

## **Reimagining education with Dan O'Brien: The importance of young people in Tiriti-led partnerships**



***Tēnā koe Dan. Thank you so much for joining us today. Every issue of Kairaranga ends with a section we call Reimagining Education, and we're really looking forward to talking to you today about how this could look if educators and young people genuinely worked side by side to achieve more equity in education. So thank you again. Won't you start by introducing yourself and telling us a little bit about your education journey?***

Ko Airangi, Kōtirangi me Ingarangi te kāinga tūturu o ōku tūpuna. Ko O'Brien, me Auchterlonie ōku hapū. Ko Ōtepoti te whenua i whakapakekehia ahau e ōku mātua. I'm a Year 13 student in Dunedin. I'm taking Level 3 NCEA. I started high school in Year 7 and my school was an all-boys school. I love playing my hockey and riding my bike and I've learned Māori since primary school. I'm taking it at Level 3 as well as Biology, Chemistry, English and a Criminal Justice uni paper this year.

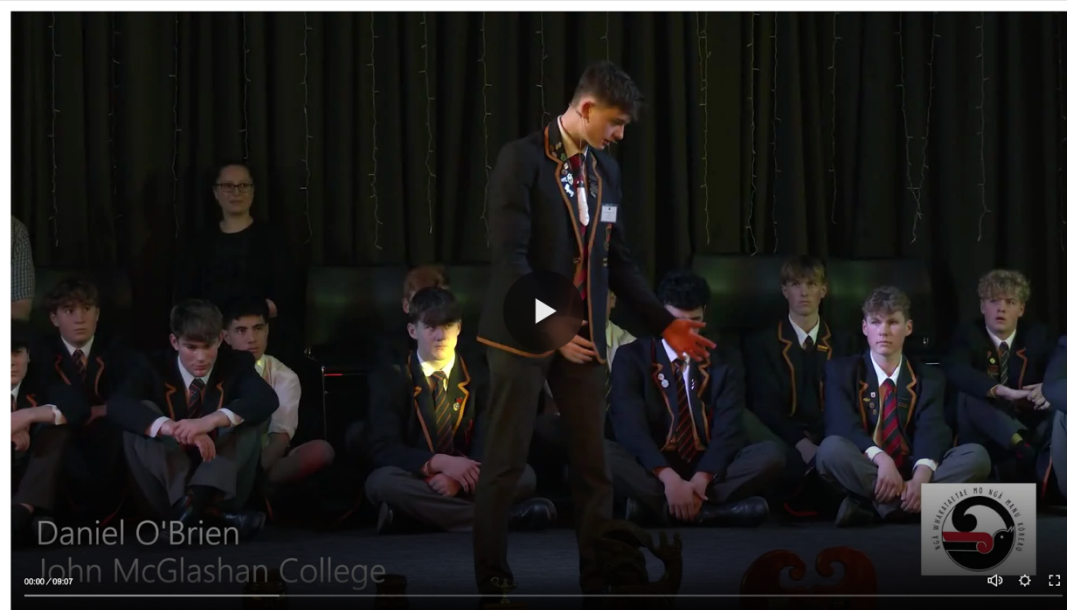
***Wow, with all that going on, thank you especially for making time for us. Dan, you have such a strong commitment to equity. We saw that come through in your Equity Through Education blog that you did for us last year based on the speech that you'd done at your school fully in te reo. Was there a pivotal moment that changed or shaped your perspective on equity?***

Yes, two. The first one will probably be: there's the store in town. So it's, you know, little plastic trinkets and stuff. And sometimes I'd go there after school or whatever and I'd be in my school uniform and, you know, my blazer, my nice white shirt and my tie and all my badges and I could walk around and I'd be I just left alone. I could do what I wanted. And then one time I went in actually with my mum and I was in trackies and a hoodie. And then this time instead of being left alone, I was being followed around. I wasn't allowed to touch anything by the lady in the shop.

It was a big difference in the way I was treated – with a hawk eye. Just because of what I was wearing and therefore the person I was perceived to be, due to just what I looked like and what I was wearing. And then I realised possibly that's actually how everyone feels every day, just because of who they are and how they look.

Then I started to do my research in Year 12 for an internal, which was around the inequities of streaming. That was a big eye opener for me. I was streamed from Year 9 and I've always been in the top set. I looked around and how many Māori were there? There wasn't. And then I realised maybe there's a problem with that. Then I did my work in Year 12 and realised there's a big inequity in it.

