

Te Papapa School

Developing adaptive teachers: challenging, changing, and totally worth it

Te Papapa School made a deliberate commitment to developing adaptive teachers who take responsibility for acceleration. Through structured professional learning groups, coaching, and a strong belief that every learner can achieve at their year level, the school is strengthening teacher expertise and shifting practice in visible ways. The work is challenging, but leaders and teachers are seeing changes.

School context

Te Papapa School is a primary school in Onehunga serving a largely Māori and Pacific community. Many whānau maintain strong connections with the school, and leaders hold a clear conviction that every learner can achieve at or above expectation. Alongside implementing structured literacy and responding to curriculum change, the school has focused on building adaptive expertise across a staff that includes both novice and experienced teachers. Leaders recognised that embedding a consistent approach to acceleration would require strengthening evaluative capability and shared expectations about teaching and learning.

Inquiry emphasis

The work was grounded in the concept of adaptive expertise and a commitment to acceleration. Leaders drew on assessment for learning principles and elements of the science of learning to strengthen clarity about what effective instruction looks like. The framing question was: if learning is not occurring at the expected level, how must teaching adapt?

Professional inquiry was structured to test the impact of instructional decisions using timely assessment evidence. Data was treated as feedback on teaching, and improvement cycles were designed to strengthen teachers' curriculum knowledge, pedagogical skill, and evaluative capability.

Link for video of the full conference presentation on the NZAI website: [Te Papapa School](#)

Why does this story matter?

This case highlights the importance of growing teacher expertise as a pathway to improving student outcomes. It shows how structured inquiry, coaching, and shared beliefs can shift both practice and expectations about what is possible for learners.

Improvement focus

The improvement focus is the deliberate development of adaptive teachers who can effectively combine strong curriculum knowledge, pedagogy, and evaluative thinking. Leaders aim to ensure that teachers notice quickly when learning is not occurring, respond with precision, and check whether their actions are making a difference.

The improvement story

The work was framed around a core belief: if students are not achieving at their year level, adults must adapt. Developing adaptive expertise became the vehicle for living that belief more consistently across the school. Professional learning centred on building three interconnected areas of expertise: curriculum knowledge, pedagogy, and evaluation. Growth in these areas was seen as essential to improving impact.

As structured literacy and curriculum shifts were introduced, leaders revisited these pedagogies. Assessment for learning principles were re-examined, and time was invested in clarifying what acceleration looks like in daily practice. Acceleration was reaffirmed as a guiding principle, with students taught at year level and gaps addressed strategically.

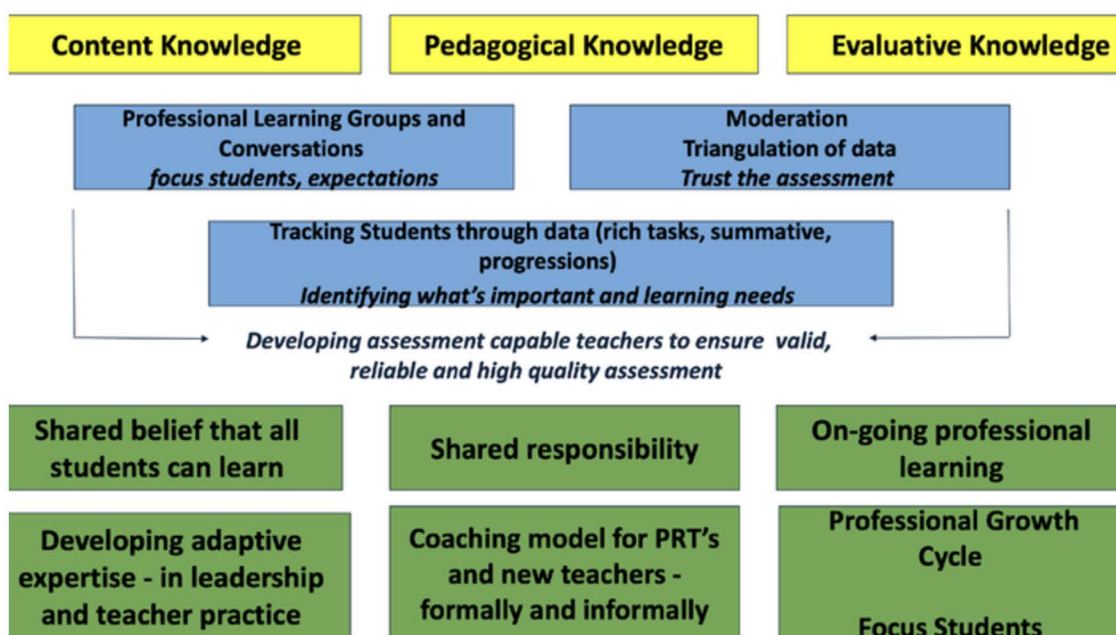


Diagram of the Assessment Framework used at Te Papapa School
(Image taken from school's PowerPoint presentation)

