciating the direct involvement of Senior Leaders as first participants. In this phase, the college's senior leaders were observed by the Heads of Faculties they supported. This sequence included three cycles of observation and conversation.

At the start of this sequence, dedicated professionaʟ learning sessions were conducted with the Heads of Faculty to ensure they understood the approach and its objectives. This professional learning and development mirrored the sessions held with the senior leadership team during the pilot round in 2023, where the theoretical foundation was outlined alongside practice opportunities for conversation techniques.

The Senior Leaders and Heads of Faculty then scheduled their three observations and conversations. The college provided relief cover to enable Heads of Faculty to attend these observations without disruption to their teaching responsibilities. Over the next four weeks, each Head of Faculty completed a Mahi Tahi sequence with their respective Senior Leader. At the conclusion of this sequence, Heads of Faculty and Senior Leaders were invited to provide feedback on their experiences, with 14 responses collected to help refine the approach moving into Term 2. These responses are shown in Table 4 (see Appendix).

The dual role of the senior leader as both initiative participant and researcher introduced a unique dynamic, potentially affecting responses due to the inherent power differential between Senior Leaders and HoFs. The anonymous nature of the feedback sought to mitigate this and support open communication. Ensuring confidentiality was essential to encouraging honest feedback, enabling a clearer assessment of the initiative's impact on trust and collaboration.

Mahi Tahi – Sequence Two (Term 2, 2024)

The second sequence of Mahi Tahi maintained a similar structure to the first but featured Heads of Faculty being observed by their Senior Leaders. This iteration was less dependent on relief provisions from the College's Board of Trustees. However, it was significantly affected by the Senior Leaders' schedules and their ongoing strategic responsibilities during that term, necessitating an extension of the observation and conversation sequence from four weeks to six weeks.

An essential takeaway from this sequence was the importance of early scheduling. There was a clear need to plan Mahi Tahi sequences earlier in the term and to firmly commit to the observation and conversation schedule from the outset. At the end of the second sequence, participants were once again surveyed. This survey, conducted anonymously via Microsoft Forms, consisted of two Likert scale questions (rated from 1 to 10) concerning the development of trust and safety throughout the Mahi Tahi process. A score of "0" indicated a negative effect, while a score of "10" represented a positive effect. The ratings for Sequence 1 in Term 1 and Sequence 2 in Term 2 were collected to evaluate progress (see Appendix, Table 5)

The participants were then given the opportunity to provide anonymous further feedback on the Likert scale questions with the option for extended written responses. Those responses were analysed narratively (Riessman, 2008). Key phrases such as "trust," "safety," "vulnerability," and "supportive environment" illustrated participants' journeys in building professional relationships, highlighting the progressive development of trust and safety across Terms 1 and 2.

Term 1 analysis

Question 1: Trust development
Term 1 feedback indicated that the Mahi Tahi approach fostered a collaborative environment where Heads of Faculty and Senior Leaders could build mutual trust. Participants valued the chance to form personal and professional connections that bypassed formal reporting structures, allowing for honest, constructive discussions centred on improving student outcomes. Common themes, including "collaboration," "equality in discussion" and "honest feedback," emphasised the positive impact on relationship-building and trust, providing a foundation for further growth in the following terms.

Question 2: Safety in practice development
Regarding safety in practice development, Term 1 participants generally perceived Mahi Tahi as a safe, supportive environment for exploring teaching techniques without fear of judgment. Although some respondents initially struggled to establish a neutral space, guided conversations facilitated a non-judgmental environment, encouraging experimentation and self-improvement. Recurring themes, such as "trial-and-error," "supportive feedback" and "non-judgmental space" underscored the initiative's role in cultivating a culture of learning and growth.

Additional feedback
Participants in Term 1 also suggested improvements to time management and scheduling for Mahi Tahi sessions. Concerns about relief cover for classroom duties during observations highlighted the need for adequate planning to ensure smooth operations. Some respondents advocated for dedicated time to prepare and review strategies, which they felt could enhance the quality of conversations and support the initiative's sustainability.

Term 2 analysis
Mid-year staff changes and parental leave saw the number of respondents fall by two in Term 2.

Question 1: Trust development
Familiarity with the process contributed to a deeper level of trust among participants. As HoFs became more comfortable with Mahi Tahi, interactions with Senior Leaders grew more collegial and open. By the third observation cycle, many respondents felt confident enough to engage in vulnerable discussions, marking a shift toward a stronger, more trusting dynamic. Themes of "comfort in sharing" and "openness" showed that repeated engagement had solidified trust within the HoF-SLT partnerships.

