

Weaving Māori culture into specialist education: Connection and belonging through dramatherapy

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the implementation and outcomes of culturally responsive teaching (CRT) at Oaklynn Specialist School, with a focus on dramatherapy incorporating Māori pūrākau. Drawing on national frameworks such as *Ka Hikitia – Accelerating Success*, *Te Kotahitanga*, and *Te Ara Whakamana*, it reinforces the importance of integrating students' cultural identities, particularly for those with complex needs. The article discusses strategies such as individualised teaching, value-based learning, and collaborative practice, exploring how these approaches contribute to improvements in student development. Findings reveal positive changes in emotional regulation, social interaction, and attention span, providing insights into the creation of inclusive, culturally responsive learning environments that can be applied in other educational contexts.

KEYWORDS

Dramatherapy, Māori, culture, inclusion, identity

Introduction

Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) is an educational approach that values students' cultural knowledge, experiences, and worldviews as a foundation for learning (Savage et al., 2011). This pedagogy promotes a sense of belonging while ensuring that teaching practices are inclusive, diverse, and meaningful. From this perspective, CRT empowers students intellectually, socially, and emotionally by integrating cultural references into the learning process. It also engages with the political dimension of education by challenging traditional power structures, and critically examining how these systems are shaped by historical and societal inequalities, particularly those related to cultural identity.

In specialist education, where learners face significant barriers such as communication difficulties, sensory processing challenges, and mobility restrictions, CRT is essential. Traditional approaches, designed primarily for neurotypical students, often fail to meet the diverse needs of learners with

disabilities, highlighting the importance of curricula that are adaptable and culturally relevant. By connecting learning to learners' lived experiences, CRT enables them to see their identities reflected in the educational process, promoting engagement and a sense of self-worth. Macfarlane (2015) emphasises that culturally responsive interactions, including educators' attitudes, classroom climate, content, and pedagogical approaches, are central to motivating learners and supporting them to realise their potential. For learners with disabilities, such practices hold considerable significance in shaping educational environments that are both equitable and responsive to individual needs.

In Aotearoa New Zealand, frameworks such as *Ka Hikitia – Accelerating Success* and *Te Kotahitanga* support the integration of CRT. These guiding documents aim to improve educational outcomes for Māori students by placing their cultural knowledge, values, and perspectives at the heart of learning. *Ka Hikitia* (Ministry of Education, 2013) advocates for a holistic approach that prioritises Māori identities in education, aligning with CRT principles for all students. *Te Kotahitanga* extends this approach by emphasising positive teacher-student relationships and the implementation of CRT practices to enhance Māori students' academic achievement (Bishop et al., 2014). Both frameworks urge educators to critically reflect on their cultural beliefs, enhancing the academic success of Māori students and preserving their cultural identity.

Drawing inspiration from the distinctive qualities embodied by Atua Māori (Māori mythical gods), *Te Ara Whakamana* offers a mana-enhancing approach grounded in Māori values, emphasising dignity (mana), respect, and relationality (Ako Solutionz, n.d.). It promotes strength-based, restorative approaches, encouraging educators to view behaviour and well-being through a cultural lens, recognising each learner's mana and potential. The model highlights the importance of building respectful relationships, affirming cultural identities, and understanding students within the context of their whānau and communities. It reframes challenges as opportunities for growth, consistent with CRT's focus on equity and learners' identities in education.

Together, *Ka Hikitia*, *Te Kotahitanga*, and *Te Ara Whakamana* provide a robust theoretical foundation for CRT, with their impact becoming evident through practical application. Oaklynn Specialist School, located in West Auckland and serving over 200 students with special needs, including many who receive Ongoing Resourcing Scheme (ORS) funding, effectively implements these national frameworks through various strategies, with dramatherapy emerging as a particularly successful approach. Dramatherapy uses structured dramatic activities to facilitate emotional exploration and self-understanding. Within a therapeutic space that intertwines real and imagined time, clients engage in social interactions that support insight and personal growth (Meldrum, 2005). This approach offers a powerful avenue for both Māori and non-Māori students. By incorporating Māori cultural values, students are encouraged to explore their identities and form meaningful connections. The following discussion examines Oaklynn School's application of dramatherapy, focusing on tailored approaches, value-based learning, and collaborative practice – the core principles that enhance its effectiveness in addressing the diverse needs of students.