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Aligning pedagogies and assessment became a deliberate strand of development. Science of learning principles were integrated with formative assessment practices, and teachers explored how structured literacy routines could strengthen clarity and precision while remaining culturally responsive. Assessment systems were reorganised into universal screening, targeted diagnostic assessment, and ongoing progress monitoring, strengthening feedback loops for inquiry.

Professional learning groups became the main forum for applying this learning. On a regular cycle, teachers brought evidence about focus students and identified next instructional actions. Teachers discussed how the proposed next steps connected to year level expectations and what adjustments might strengthen acceleration. Over time, these conversations built shared language and sharper instructional reasoning.

Video was introduced as a learning tool to deepen reflection. Teachers analysed short clips together, strengthening collective understanding of effective practice. As trust grew, feedback became more specific and anchored in evidence of student response.

Support was differentiated. Teachers early in their careers engaged in intensive modelling, co-planning, and in-class coaching to build curriculum depth and formative habits. More experienced teachers were supported to examine assumptions about remediation and acceleration, particularly where expectations had drifted below year level. Coaching conversations combined clarity and care, reinforcing shared responsibility for impact.

In the senior school, adaptive expertise was visible through focused inquiries. Following internal professional learning on sentence structure, teachers implemented explicit instruction and analysed subsequent writing samples, noting improvements in accuracy and complexity. Other inquiries integrated culturally connected contexts into literacy and inquiry learning, strengthening engagement and depth of response.

Across the school, professional learning, assessment systems, and shared beliefs became more tightly aligned. Teachers increasingly sought additional knowledge when learning stalled and approached evidence as feedback on their own practice. Adaptive expertise moved from a concept to a lived expectation.



Enablers

- A clear belief that acceleration is an adult responsibility
- Commitment to assessment for learning and culturally responsive practice
- Structured professional learning centred on curriculum knowledge, pedagogy, and evaluation
- Integration of science of learning, and formative assessment
- Growth in relational trust that allowed honest examination of practice
- Differentiated coaching that responded to teacher need



Tensions

- Emotional and cognitive load for leaders associated with sustained improvement work
- Challenging deeply held beliefs about remediation and student capability
- Balancing curriculum change alongside system redesign
- Variable teacher confidence in interpreting assessment data
- Managing discomfort associated with video analysis and public reflection

How challenges were navigated

Leaders combined clarity of expectations with relational trust. Conversations about acceleration were anchored in shared responsibility for student progress, helping staff examine practice without feeling judged.

Support was responsive and sustained. Intensive modelling and coaching were provided where needed and gradually reduced as capability strengthened. When expectations drifted below year level, leaders revisited the school's shared stance on acceleration and worked alongside teachers to realign planning and instruction.

Professional learning remained embedded within inquiry cycles. This ensured that new knowledge, assessment information, and classroom practice developed together rather than as separate initiatives.

Evidence and emerging learning

Leaders and teachers now report visible shifts in teacher practice. Conversations increasingly centre on acceleration and year level expectations, with teachers using assessment evidence more deliberately to guide instructional decisions. Confidence in interpreting progress monitoring data, including tools, has grown across teams.

There are reports of mindset shifts as well as practice changes. Teachers are more likely to treat stalled progress as feedback on teaching and to adjust strategies accordingly. In the junior school, focus students are tracked with greater precision and instructional responses are more tightly aligned to identified needs.

Classroom examples provide further illustration. Following explicit professional learning on sentence structure, writing samples showed increased accuracy and complexity over short timeframes. In senior classes, culturally connected inquiry contexts supported stronger engagement and richer responses. Leaders describe early signs that stronger alignment between belief, pedagogy, and assessment is contributing to more deliberate teaching and growing learner confidence.



Questions for schools to discuss

- How clearly have we articulated what adaptive expertise means in our context?
- How confident are our teachers in interpreting assessment evidence and identifying precise next steps?
- In what ways do we differentiate professional support to meet varying levels of experience and need?
- Which aspects of teacher expertise, if strengthened, might unlock greater progress for learners?