
Reimagining education: An interview with Dr Claire Achmad, Te Kaikōmihana Matua – Chief Children’s Commissioner



Tēnā koutou katoa. Ko Nicola Leete tōku ingoa and it is my absolute pleasure to be here today with Dr Claire Achmad, Chief Children’s Commissioner for Aotearoa New Zealand. Tēnā koe Clarie. To begin, could you tell us a bit about your background and what led you into your role as the Chief Children’s Commissioner?

Tēnā koe Nicola and ngā mihi ki a koe and to all of the viewers and readers of Kairaranga, it’s such a pleasure to have the chance to kōrero with you all today.

Ko wai au? I te taha o tōku matua, no Indonesia ahau. I te taha o tōku māmā, no Airani, Kōtirana, me Ingarangi ahau.

On my dad’s side, I’m from Indonesia, from Central Java, and from my mum’s side, Irish, Scottish, and English ancestry. I grew up in the beautiful west of Tāmaki Makaurau, amongst the kererū and kauri trees there, and that’s a place that has really shaped me. I did my schooling in Tāmaki Makaurau, out west in Auckland and then went to university in Tāmaki Makaurau and then offshore in the Netherlands.

My career has basically been dedicated to children’s rights, human rights and social justice. Throughout the various roles that I’ve had, a focus on children and their rights has always been there, and over the past 10 years or so I’ve really deepened that even more. I went and did my Masters and then my PhD in international children’s rights law, but practice and working to advance the rights of tamariki, of mokopuna has always been something that has been my guiding force, whether that’s been overseas internationally working for organisations like Unicef advocating in places like the European Union and the Council of Europe, or back home here in Aotearoa New Zealand. I really have a strong belief in the potentiality of all of our mokopuna, all our children and young people. To see them fully flourish, their full range of holistic rights really need to be upheld and realised in their everyday lives.

I guess it’s all of those different threads that have led me through into this role as Chief Children’s Commissioner, which is such a privilege, but also a very, very big responsibility. I’m grateful to work with an amazing team and board alongside me, and the focus is really now on ensuring that we’re advocating as strongly as possible for the rights of mokopuna here in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Thanks, Claire, what valuable background experience you bring to this role. That's so interesting to learn about so thank you. Thinking now then about your role of Chief Children's Commissioner. I'm wondering if you could share a little bit more with us about the role. How would you describe it?

Absolutely. The role of Chief Children's Commissioner is to be that independent, strong advocate for the rights and the wellbeing and the outcomes of mokopuna, of children and young people in Aotearoa New Zealand. In this role I lead an organisation called Mana Mokopuna Children and Young People's Commission, which is an independent Crown entity. We're funded by the government to do our mahi but we sit independently from government. First and foremost, as I said, we're an independent advocate for mokopuna, for all children and young people under the age of 18, and then for young people between 18, under the age of 25, who have been in care so who are care experienced, who have been in our state care and protection system or our youth justice system, or who are experiencing that system right now. Our role is to be that independent advocate for mokopuna, but I say for and with mokopuna because a big focus of our work is on ensuring that we're really connected with children and young people and that we understand their lives. We have a specific mandate under the Act that governs our organisation, to hear the voices and encourage the participation of mokopuna here in Aotearoa New Zealand in the things that are affecting their lives, the things that matter to them. This is actually one of their rights under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. We have a specific mandate to work with children and young people to hear their voices, but also to encourage others to make sure that they are involving children in decision making and processes that affect them.

We also have a specific role around promoting the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, monitoring its implementation here in Aotearoa New Zealand, and holding the Government accountable for implementing the Convention that we've signed up to, along with the majority of other countries around the world.

In terms of my role on a day to day basis, I'm out there around the motu with my colleagues connecting with mokopuna, listening to them, hearing what they've got to say. I also spend quite a bit of time working with the government, various government departments, with ministers of the Crown, as well, advocating to them and bringing forward what we're hearing from mokopuna, highlighting the evidence about what's going on in their lives, and the things that need to change.

If I think about this pōtae, this hat that I wear as Chief Children's Commissioner, it's got kind of two sides to it. First of all, to really advocate strongly for that change that we need to see so every single mokopuna in this country is growing up safe, well loved, and can thrive and reach their full potential. Then the other side of it is to inspire and encourage, and that's both to inspire and encourage mokopuna to let them know that we are here as their independent advocate, we're standing up for and with them, but also to inspire and encourage others across our communities, across government, about the role that they have to play in upholding the rights of children and young people, and playing their part in keeping mokopuna safe, hearing what matters to them, and helping to advance their rights in practice. It's an amazing, amazing role and amazing mahi and we're very grateful to have this organisation Mana Mokopuna Children and Young People's Commission, where we can independently do this important advocacy work.