Question 2: Safety in practice development
Term 2 responses also reflected a positive experience regarding safety, with participants indicating that Mahi Tahi supported professional growth through safe exploration of new strategies.

Although some HoFs initially found the approach challenging, most reported an increased sense of comfort by the sequence's end. Themes such as "constructive feedback," "accountability in growth" and "safe exploration" revealed that the process provided a secure foundation for ongoing improvement.

Additional feedback

Additional feedback for Term 2 reiterated the value of Mahi Tahi while noting time pressures. Participants highlighted the need for careful planning to balance observation duties with teaching responsibilities, emphasising that, while beneficial, time away from the classroom should be minimised for continuity. Feedback also suggested that structured reflective practice sessions would support continued growth for seasoned educators.

Implications and next steps

Findings from the Mahi Tahi initiative emphasise the importance of trust, vulnerability, and authenticity in fostering meaningful engagement. The continuation of anonymous surveys to assess perceptions of trust and support is recommended to inform ongoing improvements. Transparent communication and responsiveness to feedback are crucial for building relational trust, allowing teachers to engage confidently with Mahi Tahi.

To further enhance professional development, providing structured opportunities for staff to share challenges and successes in their teaching practice would expand on the progress made by Mahi Tahi. Participant feedback emphasised the role of shared vulnerability in collaborative problem-solving, underscoring the need for dedicated time and space for these discussions.

Teacher feedback, especially from HoFs, also highlighted the importance of Senior Leadership involvement. Visible participation by Senior Leaders in instructional PLD reinforces values of vulnerability and collaboration, encouraging staff to engage more fully. The initiative's structured support for reflective practice suggests that further scaling Mahi Tahi within the school could prove beneficial, with Faculty Heads and Senior Leaders potentially partnering with interested classroom teachers.

One significant lesson from 2024 involves the optimal group size for the Mahi Tahi sequence. Informal feedback suggested that smaller groups facilitated more manageable and impactful sessions, with a need to be mindful of spreading staff thinly. Involvement in more than two Mahi Tahi sequences at the same time was described as challenging, an important consideration for 2025. This adjustment reduces demands on time and cognitive load, fostering a more focused and personalised experience for the individuals involved.

Expanding Mahi Tahi to involve beginning teachers and their mentors could enhance the initiative's reach and reinforce trust-based observation practices early in teaching careers. Including beginning teachers in this process would allow for real-time mentorship and meaningful

discussions on instructional methods, supporting new educators as they build their practice within a secure and supportive framework. A mindfulness of confidence and credibility in this beginning teacher dynamic was a consideration. The need to frame Mahi Tahi as a process and as a two-way professional learning opportunity, was important to emphasise for all involved, and that insights from fresh and experienced perspectives are both of value and supportive of rich conversations. The need for explicit consideration of trust and safety is a keystone, with the PLD supporting the initiative emphasising intentionality in fostering trust and safety for all involved from the outset.

In summary, Mahi Tahi has proven valuable for fostering trust and collaborative growth, and the initiative's structured, supportive model shows potential for further scalability. Sustaining the momentum of Mahi Tahi will require mindful adjustments to group dynamics, continued refinement of scheduling, and an ongoing commitment to authentic professional learning that aligns closely with educators' daily instructional needs.

Recommendations for school leaders considering implementing Mahi Tahi

Clear guidelines help maintain a safe, non-evaluative environment where teachers can openly share and take risks in their practice. Such safety enables teachers to discuss vulnerabilities in their instructional methods without fear of negative consequences. Leaders should model vulnerability, encouraging others to do the same and reinforce Mahi Tahi's emphasis on growth and learning. Professional development on the Mahi Tahi approach should cover trust-based observation protocols, including active listening, non-evaluative questioning, and constructive feedback techniques.

Initial implementation should involve senior and middle leaders to help establish high fidelity approaches that are supported by dedicated professional learning and modelling. When senior leaders are the first to model engagement and observation, the process gains legitimacy. Clear communication explaining the initiative to the wider staff supports transparency and fosters broader buy-in. Scaling up gradually with experienced participants mentoring new ones can preserve the integrity of Mahi Tahi as it reaches larger groups. Scheduling flexibility and access to relief staff are also essential to support observations without disrupting regular teaching duties. Proactive planning around scheduling and resource allocation signals the school's commitment to the initiative's success and sustainability.

