

Papa Taiao and the origins of *Project Possum*
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“We don’t expect too much from 103 Science. Just make sure they don’t burn the school down.” It was meant as a humorous quip from the principal to my HoD. I took the comment in the manner it was intended, but felt like I had been transported back to my own school days.

My father was in the air force and I had attended five schools in Europe before the age of twelve when it was recognised that I was unable to read due to poor eye sight. Before starting secondary school in New Zealand I sat a battery of tests and unsurprisingly I was placed in the lowest ability stream. A majority of the students in my class were Maori and Polynesian. Sure, some students had low ability but a significant number of us were intelligent, talented and very capable. The one thing we had in common was that we were entirely disengaged from school. Most students in my Y9 class didn’t return for Y10. I was saved by experiencing success in sport and, as I learned to read, a rapid recognition from my teachers that I had some academic ability.

In 2008 my 103 Science class was made up of 18 Maori boys, 4 Pakeha boys and two girls. I had taught most of the students in year 9 where I had enjoyed their energy and enthusiasm. When they were in Y9 I had set up a reward system in class where I would take them out of class to perform some physical or mental challenge after they completed their work. This worked well until complaints from my colleagues made it impossible to continue. With 103 Science I decided to do something similar—get them out of class for their sanity and mine.

In 2008 I had recently completed photographing and writing a story for *New Zealand Geographic* called *Live Fast Die Young and Kill to Survive—the menace of stoats*. I proposed to the students that we run a stoat-trapping programme in parallel with their Science course. There was an endemic grebe, the *Weweia* or New Zealand Dabchick, nesting in two local dune lakes Tuparekura and Lake Kareta. Each location was a 20 min drive from school. The *Weweia* and other birds like the bittern and fern bird were under threat from habitat loss and predation. The aims were to get my students involved in a high value ecological restoration project, to teach them some techniques of conservation and get them to view conservation as a possible career choice.

I spoke with the woodwork teacher and asked him if he would be interested in getting the students in his class to build 30 DoC 200 trap boxes. I talked to a local timber supplies store and asked for materials. I asked the New Zealand Forest Conservation Trust if they would supply the traps. I talked to the school’s Gateway co-ordinator to see if she could fund transport and a few hours of teacher release. I asked the local Men and Family Center if they had any Maori man I could use as a mentor.

Remarkably, everyone I explained the project to, contributed money, time and/or resource.

The students embraced the project. They gave up their morning interval and their lunch break and we went trapping. We spent the first term building traps, learning how to use them and cutting and marking two trap lines.

Each trapping trip followed a very similar structure. I would lead by reading a whakatauki in Te Reo Maori and again in English. Students would then read the Whakatuaki. I would discuss how I thought the whakatauki related to the work we were doing. We would then walk for an hour checking traps, talking, absorbing the feeling of contributing to place and developing a sense of shared purpose and trust in each other. We would then share kai and I would ask the boys to re-read the whakatauki. I would sit back and ask them to discuss how the whakatauki related to the work they were doing. Initially the thinking was superficial but as the year unfolded their analysis grew deeper and much more thoughtful.

One thing I did not need to do was manage student behaviour... they did that themselves.

About half way through the year one of the students asked if he could borrow \$150. He told me he wanted to buy some traps to go possum trapping. Ecologically I thought that showed a deep understanding of the goals of the course. What I was not expecting was his enterprise.

Two weeks later the young man re-paid the \$150 from money he earned from possum fur he had sold. At this point I realised that these boys had learnt a huge amount from this experience.

By now there had been a great deal of interest from Iwi. One of the Trustees from Ngati Whatua Nga Rima o Kaipara, Richard Nahi, had been regularly attending our trapping days. Richard asked if he could name the programme. I said I would be honoured. Two weeks later he came up with the name *Papa Taiao*, which roughly translates to Earthcare. When he gave me the name he also gave me a challenge. He said, "I have seen a lot of learning but these boys need qualifications. See if you can find something for them."

While experimenting with my *Papa Taiao* class I had been trialling the NCEA *Education for Sustainability Achievement Standards* with my senior Biology students. The literacy level of the *Papa Taiao* students was generally low so I decided the EfS standards would be too challenging.

I trawled through the NZQA website and found a number of relevant standards under the Pest Control domain. My students had met all of the performance criteria described for several of the standards but our school was not accredited to offer the standards.

As it turned out one of the parents of a student in my EfS/Biology class worked for NorthTec teaching pest management. With his support I was able to enrol my

students and get them through Level 3 Mustelid Biology and Trapping standards. The challenge was to raise funds to cover the costs.

The school's Gateway Coordinator Claire Couch recognised the value in what I was doing and contributed about a third of the costs. Wellington Drive Technologies met the remainder of the cost.

Shortly after getting *Papa Taiao* off the ground I accepted a job as an Education for Sustainability facilitator with Team Solutions. Unfortunately, with the change in Government I was made redundant about six weeks after I started. In the following four months I developed the idea to convert *Papa Taiao* in to a course that I could take to schools in the North. The first of those courses was *Project Possum*.

Now I run my own company called *Papa Taiao—Earthcare* and I consult to Enviroschools and Northland Regional Council. In the four years that *Project Possum* has been operating more than two hundred students have been involved in possum and mustelid trapping, environmental restoration and environmental enterprise schemes.

My goal is to get students and teachers engaged in enterprising environmental action. I have removed a lot of the hard work for teachers looking to involve their students. I have found and work with accredited providers and very experienced instructors. We set up a skills day where students learn how catch and humanely dispatch possums. They learn how to harvest fur and skins and we start them up in a small business by giving each student five traps. Students go away for eight weeks record their trapping experiences and then return for assessment.

At the Northland Regional Council we have also developed a *Project Possum* stage two. The ultra keen students who want careers in conservation or pest management get the opportunity to obtain a licence to use cyanide. Cyanide enables trappers to increase their catch rate. One of our instructors, 23 year-old Ricky Schraag, gained his cyanide licence when he was 17. In his first year with his Controlled Substances Licence he harvested nearly 1500kg of possum fur. The average price for fur that year was around \$110-120/kg. Which equates to a little under three times what I was earning when I stopped teaching.

Project Possum has given rise to a programme called *WaiRestoration*. A programme *Papa Taiao—Earthcare* is developing with Enviroschools and piloting with the support of Northland Regional Council. This programme is an environmental education initiative in response to New Zealand's greatest contemporary environmental issue—poor water quality. *WaiRestoration* is run using the same structure as *Project Possum*, ie, skills workshop, practice, enterprise then assessment by accredited providers.

In all *Papa Taiao* took a huge amount of work but ultimately it was very satisfying. In a single year students in my 103 Science class and the lunchtime *Papa Taiao* group ended up completing 65 Level 1, 2 and 3 NCEA Credits. They

won one of the NZ Glass environmental awards and they didn't burn the school down.

However, the greatest reward came in the summer holidays when I was walking with my daughters on the main street of Helensville. Three of my students—including the boy to whom I loaned the \$150—leaned out of the window of their newly purchased beat-up, but warranted, Toyota Hilux brought from the proceeds of possum fur shouting, “Cher, Mr Taylor—catch you next year bro.”