Thank you Claire for sharing such valuable insights into your role and what a great way to capture your role – working for and with children. You’ve been in the role for around six months – I’m wondering what surprised you the most during that period?

That’s a great pātai. I have to say it’s been it’s been a very intensive first few months in the role and it’s been so enjoyable. It’s been challenging, as well. You know right now there are so many big issues that are affecting the lives of mokopuna but also what I try and focus on is really remembering that there are many positive things happening as well. But I think if I was to narrow it down to one thing that surprised me the most it would be how generous and open and full of wisdom the mokopuna who I speak with around the country have been. They’ve been so generous in welcoming me into their spaces, into their schools, their kura, their places of learning, their special community spaces, even into their whare, into their homes in some instances, and the way that they have been willing to have conversations with me to really open up and tell me honestly about some of those big challenges in their lives, but also about some of their aspirations and their hopes for the future. I think that’s probably been the thing that’s been most surprising, but also most heartening for me as I begin this role.

Wonderful! Thank you. Now, Claire as you’ll know, our audience has a particular interest in education so I’m wondering from your perspective as Chief Children’s Commissioner, why is an equitable education system so important?

Yeah, this is such a big kaupapa, such a big topic, and such an important one. But I guess where I start in answering your pātai Nicola is really around the fact that this is the right of every mokopuna: every child and young person in Aotearoa New Zealand and in the world actually, has a right to education. That’s clearly set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 28 from memory, but also that the right to education is to experience education on an equal basis and to have equitable opportunities to experience education. But we know that right now in Aotearoa New Zealand our access to education and our experiences of education that mokopuna are having are not equitable. We’ve heard in our mahi, I hear in the conversations that I’m having with mokopuna, that for particular groups of mokopuna there are too many barriers in the way right now, in particular for our mokopuna Māori, our mokopuna whaikaha, neurodiverse mokopuna, mokopuna who have resettled here from other countries, for our rainbow mokopuna. These are the groups of young people who are saying clearly that right now the education system isn’t serving them in the ways that it needs to, there’s too many barriers in the way for them to really experience those positive, flourishing, educational outcomes that they have a right to experience, and that they should be experiencing but they’re not. That’s of particular concern to me.

Another reason why it’s so important in Aotearoa New Zealand that we really put a focus on an equitable education system is because we have seen intergenerational cycles of inequitable access to education for our mokopuna Māori. We know that the roots of this sit in the experience of colonisation, and that the echoes of that are still being experienced right now by mokopuna Māori, especially, for example, in their experience of racism, that they experience in the education system. These systemic barriers are things that we really need to be focusing on removing.

We have recently undertaken a survey of mokopuna around the country and asked them a question, “He aha te mea nui mō ngā tamariki? In your world what matters most?” And from around the 700 or so mokopuna who we heard from, the majority of them said to us that education is something that matters the most to them in their world. Children and young people themselves are saying really clearly to us that education is something that not only matters to them, but that they want to be engaged with, but that right now there are too many barriers in the way for some of these particular groups of mokopuna. And the last thing that I’d just add is that the evidence also shows us clearly that there is a discrepancy between the experience and access to education in places around our motu that are experiencing high deprivation. You know it shouldn’t matter where you live or your experience of growing up. That shouldn’t be impacting on your experience of education. And so there’s some really big things here that we need to tackle. We need to look at the root cause drivers that underpin some of these issues that feed into educational experience for mokopuna, including, for example, our really significant rates of child poverty.

Thanks Claire. It’s really great to hear about those areas where progress is certainly needed in order to advance children’s rights. So for our educators, I’m wondering what role you consider that they play in advancing children’s rights? Perhaps you might even have some practical suggestions that you could share with us as to how we can advance children’s rights in our daily mahi.

Oh, I would love to! That’s such a cool question. You know as much as the home and parents and guardians and whānau are children’s first educators, and that’s their first learning environment, the very close second, of course, is our wider educational and learning spaces where ākonga are experiencing their education. I really believe that educators themselves have such a huge role to play in not only raising awareness of children’s rights amongst mokopuna who they are working alongside and serving but also unlocking that excitement in children about children’s rights. I’ve really seen the lights go on in children’s minds when you tell them that actually, there is this really cool thing called the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and did you know that actually, there’s a whole range of rights in there that are relevant to you and that belong to you. So I think that’s the first thing that I’d encourage educators around the motu to be thinking about, how can they weave in a focus on children’s rights into the teaching that they’re doing, the education that they’re providing for children and young people. This can be things as simple as raising awareness of the UN Convention but also asking children and young people to reflect critically on what the role of their rights is in their lives, and relating it back to their lived experience and also their experience of the world around them. Things like the right to the environment and to live in a climate that’s healthy, and that’s going to be sustainable for their future growth and development. I often hear from children and young people when I say to them, “Are there things that worry you about children’s rights?” Often they’ll say to me, the fact that we have high rates of homeless people in this country, and the fact that not everyone has lunch to bring to school or dinner on the table when they go home. Being able to have those open, safe conversations with mokopuna in their learning environments about their rights, I think, is a really cool and important role that educators can play, and I’d really encourage them to start early from early childhood education and then look to embed it right through into learning throughout those different stages of childhood for ākonga. I think when we can layer an understanding of children’s rights from really early on, that’s important. And then a key aspect that I’d also just draw attention to is children’s rights to participate in the matters that affect them. Article