Dramatherapy approach at Oaklynn Specialist School

At Oaklynn, dramatherapy serves as a dynamic platform for students to express themselves both verbally and non-verbally. Dramatic play provides an important space for students to explore their thoughts and emotions, enhancing a deeper understanding of others. Through techniques such as role-play, improvisation, and storytelling, dramatherapy creates opportunities for students to engage with fictional worlds in ways that support their unique needs. This approach is especially beneficial for students with complex needs, as it promotes authentic engagement through sensory-rich and inclusive methods. Within this creative and supportive environment, students are encouraged to explore and communicate their experiences, enhancing their emotional, social, and cognitive development.

Aligned with this therapeutic approach, Oaklynn School integrates Māori values, which are central to the school's educational philosophy. Māori pūrākau (legends) are central to this practice, chosen for their embodiment of principles such as *ako* (learning and teaching), *whanaungatanga* (relationships and connectedness), *manaakitanga* (integrity and equity), *hauora* (well-being), and *māhirahira* (curiosity and significance), providing a framework that nurtures cultural identity and belonging. Pūrākau are regarded as sacred cultural narratives inspired by the natural, social, and spiritual worlds of Māori (Standing & Kahu, 2021). They are integral to Māori identity and the sustainability and wellbeing of Māori people, shared to generate knowledge, articulate expectations for whānau and iwi, and guide cultural practice. By incorporating these narratives into dramatherapy sessions, students encounter these values in ways that are both impactful and personally resonant. This approach ensures they are not simply taught but actively lived, creating an environment where students feel a genuine sense of belonging.

A pivotal moment for Oaklynn was its collaboration with the mana whenua, Te Kawerau ā Maki, an iwi from the Tāmaki Makaurau region, which has profoundly influenced the school's cultural and educational practices. With their deep roots and strong historical connection to the land, Te Kawerau ā Maki shared stories of key Māori ancestors – Tiriwa, Hape, Hoturoa, and others – which were thoughtfully adapted at Oaklynn School to meet the diverse learning needs of students while preserving cultural integrity. In response, the school developed a three-year curriculum framework that embeds these narratives and values into place-based learning. This collaboration is grounded in reciprocity, with the iwi taking an active interest in how their tūpuna (ancestors) are represented and providing feedback to ensure their heritage is portrayed authentically and respectfully. The ongoing partnership strengthens Oaklynn School's commitment to cultural responsiveness and deepens its connection to the local community.

Individualised teaching approaches

Dramatherapy sessions are essential to the cultural integration process at Oaklynn. While the central narrative, focused on tūpuna, and associated activities remain consistent across sessions, they are carefully adapted to meet the diverse needs of students. These adaptations consider individual abilities, sensory preferences, and communication styles, ensuring inclusivity and effectiveness for all learners.

Most Oaklynn students have autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and exhibit wide-ranging needs and responses to dramatherapy activities. Some students thrive in activities involving social interaction, while others respond better to structured, quieter tasks with individualised pacing. For example, in a session focused on the story of Hape (a Māori leader who was initially denied the journey to Aotearoa due to his physical disability), students began by participating in a group meeting to decide who would join the journey. They engaged with greeting activities, such as playing a pre-recorded karanga (a ceremonial call of welcome) using a switch, and experimented with gestures including handshakes, elbow bumps, and fist taps. For students who preferred solitary tactile activities, tactile exploration was offered with paper-mâché figures representing Hape's people or soft feathers, which hold cultural significance in Māori traditions as symbols of connection to the spiritual world. These options allowed students to engage with the theme of welcome in a flexible way, accommodating their sensory preferences.

In addition to addressing the needs of students with ASD, the dramatherapy sessions at Oaklynn School are equally responsive to the needs of students with Profound and Multiple Learning Difficulties (PMLD), all of whom use wheelchairs. For instance, during the same session on Hape, students with ASD physically navigated obstacles using an elastic loop placed around both feet, simulating Hape's struggle to walk. This activity allowed them to experience Hape's challenges firsthand, cultivating empathy and a deeper connection to his journey. For students in wheelchairs, the session was adapted to include a specially designed path with tactile features such as bumps and other obstacles that they navigated while in their chairs. These adaptations incorporated visual, tactile, and motion-based elements, allowing students to experience a sense of overcoming barriers in a way suited to their abilities.