To ensure Mahi Tahi remains effective, regular collection of anonymous feedback is recommended. This feedback helps gauge participant experiences with trust and safety, guiding ongoing improvements. Analysing responses allows leaders to adjust practices, address emerging needs, and ensure Mahi Tahi continues to align with teachers' needs and school goals.

Conclusion

Developing an educational philosophy and supporting it to become effectively embedded in practice was a significant undertaking made possible by a concerted focus on the development of relational trust, transparency and "improving not proving." The initial iterations of the Mahi Tahi

approach engaged the Long Bay College middle and senior leaders with approaches considerate of trust and professional safety. These were guided by the goal of supporting observation and conversation between those groups, related to their classroom practice. The intention thereafter was to collect feedback, analyse, evaluate and iterate approaches as time went on, and into the future. The goal: development of safe and growth focused lesson observation and conversation as a feature of collective practice across the wider school and shared understanding of the formative assessment approaches outlined in school's approach to teaching and learning, Tino Akoranga.

The Board of Trustees have invested and committed to resourcing the development of the approaches developed. This includes release time for observation, reflection and conversation as a driver of teacher capability. That investment seeks to secure high quality teaching and learning, and responsiveness for learners and the school community.

Long Bay College is happy to share their experience with educators on similar journeys who seek to shape their approaches to meet the needs of their school and their communities.

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Appendix

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Table 1: Overview of the Long Bay College "Principles of Exceptional Learning"

Principle	Supportive commentary shared with teachers
Tikanga	Exceptional learning requires exceptional classroom climate. Knowing our students, and establishing positive relationships for learning, underpinned by high expectations, creates a climate in which success is valued and students feel cared for.
Ako	For exceptional learning to happen in our classrooms, we must be experts in both what we teach, and how to teach it. Pedagogical content knowledge is about knowing how best to teach your subject. It is knowing what strategies work best, predicting misconceptions, knowing how students engage with the subject and being knowledgeable in the subject itself.
Mahara	Understanding how the brain learns allows us to ensure that we teach in such a way that supports transition to long term memory and strengthens our students' ability to retrieve and utilise what they have learnt and how to use it. Reducing cognitive overload by reducing distractions, presenting new learning in chunks and, developing retrieval strength all assist us in this principle.

Table 2: "Trust Based Observation." Questions supporting post-observation conversation

How were you supporting your learners to learn?	What would you do differently next time?
This question allows for the teacher to discuss their practice, and the deliberate choices they were making to support student outcomes. It reiterates the focus of the observation on student learning and teacher	This question opens the door to a discussion around the next steps in their practice. A teacher may already have ideas as to their next steps, this empowers teachers to discuss those ideas. It creates an opportunity for the teacher to ask for advice, instead of having this advice imparted without solicitation.

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Table 3: Mahi Tahi conversation element scaffold