12 of the Convention. So by educators giving that opportunity for children to participate in decision-making and design of education in their education spaces, that's a really tangible way in practice that educators can bring that Article 12 right to participation to life in the education setting.

Thanks, Claire, they are such valuable practical suggestions. You touched on students' right to participation, and, as you'll know, like in many spheres, there's been an increased focus, probably over the last decade, on student voice in education. I'm wondering if you might have some suggestions for teachers as to considerations that are important when they're gathering and listening to the voices of ākonga.

Yeah, oh, a great one. And I think again, you know, just really encouraging educators to not be afraid of this and to try and find ways to intentionally build in the hearing of student voice and participation into their ways of working. I think the first consideration I'd like to bring forward is that this work takes patience. We shouldn't see it as a sort of quick stint thing, but actually, it's something that I'd like to see educators really building a long term commitment to and finding opportunities to just weave it into the way that they do things on an ongoing basis, because that's the most empowering experience for young people when they have that ongoing process of being able to bring forward their views on things, and what matters to them. Second thing I would say is that it's really important to ensure that the discussion is left open so that mokopuna themselves can really shape that participation and bring forward the things that matter to them. I think there's a real opportunity for educators to create spaces in which mokopuna are able to tell the stories that matter to them, and also learn stories that are relevant to their culture, their identity, their own language, and their own identity and place in the world and here in Aotearoa New Zealand. Also needing to think about, who else might it be important to hear from? And what are the other spaces where educators can be encouraging student voice as a natural part of how things work in Aotearoa New Zealand? So there, I'm really thinking about are there opportunities for mokopuna voice to be encouraged and heard within whānau settings in the home and then how to draw those through into the education setting. Also the wider community and hapori that our schools and kura and other learning spaces sit within, what's the role that they play in hearing mokopuna voice as well and how can that weave back into those spaces where student voice is being heard more directly in the education setting. A few different considerations there to think about but really the key message from me that I want to share with educators is just how important a role they can play in hearing mokopuna voice and just *kia kaha tonu, kia kaha te mahi, whakahirahira*, keep that mahi strong because it has such a positive impact on mokopuna when it's done really well.

Thank you, Claire. You touched before on the survey that Mana Mokopuna recently completed with many young people. I'm wondering if you could tell us about any other upcoming work that the Commission has with an education focus?

Yes, oh, I would love to and this is a thread that will continue to run through our mahi and that has historically run through the mahi of previous children's commissioners and that we now bring forward into the mahi of Mana Mokopuna Children and Young People's Commission. The first piece of mahi that I'd like to highlight is a recent report that we've published. This is called, "Without racism Aotearoa would be better". I've got a copy right here. It's an amazing report. It's a mokopuna

voices report, so what that means is that this beautiful report is full of direct quotes and experiences of mokopuna themselves particularly on the kaupapa of racism. The quote of the title of the report, “Without racism Aotearoa would be better”, that’s a direct quote from a mokopuna who we engaged with through this particular project. We engaged with 161 mokopuna around the motu to hear and understand their experiences of racism, but also to hear the solutions that they have to this problem that we know affects the lives of way too many mokopuna in this country. One of the biggest things that comes through in this report from mokopuna is that one of the contexts that they experience racism in the most is sadly in the education system. I’m really encouraging every single educator, every single school around the motu to jump onto our website <https://www.manamokopuna.org.nz/> and download this report. It’s available in English and in te reo Māori and there are summary versions there as well. And really read it. Share it with the mokopuna in your education spaces. Use it to open up a conversation, because some of the solutions in here are particularly focused on the education system and education settings. For example, one mokopuna in this report, they said, this is a direct quote, “School. Racism is coming from school. I don’t get bullied anywhere but school”. Some of the solutions that mokopuna bring forward in this report are really about how schools and educators can be playing a much more active role in addressing racism and hopefully ending racism. Another mokopuna said, “Schools and teachers should act when there is racist bullying”. And then another mokopuna says, “When teachers are educated about different cultures, and choose not to respect them. There should be consequences”. Clearly mokopuna here are calling out for their education spaces to be safe so that they can learn and thrive to the best of their potential. So, just a big plug for everyone to check out this report.