Value-based learning

At Oaklynn, dramatherapy sessions are grounded in value-based learning, with a strong emphasis on key Māori values such as forgiveness, restoration, gratitude, resilience, and unity. These often abstract concepts are thoughtfully translated into accessible, multimodal experiences tailored to the diverse cognitive and physical abilities of the students. Through the dramatherapy model, students are offered opportunities to engage with and internalise these values in developmentally appropriate and personally relevant ways. While it may be difficult to determine with certainty whether students understand these values in a conventional sense, they are nonetheless immersed in experiences that encourage intuitive and experiential engagement.

A prime example of this integration of values is the concept of unity, explored through an activity where all students held a bungee cord with bells attached, gently shaking it together. The sound of the bells created a shared atmosphere of cohesion and collective participation, symbolising interconnectedness. This activity enabled students to embody the concept of unity, highlighting how individual actions contribute to the greater whole and emphasising cooperation. Another example involved activities designed specifically for students with PMLD, inspired by Tiriwa, a guardian in Māori tradition associated with the forest and its wellbeing. With gentle guidance from staff, students swayed with green scarves or ribbons, representing the movement of trees in the forest. This sensory-based experience was enriched with the sound of birdsong and the scent of fresh grass,

deepening the connection to nature. Verbal and tactile acknowledgements of Tiriwa's care accompanied the activity, illustrating the Māori value of gratitude. Through this multi-sensory experience, students were invited to engage with the story's themes and appreciate Tiriwa's nurturing, protective role in a way that resonated with their abilities.

Collaborative practice

Collaborative practice is a cornerstone of Oaklynn School's approach to dramatherapy, ensuring that students' needs are met through a cohesive and responsive framework. The active participation of teachers and kaiāwhina (teacher aides) is essential, as they bring both professional expertise and a deep understanding of individual students into the therapeutic process, helping to shape effective, tailored interventions. Although teachers and kaiāwhina may not be trained drama professionals, they possess a strong, intuitive grasp of how to facilitate and engage in play – an essential aspect of dramatherapy. Their ability to encourage playful, responsive interactions enhances student engagement and nurtures emotional safety within sessions. The contributions of teachers and kaiāwhina extend beyond practical assistance; through their ongoing, day-to-day relationships with students, they offer a deep understanding of each learner's needs, preferences, and strengths. Their presence in dramatherapy sessions also creates a sense of familiarity and trust, which is especially important for students who may find unfamiliar activities challenging.

This practice enriches the therapeutic process and strengthens consistency between classroom and therapeutic settings, ensuring that the benefits of dramatherapy extend beyond the sessions. Through active participation, teaching staff integrate dramatherapy principles into the wider educational context by applying a creative, sensory-rich, and person-centred approach to daily routines and classroom activities. For example, sensory exploration is often employed with students with PMLD to facilitate emotional expression and interaction. In dramatherapy, this involves exploring a story through sensory props, sounds, and movements tailored to their unique sensory and cognitive profiles. Activities such as engaging with tactile objects or listening to calming music that complements the narrative's tone help to stimulate sensory awareness, encourage communication, and promote engagement. These strategies are then woven into various classroom activities, such as shared reading sessions, sensory art projects, or music-based tasks, ensuring that therapeutic principles continue to support emotional, social, and cognitive development across contexts.

In summary, Oaklynn School's approach demonstrates the transformative power of dramatherapy in inclusive education. Blending cultural narratives with creative, sensory-based practices, the school creates an environment where all students, regardless of their individual learning or physical challenges, can engage, express, and connect. This model emphasises the importance of tailoring therapeutic methods to each student's unique needs and incorporating cultural values into the learning process. Through collaboration, creativity, and a strong commitment to personalised care, Oaklynn School shows how therapeutic practices can break down traditional educational boundaries, nurturing emotional, social, and cognitive growth in empowering ways. The discussion below examines the long-term benefits of this approach and its contribution to sustained development and positive outcomes for both students and the wider educational community.

Exploring the impact of Oaklynn School's dramatherapy approach

Rooted in both creative practice and evidence-informed approaches, dramatherapy sessions at Oaklynn provide a rich understanding of each student's communication, behaviour, and sense of self. Drawing on these lived moments alongside relevant research, the dramatherapy process offers therapeutic support while also facilitating reflective learning and collaborative participation. By systematically observing and reflecting on students' responses within sessions, this process generates evidence that can inform both practice and planning.