Conversation element	Possible phrasing	Rationale
Thank the person for having you. Introduce the two-question approach and get permission to begin. **Do not begin with your thoughts on the lesson.**	"Hi ____, thanks for having me visit yesterday. I am looking forward to talking about your lesson with you. I'm not going to start with my thoughts, instead I'll be asking you two questions. – how were you supporting the learners to learn, and what would you do differently next time. **Is now a good time? Are you ready to start?"**	*This is to soften the conversation and set the other at ease. It is a way of supporting shared understanding of the approach and of power sharing.*
Start with the first question (be precise in your phrasing).	"So, our first question, **how were you supporting your learners to learn?"**	*This question supports the teacher in sharing their practice, and the deliberate choices they were making to support student outcomes.* *It reiterates the focus of the observation on student learning and teacher support of that learning.*
Listen carefully to what is being said.	(You are **staying quiet, actively listening.** Nod, or smile as needed. Focus on the conversation but **do not interject** unless directly asked to).	*Staying quiet prevents you accidentally passing, or appearing to pass judgement on what is being described. You are simply listening at this stage.*
Summarise what you have heard back to the other person, eliciting clarification of what you have heard.	"Great, so you've described _____ and _____ and _____. You think _____ as well. Is that correct?"	*This ensures that you have understood what you have heard, provides an opportunity for the other person to clarify or add ideas. It also reinforces that you have been listening. Remain neutral, or neutral-positive.*
Detect and check key points of what they have said, asking for clarification as needed, and discussing further. Keep it light and gentle.	"So, one thing that I wanted to ask a little bit more about was_____. Can you tell me what your rationale was/beliefs are/thinking process was (etc) on _____."	*This allows you to ask further questions, tease out further detail or gently clarify something that might require clarification. Note that this must be done with caution – this is not the time to be directly challenging.*
Ask the second "Mahi Tahi" question. Again, **be precise** in your phrasing of the question.	"Ok, so let's move to our second question. **What would you do differently next time?"**	*This question opens the door to a discussion around the next steps in their practice. A teacher may already have ideas as to their next steps, this empowers teachers to discuss those ideas. It creates an opportunity for the teacher to ask for advice, instead of having this advice imparted without solicitation.*
Listen carefully to what is being said.	(You are **staying quiet, actively listening.** Nod, or smile as needed. Focus on the conversation but **do not interject** unless directly asked to).	*Staying quiet prevents you accidentally passing, or appearing to pass judgement on what is being described. You are simply listening at this stage.*
Summarise what you have heard back to the other person, eliciting clarification of what you have heard.	"Great, so you've described _____ and _____ and _____. You think _____ as well. Is that correct?"	*This ensures that you have understood what you have heard, provides an opportunity for the other person to clarify or add ideas. It also reinforces that you have been listening.*
Detect and check key points of what they have said, asking for clarification as needed, and discussing further. Keep it light and gentle.	"So, one thing that I wanted to ask a little bit more about was_____. Can you tell me what your rationale was/beliefs are/thinking process was (etc) on _____."	*This allows you to ask further questions, tease out further detail or gently clarify something that might require clarification. Note that this must be done with caution – this is not the time to be directly challenging.*
Offer advice **ONLY** if **requested.** Check for their own thoughts around the idea.	"Thanks for asking. Have you considered____" "What do you think about that as an approach? Would that work with this class? How could you use that with this class?"	*If the teacher requests your ideas, provide them. Seek to align with Tino Akoranga, and do not be afraid to look through Tino Akoranga together. Make sure that the teacher has an opportunity to consider any ideas shared with them.*
Agree on next steps.	"So, moving ahead, you've talked about _____ and ____ as adaptations on what you tried with ____. Is that correct?" I'd like to come back and see your next steps over the course of the coming week. What lesson should I come to?"	*This ensures that there is agreeance and clear next steps, understood by both sides.* *Setting the next visit secures both participants into the next part of the sequence and ensures that there is a continuing focus on the trialled strategies.*

Table 4: Mahi Tahi participant survey feedback

Question	Sequence 1 Rating N=14	Sequence 1 Rating N=14
Do you feel that the approach has been supportive of developing trust (defining trust as a sense of personal and professional regard between the HoF-SLT pairing that is focused on improving student outcomes).	9.14	8.66
Do you feel that the approach has been supportive of developing safety (defining safety as a sense that it is appropriate to take develop classroom practice through trial and error with subsequent conversation grounded in improving not proving) between the HoF-SLT pairing.	9.14	8.83

Figure 1: Teaching to the North East and supporting High Quality Formative Assessment

TEACHING TO THE NORTH EAST AND SUPPORTING HIGH QUALITY FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT

Tikanga

Tikanga is about creating a learning focused culture. This should be one where ākonga feel known, cared for and that success is highly valued. We strive to create a sense of whanaungatanga in our classrooms.

Ako and Mahara

Ako is about becoming experts in both what we teach, and how to teach it. This includes knowing how best to teach your subject. It is knowing what strategies work best, knowing how ākonga engage with the subject and being knowledgeable in the subject itself.

Mahara is about working with, not against the brain during the entire learning process. This means being mindful of cognitive load, supporting ākonga to move from novice to expert and helping new learning to eventually be stored in the long term memory.

Bishop (2019, 2023)

North East teachers should:
- Reject deficit explanations about their learners.
- Care for their learners.
- Demonstrate high expectations.
- Be knowledgeable about what their learners need to learn, for example numeracy and literacy.
- Be adept in strategies to promote learning such as overt instruction and formative assessment.
- Promote learning through the provision of feedback.
- Promote learning through drawing on the prior knowledge of their learners.

