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COVID-19 has brought a multitude of challenges into our lives. Unlike many of my whanaunga, I am among the privileged who have retained their regular job and steady income. Whilst us adults have flapped about, like soft-lipped, just hooked kahawai, trying to make sense of the chaos, so too have our young people.



At the beginning of the lockdown period, I really struggled to navigate the seemingly endless tabs that were open in the glitchy, out of date computer screen that sat in the void where my brain once lived. I tried to schedule myself silly to make sense of the lack of autonomy in my life, and to add some structure. I made lists of new things I wanted to try: jobs I needed to complete and meals that I was going to have to cook now take-out was no longer an option. At times when I got myself into a spin, I would recall my last lesson with my English class before New Zealand went into lockdown.

My Year 12 English class begged me to project the Prime Minister's announcement, so that we could watch it together. Knowing it would upset some people (read: me) in the class, I ruled against it. How's that for autonomy? Of course, as soon as I nipped next door to the photocopier, they were on their phones, and positively fizzing with elation and anxiety when I returned to the room to be informed that the school is closing for four weeks.

I did my best to keep everyone (read: again, me) in the room calm, by going through some tips to survive such an experience. We talked about routine, self-care, what our class work would look like. We even went to the library and borrowed books to see us through. I was confident that the kids were prepared. The fact that I'd managed not to cry in front of them had really cemented the notion that it would all be okay.

But reality for a lot of my students is that it has really been not okay. Of course, in a nationwide lockdown the inequalities that torment our minority communities do not disappear. It doesn't take a tohunga to tell you that the stresses of financial strain and facing a life-threatening virus during these times are keenly felt in the homes of our Indigenous brothers and sisters. Many of our whānau live every day carrying the intergenerational trauma of colonisation, which has long seen our people



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robbed of their resources, their livelihood, health and, of course, their customs. If it wasn't daunting enough to know that a potential community outbreak would be more deadly for Māori and Pasifika than our neighbours, we were reminded by the government that we were not intelligent or trustworthy enough to be allowed to tangi our dead. The irony is, of course, that the government made such a call with the intent to try and protect people. As many Indigenous people know, the continuation and survival of our whakapapa and cultural practices is dependent on protecting our kaumātua. When you make decisions for people without their entire wellbeing in the conversation, you're never going to get it right all the way.

Thankfully, I am working at a school, where the management has put relationships at the core of our COVID-19 response. The messaging has always been that the wellbeing of whānau is at the forefront; learning, in the Western sense, can happen later. My school has tried to do all they can to mitigate barriers to learning, including sending out our own laptops to whānau who needed them. My colleagues have been just as incredible, finding creative ways to support each other and our students. Of course, we are doing all we can to get our students to engage in online learning, but the truth is it's damn hard to do any work in a house full of family who are all vying for devices and privacy to get their mahi done too.

Logistically, it's a nightmare. There are chores to do, nannies to check in on and nephews to babysit, not to mention the emotional resilience required to get your thinking muscles around this unprecedented season. On top of this, many of my students are essential workers at local supermarkets. I even had a late night message from one student pleading for more time to finish some work, as she'd been busy working, putting together care packages for kaumātua in her iwi. If I hear from my students a couple of times a week, or they've 'seen' the story I posted on my teaching Instagram profile, I call it a success. I'm not doing a lot of active teaching, but I am learning a lot.

Anyone who knows anything about teenagers will tell you that friends are everything. It's no surprise that when rangatahi are feeling down, they turn first to their friends for support. Without the daily interaction with their friends, many of my students are finding themselves with low moods and a serious lack of motivation to do just about anything. I am learning to read tone into chats, which tells me they need a call or referral to a counsellor. I'm learning to listen for heavy sighs which say, 'I haven't been sleeping'. I'm learning that stressed mums sometimes need you to growl their kids over Zoom, in front of a lounge full of cuddies, for not doing their chores



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and their school work, because they just can't say it again and keep it together.

For years, evidence indicating that relationships and holistic understanding of students are vital to bridge the alarming gaps between the academic results of our Māori and non-Māori students has been informing teachers. COVID-19 has certainly taken a lot from us, but I'm hopeful that it will leave us with some lessons too. Never before have we been asked to teach like this, and be this flexible and creative. Never before has it been so clear that before teaching can happen, we must learn. We must learn to look at the big picture, to acknowledge what is going on for whānau. We must learn to care for our students as individuals and to actively work to nourish their entire beings. I hear from kids and stressed parents every day; that they can't wait for school to get back to normal. Yes, I am looking forward to routine and interaction *kanohi ki te kanohi*, but I hope this flexibility and *manaaki* sticks around longer than the threat of COVID-19. We have the opportunity to rebuild the new normal; let's not forget what should be at the heart of it. *He aha te mea nui o te ao? He tangata. He tangata. He tangata.*

Nicole Titihuia Hawkins descends from Ngāti Kahungunu ki te Wairoa & Ngāti Pāhauwera. She lives in Pōneke, where she enjoys writing, baking, diving and running kaupapa Māori t-shirt initiative, Morkins & Co. Most commonly, she is found teaching English, Social Studies & Māori Activism at a local high school. She hosts Poetry with Brownies, which are open mic events for people of colour to share their work in safe spaces. Nicole's work has been published in Blackmail Press, Capital Magazine, The Spinoff Ātea, Overland and Sport 47.