To explore these responses in practice, dramatherapy sessions were conducted once a week within each classroom. Data were gathered through in-session reflection, post-session discussions with classroom staff, and written notes, allowing the arts therapist to track patterns of engagement and learning while incorporating staff perspectives. In some cases, sessions were also recorded on video to enable deeper analysis of interactional dynamics, non-verbal communication, and subtle shifts in engagement. In the PMLD classroom, the teacher collected her own observational data during dramatherapy sessions to assess students' communication and social engagement. This complementary perspective enriched understanding of the learner's responses, informed planning, and guided necessary activity adaptations.

To structure the sessions and provide consistent opportunities for engagement, dramatherapy was organised into cycles, each representing one tūpuna, which usually ran for two school terms. To ensure focused attention, sessions were scheduled on a rotating basis across classrooms. The duration of a cycle was extended for individual classes where additional time was required to consolidate progress. When a new tūpuna was introduced, the arts therapist began with a probing session to explore learners' initial responses, which informed subsequent planning and allowed for adjustments to better match the students' needs and abilities. This flexible structure ensured that the intervention remained responsive, acknowledging the different pace at which learners with complex needs engage with therapeutic processes and culturally enriched learning.

Emotional regulation

The data offered clear insights into the students' emotional states, highlighting moments of enthusiasm, sadness, and agitation during dramatherapy sessions. These emotional fluctuations were closely linked to the sensory-rich and emotionally evocative nature of the activities. Students' responses were often shaped by the intensity or novelty of the experiences, as well as their previous encounters with similar sensory input. While opportunities for dramatic play and expression frequently elicited engagement and excitement, unfamiliar or overstimulating elements occasionally resulted in discomfort or heightened arousal.

Over time, however, a gradual improvement in emotional regulation became evident. The structured and consistent framework of the sessions, grounded in familiar routines, created a secure environment in which students could confidently engage with new experiences. Carefully introduced variations within this predictable format supported the development of trust and encouraged self-

awareness. These patterns suggest that dramatherapy holds significant therapeutic value in supporting emotional resilience and regulation among students.

For example, in a dramatherapy programme based on the theme of Hoturoa's journey, J, a 13-year-old student with PMLD, demonstrated a clear progression in emotional and physical engagement. Initially, J's responses were minimal: slight voluntary movements that hinted at latent awareness. As the sessions progressed, he became more responsive to musical rhythms and glowing taonga (treasure) props. During a scene depicting a waka (canoe) travelling across glowing waters, J eventually appeared to enjoy being gently moved in his wheelchair. He explored tactile elements such as woven flax mats, evoking the waka's surface, and actively engaged in water play with real shells and sand, which brought the ocean journey to life. His growing enthusiasm and curiosity marked a positive development in self-awareness and emotional regulation.

Similarly, K, an 8-year-old non-verbal student with PMLD, initially exhibited signs of discomfort during the early Hoturoa-themed sessions, particularly in response to costume props such as woven headpieces and visual stimuli. Over time, however, he began to show a preference for specific sensory elements of the narrative, responding positively to natural textures and visual stimuli. During scenes depicting stormy sea journeys and the arrival on new land, K was especially drawn to the shimmering star projections, which represented the celestial navigation guiding Hoturoa's waka. His startle responses gradually decreased, and he began to initiate interactions, smiling, visually tracking the stars, and even attempting vocalisations during rhythmic chants. These subtle but significant shifts indicated growing emotional ease and deeper engagement with the sessions.

As Ellinor (2019) notes in her work with children with PMLD and their families, dramatherapy functions as both a form of creative expression and a secure, structured group setting that encourages emotional risk-taking and the development of trust. She highlights the role of consistent and familiar drama and movement-based activities in creating a sense of safety, enabling children to begin exploring their emotional worlds. At the same time, gentle variation and the therapist's relational presence contribute to building resilience and supporting emotional growth. The experiences at Oaklynn School reflect these principles closely, demonstrating how carefully planned sessions can support emotional regulation and enhance self-awareness in students with complex needs.