Wiliam and Leahy (2015)

Formative assessment:
- Is the range of evidence informed strategies that teachers can use to support their learners to make progress.
- Can identify students progress as well as highlighting gaps in their knowledge and understanding to give the teacher useful insight as to what feedback and instruction can be provided to continue to move learners forward.
- Takes place during the learning process. It continually informs the teacher and the student as to how learning can move forward as it is happening.

Relational pedagogies
supporting culturally responsive teaching as described by Bishop (2023)

Tino Akoranga
Our approach to teaching and learning at Long Bay College.

Evidence Informed Formative Assessment
as described by Wiliam and Leahy (2015)

Relational Formative Assessment Strategies

Clarifying and sharing learning intentions and success criteria

Engineering effective discussions, tasks and activities that elicit evidence of learning

Providing feedback that moves learners forward

Activating students as learning resources for each other

Activating students as owners of their own learning

For these practices to be most effective, teachers must actively sustain North East pedagogies. This includes supporting effective learning relationships and interactions between themselves and the learner, and between the learners themselves

Between 2019 and 2023 we have developed adaptive routines, aligned to **Tikanga, Ako and Mahara** (Our exceptional learning principles) these explicitly supporting teachers in applying research informed practices that consider the learner, the learners backgrounds, the teacher, the subject, the classroom and the cognition of all, to support high quality teaching and learning.

North West
High teaching skill, low relational skill

North East
High teaching skill, high relationial skill

South West
Low teaching skill, low relational skill

South East
Low teaching skill, high relational skill

Teaching to the North East is a framework devised by Russell Bishop (2019). This framework anchors good teaching as a combination of strong relationships, combined with strong teaching skill.

Supporting effective learning interactions

Sustaining North East pedagogies

Supporting effective learning relationships
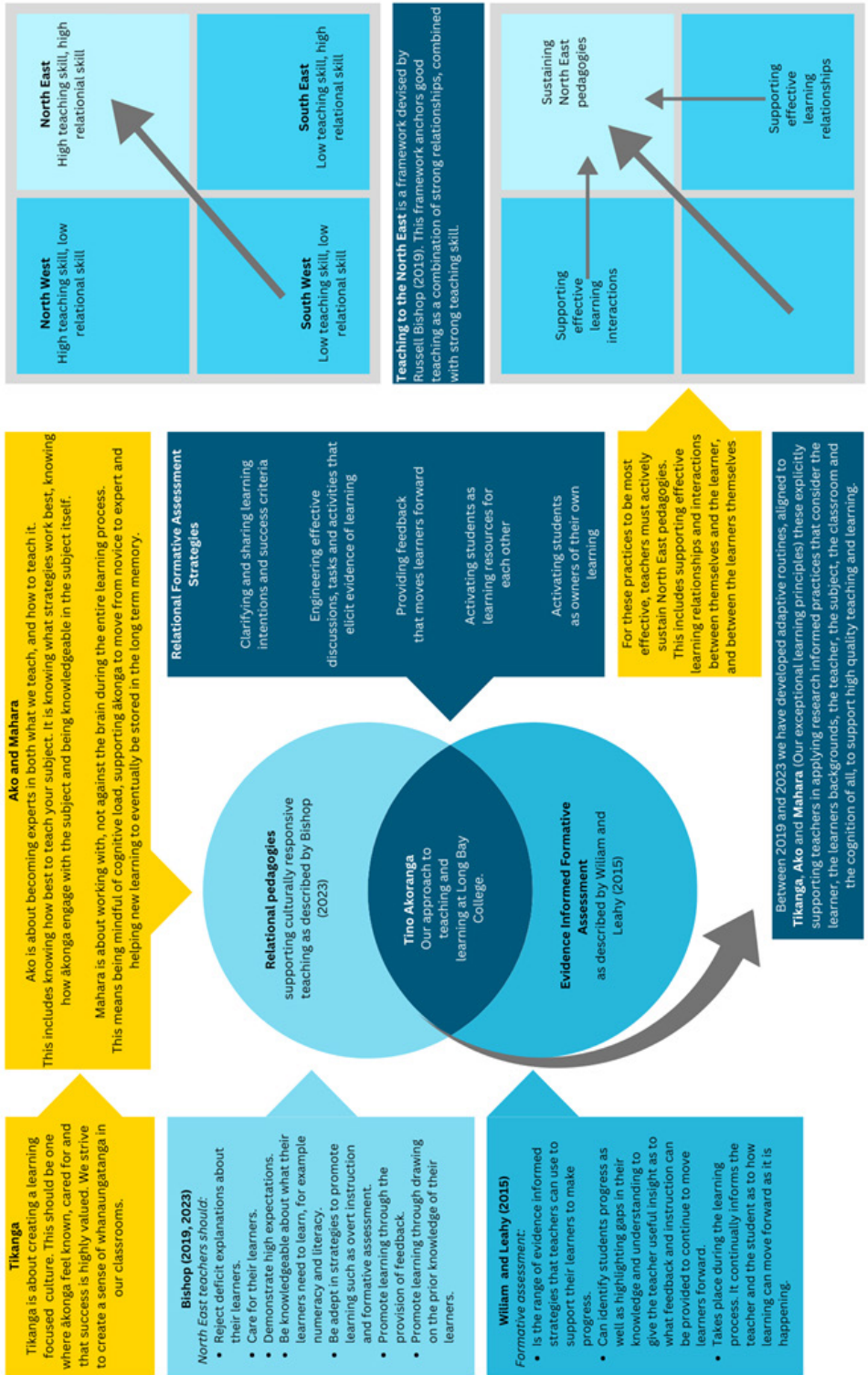
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Figure 2: Supporting safe and growth-focused post observation conversation

