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Māori-medium teachers, students, and leadership perspectives on curriculum, implementation, and assessment reform

This report brings together the voices of Māori-medium teachers and leadership first, followed by students. It uses the same concise thematic format across both parts so that the strongest signals, differences in emphasis, and implications for reform can be read consistently.

The analysis is based on qualitative focus groups with teachers and students and an interview with a senior leadership team in a kura kaupapa Māori context in Tairāwhiti. The evidence is practice-focused and reflects participants' experiences of curriculum, implementation, and assessment reform.

How to read the ratings

- Frequency reflects how often a theme appeared in the underlying qualitative evidence, using the categories Very High, High, Medium-High, Medium, Medium-Low, and Low.
- For the combined teacher and leadership section, convergence describes the degree of alignment between the two evidence streams. “Very strong” means closely matched concerns and strength of view; “strong” means clear alignment with some difference in emphasis.
- For the student section, convergence describes how firmly and consistently a view was expressed within the student discussion.
- The ratings are qualitative, not respondent counts. They should not be interpreted as population estimates or statistical prevalence.

Report structure

Reform area	Highest-frequency signal	System implication
Part A	Teachers and leadership	Curriculum, implementation, and assessment reform
Part B	Students	Curriculum, implementation, and assessment reform
Conclusion	Shared and distinct signals	Implications for reform design and transition

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Part A: Teachers and leadership perspectives

Teachers and leaders described a closely connected set of risks. Greater prescription may weaken cultural and local responsiveness; limited staffing, resources and clarity may constrain implementation; and increased reliance on examinations may narrow how Māori learners can demonstrate achievement.

Curriculum reform

Misalignment with kaupapa Māori philosophy and pedagogy	Frequency Very High	Convergence Very strong
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- Cultural and pedagogical alignment was the most distinctive curriculum concern across teacher and leadership evidence
- The proposed direction was viewed as more rigid and less compatible with kaupapa Māori approaches than the current NCEA framework
- Participants stressed that translation of English-medium material is not equivalent to curriculum and resources designed from a Māori worldview
- Both groups called for stronger kura voice, greater self-determination, and differentiated approaches for Māori-medium education.

Loss of flexibility, local relevance, and teacher autonomy	Frequency High to Very High	Convergence Very strong
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- Teachers and leaders linked increased prescription with reduced capacity to shape learning around students, place, identity, and whānau aspirations
- Teachers emphasised reduced autonomy and weaker ability to design relevant classroom programmes
- Leadership emphasised reduced local control and the risk that standardisation will constrain kura-led curriculum development
- The shared implication is a less engaging and less culturally connected learning experience for some Māori learners.

Refinement rather than replacement	Frequency Very High	Convergence Very strong
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- NCEA has strengths for Māori learners, and targeted improvement was favoured over wholesale replacement
- Priority improvements included stronger foundational literacy and numeracy, lower assessment burden, and greater emphasis on transferable skills
- Support for change was conditional on preserving flexibility, local responsiveness, and cultural alignment
- Participants wanted reform design to be grounded in classroom realities and informed by Māori-medium educators and communities.

Implementation reform

Policy uncertainty and inability to plan

Frequency
Very High

Convergence
Very strong

- Insufficient and changing information was identified as a dominant barrier to readiness
- Leadership described planning as constrained by a “moving target” with limited operational detail
- Teachers reported relying partly on informal networks and public information rather than structured system guidance
- Both groups anticipated duplication and rework if curriculum, staffing, and resources are developed before requirements stabilise.

Workload escalation and transfer of reform costs

Frequency
Very High

Convergence
Very strong

- Implementation demands were expected to be layered onto already stretched roles and absorbed through additional staff time
- Teachers are expected to redesign programmes, develop assessments, translate and reinterpret material, create resources, and explain changes to whānau
- Leadership anticipated loss of non-teaching time and work during school holidays over multiple years
- The shared risks are reduced teaching quality, burnout, attrition, and uneven implementation.

Workforce, release, and professional learning constraints

Frequency
High to Very High

Convergence
Very strong

- The dual requirement for subject expertise and te reo Māori fluency sharply limits the available workforce
- Shortages of specialist and relief teachers reduce subject coverage, release time, and access to professional learning

- Small kura, and multi-role staff, have less capacity to absorb reform demands than larger, better-resourced schools
- Professional learning must be timely, practical, and matched with collaboration and release capacity.

Kaupapa Māori resource development	Frequency Very High	Convergence Very strong
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- Resource shortages are both practical and cultural
- High-quality materials developed in te reo Māori, and grounded in kaupapa Māori pedagogies, are limited
- Teachers are required to act as curriculum designers, translators, interpreters, and resource creators
- Locally created material increases workload and may contribute to variation unless supported by coherent and culturally grounded system wide resources.

Assessment reform

Increased reliance on high-stakes examinations

Frequency
Very High

Convergence
Very strong

- Examination-based assessment was the strongest assessment concern for both teachers and leadership
- A single end-of-year event was viewed as an incomplete and potentially unfair measure of a year's learning
- Examinations were seen as less aligned with applied, relational, experiential, and context-specific learning
- Participants expected greater pressure, lower confidence, and poorer outcomes for learners who do not thrive in traditional examination environments.