Māori pūrākau, with their emotionally resonant themes and cultural significance, have proven highly effective in engaging students facing emotional challenges. These narratives provide a powerful context for exploring complex feelings in ways that resonate with students' lived experiences. As Sherratt and Peter (2002) highlight, drama encourages children to understand others by exploring emotions from diverse perspectives. Their focus on representational play and structured dramatic activity as a bridge between emotional expression and social understanding aligns closely with the use of Māori stories. The rich characters and layered narratives within these pūrākau, rooted in whakapapa and cultural values, offer culturally responsive opportunities to explore themes such as courage, belonging, and connectedness. In doing so, they encourage deeper emotional insight and support strong relational bonds.

Social interaction

Following progress in emotional regulation, social interaction also emerged as a key area of development during the monitoring. As students gained greater control over their emotions, they appeared more confident in communicating and engaging with others. This enhanced emotional stability supported their participation in group activities and contributed to the development of relationships with both peers and staff. These findings illustrate dramatherapy's capacity to support social growth through its interactive and relational approach. Activities such as improvisation with props, emotional expression through masks, and shared movement experiences offered students opportunities to practise essential social communication skills, including eye gaze, expressing preferences, and making requests.

A notable example of this social growth was P, a 12-year-old learner diagnosed with Angelman syndrome, who initially communicated through actions such as grabbing and pulling peers and adults, as well as mouthing available objects (a sensory or exploratory behaviour commonly observed in learners with complex needs). During dramatherapy sessions, P exhibited strong visual, tactile, and olfactory interests, with the impulse to taste objects being a prominent feature of her interaction with drama props and sensory materials. Over time, her response to sensory exploration began to evolve. In one session, she was introduced to sensory sand representing the beach journey from the Hoturoa story. Initially, she attempted to taste the sand immediately, but after repeated interactions, she began exploring it with her fingers for longer periods before trying to mouth it. When staff allowed her to engage with the material without immediate intervention, P smiled, suggesting an emerging awareness of social engagement and responsiveness.

By the end of the ten-week programme, P showed a reduced urge to grab and mouth all available props, indicating an improvement in impulse control. Her engagement with sensory elements became more purposeful, and her interactions shifted from instinctive to more controlled and socially responsive behaviours. These developments align with findings from Johnels et al. (2023), whose study on MultiSensory Music Drama (MSMD) demonstrated that multisensory storytelling, tailored to the preferences and abilities of students with complex needs, can enhance interactive engagement. The MSMD approach, which emphasises individualised sensory input, repetition, and responsive facilitation, proved effective in increasing students' engagement behaviours and agency. P's progress reflects this model, showing how a sensory-rich, carefully scaffolded dramatherapy process can support children in developing both emotional regulation and socially appropriate interactions.

To enhance communication and engagement, dramatherapy sessions should incorporate a variety of strategies tailored to each learner's level of support. Collected data revealed that some students benefitted from verbal prompts to initiate or sustain interactions, while others needed supportive scaffolding, such as modelling or assisted initiation, to foster autonomous participation, or emotional reassurance to manage anxiety. This highlights the need for flexible support mechanisms to ensure that all learners can participate actively. Furthermore, sensory materials proved essential. Props such as lycra, nature-based resources, and tactile items provided important sensory input, encouraging interaction among students with sensory processing challenges. By combining tailored support with

sensory-rich interventions, dramatherapy creates an environment where learners can engage confidently and access the full therapeutic benefits.

Increased attention span

A primary concern when working with children with intellectual disabilities is managing limited attention spans and behaviours that may disrupt learning, which are commonly observed within this group (Beirne-Smith et al., 2006). At Oaklynn School, longitudinal data indicated that dramatherapy contributed significantly to improving students' ability to sustain attention. The sessions combined familiar, predictable routines with novel and stimulating activities, creating a balanced environment conducive to focus. For example, P, the student with Angelman syndrome mentioned above, initially found it difficult to maintain attention for more than a few seconds during group tasks. Over several months of dramatherapy, however, P demonstrated the ability to remain engaged for up to five to seven minutes without external prompting. Comparable gains were observed in students with ASD, who also showed increased attentiveness during group storytelling and dramatic play.

These positive outcomes at Oaklynn School are consistent with research demonstrating the impact of dramatherapy on attention span. Biyati et al. (2012), for example, reported significant improvements in attention among primary school boys with intellectual disabilities who participated in dramatherapy sessions. Their study identified notable differences between the intervention and control groups, with the dramatherapy participants exhibiting greater focus ($p=0.002$ in one test and $p=0.049$ in another). These findings reinforce the growing body of evidence that dramatherapy can effectively support sustained attention and engagement in group settings.