MAHI TAHI : SUPPORTING SAFE & GROWTH-FOCUSED POST-OBSERVATION CONVERSATION

Working collaboratively alongside colleagues strengthens trust, reinforces the professional and social connections within a school and supports teachers in being able to communicate their practice to others.

Effective post observation conversations between teachers about practice should be safe and focused on growth.

The graphic below, an outline that seeks to support teachers engaging in a Mahi Tahi conversation with safe and growth focused approaches at the forefront of practice.
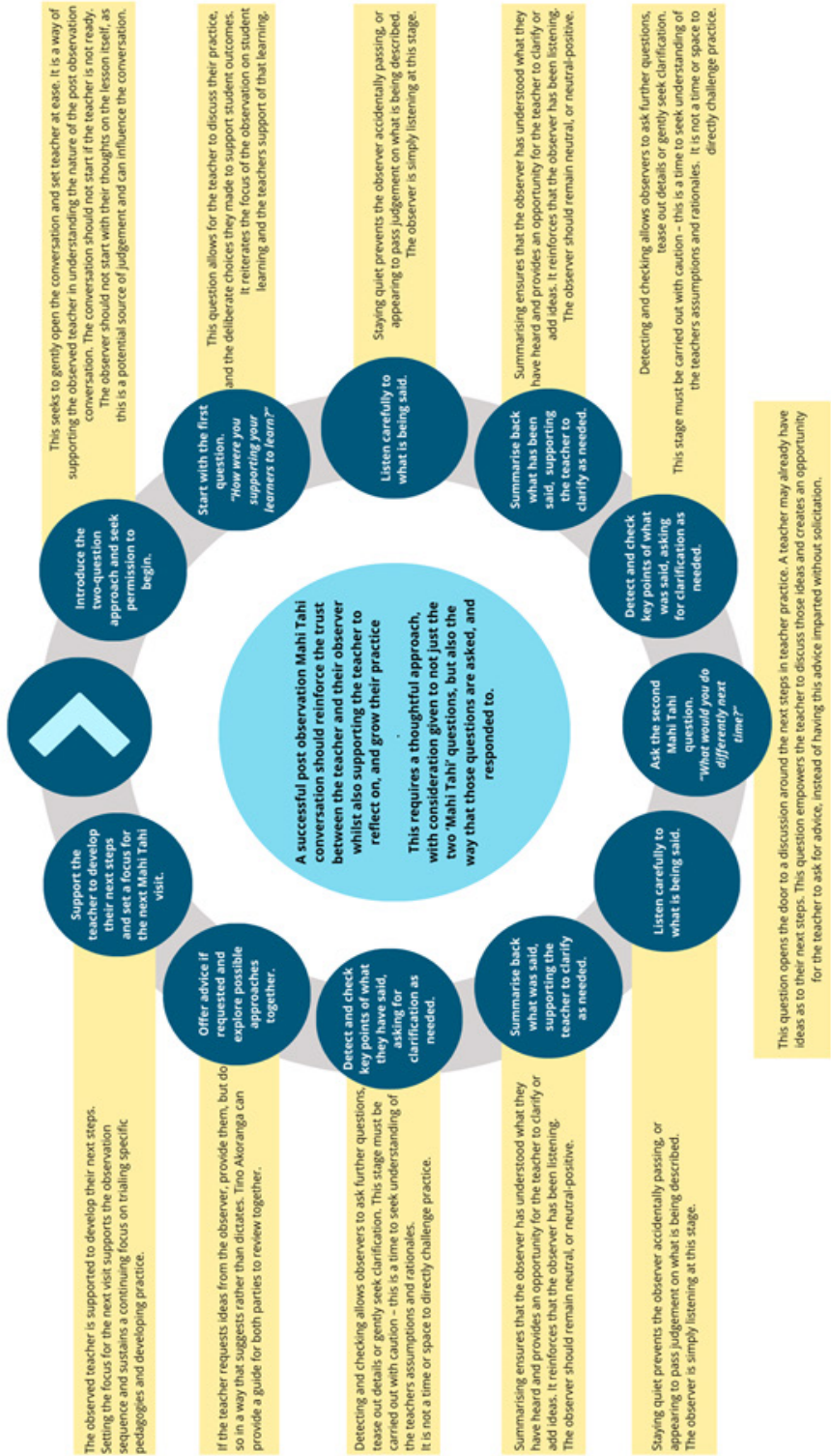
A successful post observation Mahi Tahi conversation should reinforce the trust between the teacher and their observer whilst also supporting the teacher to reflect on, and grow their practice