Reduced recognition of diverse learner strengths

Frequency
High to Very High

Convergence
Very strong

- Participants warned that a narrower assessment model may not recognise the full range of Māori learner strengths and pathways
- Teachers emphasised the needs of practical and experiential learners and the value of multiple opportunities to demonstrate achievement
- Leadership connected assessment design with qualification accessibility, retention, and the risk of disengagement
- Literacy and numeracy thresholds were supported as objectives but viewed as potential barriers if poorly designed or implemented.

Equity and system-level risks

Frequency
High

Convergence
Very strong

- Resource asymmetry may compound assessment and implementation risks in Māori-medium settings
- Digital assessment can create added barriers where connectivity, devices, and/or infrastructure are constrained

- Smaller kura may have less capacity to meet new requirements, creating a risk of widening differences between kura and mainstream schools
- Participants raised concern about student movement to better-resourced mainstream schools and the emergence of a more stratified system.

Part B: Student perspectives

Students were not opposed to improvement, but placed strong weight on stability, understandable change, and assessment spread across time. Their clearest message was that reform should preserve multiple opportunities to achieve and avoid disadvantaging current learners during transition.

Curriculum reform

Learning relevance and future pathway	Frequency High	Convergence Strong
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- Students expressed mixed views about how well learning connects with future study, work, and life goals
- Some curriculum content was seen as lacking practical application or connection to individual aspirations
- Students wanted stronger alignment with career, tertiary, trades, vocational, and applied pathways
- Greater relevance was expected to support motivation and engagement.

Different learners need different pathways	Frequency Medium-High	Convergence Moderate to Strong
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- Students recognised that learning and achievement are not experienced in the same way by everyone
- Participants understood that some students are more comfortable with examinations than others
- They wanted flexibility and multiple pathways to remain available
- Their views reinforce the importance of curriculum and assessment design that can accommodate different strengths and aspirations.

Implementation reform

Limited understanding and insufficient communication

Frequency
Very High

Convergence
Strong

- Awareness of the proposed reforms was partial and inconsistent
- Students were uncertain about the purpose, timing, and implications of change
- Some information was understood, including A–E grading and marks out of 100, but deeper understanding was limited
- Students wanted clearer explanations and more meaningful engagement in reform discussions.

Transition disruption and the need for stability

Frequency
Very High

Convergence
Very Strong

- Students described NCEA as difficult at first but increasingly manageable once understood
- Major change risks requiring students to relearn a qualification system while also trying to achieve within it
- Current cohorts were concerned about being disadvantaged by changes introduced during their senior secondary journey
- Students accepted that careful reform may benefit future cohorts, but wanted disruption to current learners minimised.

Supportive relationships as an implementation strength

Frequency
Very High

Convergence
Very Strong

- Strong teacher-student relationships were a major positive feature of students' current experience
- Teachers were identified as the most important source of academic and pastoral support
- Students described their kura as supportive environments
- Reform should protect the time and capacity required for relational support rather than displace it.

Assessment reform

Strong preference for internal and ongoing assessment

Frequency
Very High

Convergence
Very Strong

- Students clearly preferred assessment spread across the year to greater reliance on final examinations
- Internal assessment was viewed as more manageable and more reflective of sustained effort and learning
- Multiple opportunities to demonstrate achievement were strongly valued
- Most participants expected to perform worse under a more examination-focused system.

Examination pressure, wellbeing, and unfamiliar settings

Frequency
High to Very High

Convergence
Strong

- Students expected increased external assessment to raise stress and anxiety
- Day-to-day workload was generally manageable, but pressure intensified when assignments and assessments clustered and deadlines overlap
- Balancing schoolwork with sport, cultural commitments, and other responsibilities could become difficult at peak times
- Examinations in unfamiliar environments, including other schools, were seen as adding discomfort and potentially affecting performance.

A–E grading and marks out of 100

Frequency
High

Convergence
Moderate to Strong

- Students generally viewed the proposed grading approach positively
- A–E grades and percentages were considered easier to understand and more transparent than the current reporting system
- Percentage results were seen as providing clearer information about performance

- However, grading format was a lower priority than assessment structure, transition, and support.

Overall conclusion

Across the evidence, the central issue is not opposition to reform if it will lead to improved outcomes. It is whether reform can strengthen the system without losing the flexibility, cultural alignment, relational support, and multiple pathways that participants associate with Māori learner success.

Teachers and leaders were most concerned about system design and delivery capacity. They saw a risk that greater prescription, inadequate kaupapa Māori resources, workforce shortages, and uncertain guidance would combine to make reform harder to implement in Māori-medium settings. They also strongly opposed over-reliance on examinations and favoured refinement of NCEA rather than wholesale replacement.

Students focused most strongly on how change would affect their ability to understand the qualification, manage assessment pressure, and demonstrate achievement. They preferred internal and ongoing assessment, valued clearer grading, and wanted learning to connect more directly with future pathways. They were open to improvement but wanted stability and protection from disruption during transition.

Shared requirements for credible reform

- Preserve meaningful curriculum flexibility, local relevance, and cultural responsiveness
- Co-design differentiated approaches with Māori-medium educators, kura, and communities
- Provide complete, kaupapa Māori-grounded resources, stable guidance, professional learning, staffing, and release time before implementation
- Retain multiple credible forms of assessment and avoid excessive dependence on single high-stakes examinations
- Communicate directly and clearly with students and minimise disruption for cohorts already progressing through NCEA
- Protect strong teacher-student relationships and the capacity of kura to provide academic and pastoral support
- Assess cumulative equity effects across curriculum, assessment, digital requirements, workforce capacity and school resourcing.