

■ Andrew Bonallack

**A** group of long-term unemployed Wainuiomata men say an experimental six-month teaching placement at kindergartens has inspired them off the couch and into tertiary study.

A Wellington Kindergarten Association project called "Y men" placed eight young men for one day a week for six months in supported placements at kindergartens in Wellington, Hutt and Porirua last year.

Speaking at their graduation ceremony in December, association general manager Amanda Coulston says it was a partnership between themselves, the Ministry of Social Development and Careers NZ.

She hoped the project would either inspire the men into ECE training, or other study.

"We have a chronic shortage in Early Childhood Education, of men being actively involved in our kindergartens on a daily basis," she says.

She says her hopes were "surpassed", with all eight completing the training, with five subsequently applying for ECE training and another applying for unrelated study at Weltec.

Ms Coulston was visibly choked when she spoke of how proud she was of the men.

Originally a primary school teacher from Wainuiomata, she had taught some of them years ago.

"I didn't try so hard, and have such belief in these eight or nine year olds, to see them suffer unemployment for years and years.

"We were losing the magic.

"We provided the opportunities, they had to do it."

One of the men, Dallas Te Huna-Green, was based at Tairangi



RESPECT: Afa Tunupopo (centre) and his cohorts perform a haka during their graduation ceremony.

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Kindergarten in Porirua.

"I was unemployable," he says. "I didn't think this was a big deal. I thought, chill with kids, go home. But to the kids, it's something more than that. I learnt heaps [at Tairangi]. I'm going to take what I learnt this year, and take it further

— make something of myself."

Afa Tunupopo, who found himself at Nuanus Kindergarten in Cannons Creek, Porirua, says the experience taught him how to be a better Dad.

"It's been an awesome time — I learnt heaps of stuff."

Norton Harrison, based at Ohwiro Bay Kindergarten, says all the boys were thankful "for the opportunity to get off the couch".

"The staff and the families were amazing — now it's about us making that next step, about what we want to do with the rest of our

lives," he added.

Charlie Lewis, working at Bellevue Kindergarten in Newlands, thanked the kindergartens for giving them a chance.

"Without that, dole, here I come. "I'm going to cherish this for the rest of my life."