That was a big eye-opening moment, and my pivotal moments looking into my perspectives.



Click here to view Dan's powerful speech in te reo about streaming in schools:

[Streaming in Aotearoa schools: Helpful, harmful, or not that important?](#)

***So how do you think about equity now and your role as a Tiriti partner?***

I think about equality now, realising that what is good for Māori is good for everybody. Realising that Te Tiriti can just be seen as a promise between two peoples to just look after each other and to do so. Making sure that equity is occurring, and that's vital to keeping that promise, and doing that work and making those changes to make it equitable. That's the way of keeping Te Tiriti – that contract of two peoples looking after each other.

***That's such a beautiful, simple way of saying it. Like, how can you have a problem with us just saying, hey, can we look after each other? Dan, you do so much to try to make a difference and actually to make a difference. Just wondering what support you wish was available to young people who are out there like you really trying to reimagine education.***

One way that would help us is looking to the children and saying, "What's your perspective?" I'm on the Dunedin Youth Council, which is about making sure that we have a voice within politics. So with the DCC, our opinions as youth and the way that we see the world and things that need to be done are taken into account as well. Looking at those opinions and then putting them into the work of other people, like for education. So for those people being educated to be teachers or psychologists, that would be really, really helpful, I think, to be able to get the opinions of the people who are going through it right now. That would definitely be one way to help out.

***Dan, your example of the Dunedin Youth Council is so powerful. Can you talk a little bit about what it feels like on a daily basis when you're genuinely power sharing between adults and young people?***

It's a lot of work sometimes. They are politicians and they want to get their agendas through – that's their job. And so we do have to work quite hard to get our points across. But we just make sure we have the right arguments, we have everything prepared and make sure that we all really believe in our causes. It does come through, and we do get the things that we need for the issues that we hear about, that affect us as youth. So, we have to work quite hard but we are able to get what we want done.

***Is it alright to share an example of a time that it's gone really well?***

Yes. So I only just joined this year, but one big thing they did last year was a campaign about safety around the Dunedin bus hub. It was an advertisement which was linked with the Highlanders. That was the big thing last year, safety around the bus hub, because that was a big thing that youth had been talking about for quite a lot as being not a safe place. We've seen this is not a safe place, so we have to do something about this now. And so we, they, they did. And then I joined this year.

***More generally, I imagine people see that you're stretching your reo, you're writing blogs, you're entering debates around really important topics, you're donating your time to Youth Council. Do you see that kind of impact inspiring other people, adults and young people alike?***

Yeah, I think so. I mean, once you're doing something, everybody's going to want to jump on the bandwagon. Yeah, most definitely I can. I could definitely see everybody sort of wanting to want to see that change. In the Māori classroom especially, it's sort of changing, making sure we're all speaking in te reo as much as we can. And then also for the streaming, it was talking to teachers, especially my English teacher because that was the internal that I started on. It was an eye-opener for the teachers especially, that work, because they hadn't realised it. It was a big thing for him, and he was like "This is really, really good work. And it's made a big difference to the way that I sort of think about the streaming and the way that I'm doing it". So there was a big effect, especially on the teachers, actually, and the way they sort.

***That's brilliant, Dan. May it reach the policy makers' ears next. Streaming is such a good example of something where you said, "I'm actually going to take a stand here. I've got a bit of privilege and I'm going to spend it to make a difference". What message do you have for all of us about how we can be doing that more often?***

The message is more to – not just to everybody – but more specifically to the people who make those policies and those systems. There are inequities in streaming, yes, and there are many other inequities. So looking at them in all policies, all of the systems, really looking at them and changing them to see *how can we make this equitable? How can we uphold our Tiriti principles and our obligations?* Because we have to; that's what our country is built on. We have to uphold Te Tiriti.

We've always got to come back to *how can we make this equitable for all systems and all policies?*  
I think that's the one thing we've got to look at.

***Dan, thank you so much. Is there anything else you want to share with us?***

No, that's all. Thank you.

***Thank you. Ngā mihi nui.***

#### INTERVIEWEE PROFILE



**Dan O'Brien** is a Year 13 student at John McGlashan College. He was the school's first senior te reo Māori speaker at Te Whakataetae o Ngā Manu Kōrero. He intends to study law and Māori at University next year. As a keen sportsman, Dan enjoys all sports, but will most likely be found at the turf, playing hockey.

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