Additional support for therapeutic approaches aimed at enhancing attention spans comes from Pirnazar et al. (2022), who investigated the impact of structured therapeutic play on children with intellectual disabilities. Their study reported significant gains in sustained attention, with improvements of up to 30% over several weeks. This trend closely reflects the progress observed at Oaklynn School, where dramatherapy helped students maintain focus for increasingly extended periods. Together, these findings contribute to the growing evidence base supporting the effectiveness of creative therapeutic interventions in improving attention in this population.

Conclusion

Oaklynn School's dramatherapy practice offers a compelling model for embedding creative, relational approaches into educational settings to support students with complex needs. Rather than treating dramatherapy as an external or clinical intervention, it is integrated into the school's daily practices and routines. This integration encourages other educators to explore how creative modalities can be authentically incorporated into their own contexts, aligning with students' routines and rhythms. Schools may find that imaginative exploration complements structure, providing students with emotional security and opportunities for expressive growth.

The storytelling strand of Oaklynn's practice through Māori pūrākau demonstrates the power of culturally grounded narratives in supporting identity and engagement. These stories are not just told

but brought to life through movement, rhythm, and sensory play, allowing students to connect with their cultural heritage. This approach invites educators to reflect on how stories from their own communities might be enlivened similarly, offering students deep connections that transcend language. This method can be especially impactful for learners who engage with the world through sensory and embodied experiences.

The thoughtful use of props and materials creates an environment where students are invited to engage at their own pace and comfort level, without the expectation of performance. It respects individual sensory preferences and allows students to engage in ways that feel safe. Attuning to each learner's needs means adjusting the experience based on their sensory and emotional responses. In many settings, this might involve reconsidering how materials are introduced or valuing silence and stillness alongside activity and expression, with all forms of engagement respected.

Observation plays a vital role throughout the practice, with staff responding to subtle cues such as glances, gestures, and shifts in breath. These moments hold meaning and become part of the shared language between students and adults. Educators may find it valuable to reflect on what constitutes communication in their own context and how small signs of engagement can be noticed and built upon. This practice encourages ongoing reflection and adaptation, rather than offering a fixed solution. By prioritising creativity, cultural connection, and attentive listening, inclusive learning becomes both achievable and impactful. Even though every school has its own rhythm, core values such as curiosity, trust, and responsiveness provide a purposeful pathway forward for others to consider.

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AUTHOR PROFILE



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Dr Istvan Csata is a multidisciplinary educator and registered arts therapist whose career bridges the fields of education, psychology, and the creative arts. He earned his Doctorate in Political Science and Jurisprudence from the University of Miskolc in 1987, followed by further studies in philosophy at Kossuth Lajos University and art education at the University of Kaposvár. His academic journey later led him to Aotearoa New Zealand, where he completed a Master of Arts in Arts Therapy (Clinical) at Whitecliffe College of Arts and Design in 2019.

Istvan began his professional career teaching English and philosophy in Budapest. He went on to work at the Carl Rogers Person Centered School, a progressive educational environment where he developed alternative curricula and taught a wide range of subjects including visual arts, philosophy, and social studies. His work was grounded in a humanistic and relational approach to education, informed by the principles of person-centred learning.

Since relocating to Aotearoa New Zealand in 2006, Istvan has continued to integrate his passions for therapeutic practice and education. He has worked extensively with neurodivergent children and young adults across Auckland, combining creative modalities with trauma-informed, student-centred approaches. His practice reflects a commitment to inclusivity, emotional attunement, and the transformative potential of the arts.

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Galina Nam

Dr Galina Nam is an educator and advocate with a strong focus on disability rights and educational equity. She began her career after completing a bachelor's degree in English and Russian Philology, teaching students with special needs in mainstream educational settings.

In 2009, Galina completed a master's degree in educational leadership and policy at the University of Utah in Salt Lake City, USA. She went on to work with a vocational training project coordinated by the German Development Cooperation, where she led academic mobility programmes that included learners with disabilities. Alongside this work, she was actively engaged in advocacy for children and young people with disabilities who were experiencing segregated education.

After moving to Aotearoa New Zealand, Galina completed a PhD in inclusive education. She now works in a specialist school setting, where she continues to contribute to learner-centred approaches that promote access, dignity, and meaningful participation for students with complex needs.

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