This requires a thoughtful approach, with consideration given to not just the two 'Mahi Tahi' questions, but also the way that those questions are asked, and responded to.

Introduce the two-question approach and seek permission to begin.

Start with the first question. *"How were you supporting your learners to learn?"*

Listen carefully to what is being said.

Summarise back what has been said, supporting the teacher to clarify as needed.

Detect and check key points of what was said, asking for clarification as needed.

Ask the second Mahi Tahi question. *"What would you do differently next time?"*

Listen carefully to what is being said.

Summarise back what was said, supporting the teacher to clarify as needed.

Detect and check key points of what they have said, asking for clarification as needed.

Offer advice if requested and explore possible approaches together.

Support the teacher to develop their next steps and set a focus for the next Mahi Tahi visit.

This seeks to gently open the conversation and set teacher at ease. It is a way of supporting the observed teacher in understanding the nature of the post observation conversation. The conversation should not start if the teacher is not ready. The observer should not start with their thoughts on the lesson itself, as this is a potential source of judgement and can influence the conversation.

This question allows for the teacher to discuss their practice, and the deliberate choices they made to support student outcomes. It reiterates the focus of the observation on student learning and the teachers support of that learning.

Staying quiet prevents the observer accidentally passing, or appearing to pass judgement on what is being described. The observer is simply listening at this stage.

Summarising ensures that the observer has understood what they have heard and provides an opportunity for the teacher to clarify or add ideas. It reinforces that the observer has been listening. The observer should remain neutral, or neutral-positive.

Detecting and checking allows observers to ask further questions, tease out details or gently seek clarification – this is a time to seek understanding of the teachers assumptions and rationales. It is not a time or space to directly challenge practice.

This question opens the door to a discussion around the next steps in teacher practice. A teacher may already have ideas as to their next steps. This question empowers the teacher to discuss those ideas and creates an opportunity for the teacher to ask for advice, instead of having this advice imparted without solicitation.

The observed teacher is supported to develop their next steps. Setting the focus for the next visit supports the observation sequence and sustains a continuing focus on trialing specific pedagogies and developing practice.

If the teacher requests ideas from the observer, provide them, but do so in a way that suggests rather than dictates. Tino Akoranga can provide a guide for both parties to review together.

Detecting and checking allows observers to ask further questions, tease out details or gently seek clarification. This stage must be carried out with caution – this is a time to seek understanding of the teachers assumptions and rationales. It is not a time or space to directly challenge practice.

Summarising ensures that the observer has understood what they have heard and provides an opportunity for the teacher to clarify or add ideas. It reinforces that the observer has been listening. The observer should remain neutral, or neutral-positive.

Staying quiet prevents the observer accidentally passing, or appearing to pass judgement on what is being described. The observer is simply listening at this stage.

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Figure 3: Working together as one

MAHI TAHI: WORKING TOGETHER AS ONE