Then the second piece of mahi that I thought, is really relevant to this kaupapa of education is some work that we’re doing with an amazing group of young people who are based around the motu. Twenty-five learners from across different kura, kura kaupapa, alternative education, satellite schools, who support disabled and neurodiverse learners, they’ve come together in this group, called the Youth Voices Group. We’re working with them on a particular project to ensure that they are able to bring forward their experiences of education because in their experience, the education system has underserved them, there have been too many barriers in their way. What they are saying is we don’t want that to be the experience for other ākonga. They’re bringing forward their experiences, but also their ideas and they’re working together to shape what’s called a Youth Voices Toolkit, which is going to demonstrate how schools and learning environments can involve ākonga in implementing and making decisions about the curriculum and their everyday learning experience. That’s something that we’ll be out around the motu with the Youth Voices Group over the next few months as they are testing this toolkit and then, a bit later in the year, closer to Matariki I think, we’ll be really showcasing that toolkit and the power that involving children and young people themselves and helping to shape their education, experience, the power that that can have. The fundamental change that that would result in is the experience of young people in this country when it comes to their learning. So a few different cool projects going on and we always love to share them with others around the world.

Fabulous Claire and I love that there’s one that we can pick up and start looking at already and another for us to look forward to, so thank you.

Turning now back to the history of the Children's Commission. I understand that there have been eight Children's Commissioners, with each one bringing their unique background and strengths to the role. So, I'm wondering then what's the key difference that you would hope to make in the role of Chief Children's Commissioner?

That's a big pātai and look, I am so fortunate to have the opportunity, together with our amazing team, to build on that whakapapa of the previous Children's Commissioners so I really mihi to all of them. In terms of the big difference and the focus that I want to bring, I think it really is around contributing to a shift in Aotearoa New Zealand around the way that we see and treat children in this country. I really want to see Aotearoa New Zealand be a country where we can proudly say that every single child and young person in this country grows up safe, loved well, and flourishing, and able to reach that full potential. Attending to some of those big issues like our woeful rates of child abuse, and high rates of child poverty, these are some of the things that I really want to make an impact on and influence on over the coming five years of my term. Within that though, a unique aspect that I really want to bring forward and continue to strengthen, and I've started as I mean to go on in this respect, is to ensure that every single child and young person in this country is able to be heard on the things that matter to them. I really want to make that absolutely central to how we shape our advocacy at Mana Mokopuna for and with children and young people. I believe in showing up for children and young people in their communities, spending time with them, deeply listening to their experience. But then following through on advocacy, based on what I've heard. I guess that's the unique approach that I want to be bringing to my role as Chief Children's Commissioner.

And we can absolutely see you bringing that already with the projects you've outlined to us and on the Children's Commission Facebook page, you are out and about all the time with mokopuna.

Just finally, you have been interviewed a lot recently. Is there any question that you wish that people would ask you?

Gosh, yes, I do get a lot of questions thrown my way. I think it's really, I'd like it if they'd ask me more about what the positive things are that I'm seeing out there around the country in the lives of children and young people. You know, we have some incredible, often community-driven initiatives and also child and youth led initiatives that are contributing to the wellbeing and the rights and the positive outcomes of mokopuna in this country. That would be the thing I wish that more people would ask me about.

Fantastic thanks Claire. We are so appreciative of you taking the time today to share your whakaaro with us and we would really just like to wish you all the very best as you continue your invaluable mahi to ensure that all mokopuna in Aotearoa New Zealand live their best lives. Ngā mihi nui Claire.

Ngā mihi Nicola. Thanks so much.

INTERVIEWEE PROFILE



Dr Claire Achmad

Chief Children's Commissioner

Dr Claire Achmad is a recognised advocate for children in Aotearoa New Zealand and internationally, having worked in a wide range of areas relating to children's rights, including from legal, policy and practice perspectives. Claire was appointed as the Deputy Chair of the Children and Young People's Commission from 01 July 2023, and from 01 November 2023 took up the role of Chief Children's Commissioner and Chair of the Commission for a total term of five years.

Claire holds a doctorate in international children's rights law from Leiden University, the Netherlands, and has published internationally on a range of children's rights issues. She also holds degrees in Arts and Law from the University of Auckland and is a University of Auckland 40 Under 40 Honoree. Previously, Claire has worked for children's NGOs and international organisations in Aotearoa, Australia and Europe, held a senior role within Te Kāhui Tika Tangata the New Zealand Human Rights Commission, and practised as in-house legal counsel in the New Zealand government. She was admitted as a barrister and solicitor of the High Court of New Zealand in 2007.

<https://www.manamokopuna.org.nz/about/people/dr-claire-achmad/>