

Mana whenua/Belonging through assessment

- a kōhanga reo perspective

Abstract

This article presents the findings from a Teacher Led-Innovation Fund (TLIF) project where kaiako set out to develop and then explore *Ngā kōrero tuku iho* as an assessment approach within kōhanga reo. Underpinned by kaupapa Māori research protocols, *wānanga* (discussions) were held with kaiako and whānau to evaluate the approach. The findings from *wānanga* with whānau are presented and discussed in this article encouraging new ways of thinking about Mana Whenua/Belonging within the context of assessment and beyond.

Introduction

The early childhood curriculum *Te Whāriki* places emphasis on children and their families experiencing a sense of Mana Whenua/Belonging through acceptance and inclusion (Ministry of Education, 2017). Nonetheless, the idyllic notion of an environment that fosters Mana Whenua/Belonging is fraught with many complexities as has been documented by a number of researchers concerned with the mechanisms of power, privilege, and dominant discourses (Ardnt, 2018; Macartney, 2012; Ritchie and Rau, 2010; Skattebol, 2005; Stratigos, 2015; Sumison and Sandi, 2011). These mechanisms permeate throughout all facets of day to day operations including approaches to assessment. It follows then that for some children and their families they are likely to experience assessment practices which are out of sync with their own cultural norms. Counter-discourses therefore provide opportunities for teachers to re-think current practices and consider new possibilities (Ritchie and Rau, 2010).

This article discusses the findings of a Teacher-Led Innovation Fund (TLIF) project undertaken by Te Kōhanga Reo ki Rotokawa – a Māori language nest located in Rotorua, New Zealand. The article describes the journey of kaiako and whānau judged for their assessment practices which ultimately led to the development of a new assessment approach and counter discourse – *Ngā kōrero tuku iho*. Importantly, the article highlights the impact of the new approach on the Mana Whenua/Belonging of whānau, kaiako and mokopuna.

Background to the project

Which discourses count?

The TLIF project came about after a visit by the *Education Review Office* in 2015 where preliminary discussions focused specifically on the assessment practices of the kōhanga reo. The analysis of learning stories and the extent to which learning was made visible to parents was of particular interest to the reviewers who felt the areas needed strengthening. Other ways in which the kōhanga reo made learning visible to parents that were embedded within the cultural makeup of kōhanga reo largely went unnoticed. The judgements opened a floodgate of questions in relation to assessment in kōhanga reo – Assessment by whose standards? Can western approaches to assessment within kōhanga reo capture the subtle nuances valued by Māori? Can western approaches if used within kōhanga reo, make learning visible in a Māori way? How do western approaches align with the ethos of kōhanga reo where whānau are active participants in their children's learning? Do we have the right to question the best-fit of assessment practices? Can we develop our own approach for kōhanga reo? Māori positioning on assessment offered valuable insights in our quest for answers.

Kaupapa Māori Assessment

Kaupapa Māori assessment involves 'making visible learning that is valued within te ao Māori' (Ministry of Education, 2009, p.55). For this reason, acknowledging Māori identity, language and culture (Ministry of Education, 2013) is a key focus of the assessment of Māori children. Kaupapa Māori assessment considers how Māori children develop ā-tinana (physically), ā hinengaro (mentally), ā wairua (spiritually), ā whatumanawa (emotionally) (Ministry of Education, 2009; Ministry of Education, 2017). Whānau also play an integral role in the assessment process working together with kaiako who, rather than assuming the position of the expert teacher, participate as one whānau collective (Ministry of Education, 2009).

Kaupapa Māori assessment and early childhood services

Te Whatu Pōkeka: Kaupapa Māori Assessment for Learning Early Childhood Exemplars (Ministry of Education, 2009) has been developed in response to Māori assessment needs. The document recognizes the importance of Māori language, culture, identity and history but was developed primarily for Māori early childhood services (Ministry of Education, 2009; Rameka, 2009). Participants in the project share unique ways in which their service frames kaupapa Māori assessment. For example, one service was inspired by the Māori demi god Maui-Tikitiki-a-Taranga through which an assessment framing was created while another service combined the strands of *Te Whāriki* used in conjunction with their Christian values and beliefs (Ministry of Education, 2009; Rameka, 2012).

Kōhanga reo and assessment

From the outset the primary objectives of kōhanga reo have focused on the Māori language and cultural socialization of mokopuna, the development of the whānau unit and mana Māori motuhake (the spirit of Māori autonomy) (Department of Maori Affairs, 1982; Douglas & Barrett-Douglas, 1983; Fleras, 1983; Government Review on Te Kohanga Reo, 1988; Irwin, 1990; Ka'ai, 1990; Kohanga Reo, 1984). In 1990 kōhanga reo were shifted from the administration of the Department of Māori Affairs to the Ministry of Education. The move meant kōhanga reo were now subject to review by the Education Review Office where kōhanga reo were required to meet licensing criteria or risk closure (Royal Tangaere, 2012). The licensing criteria brought new emphasis on curriculum and more importantly, assessment (Education Review Office, 1994, 1997) that detracted from the primary objectives of kōhanga reo. The move was also significant as it brought kōhanga reo in to the same space as early childhood services along with expectations that kōhanga reo would operate in the same way. In our case there appeared to be some expectation by the Education Review Office that approaches to assessment within mainstream early childhood settings would also be replicated in kōhanga reo.

Te Kōhanga Reo National Trust formally established in 1983 to act as caretakers of the movement have responded by providing kōhanga reo with support in understanding assessment that aligns with the kōhanga reo kaupapa (movement). The support that has occurred internally over the years was recently formalized in *Te Whāriki a te Kōhanga Reo* (Ministry of Education, 2017). The term assessment or aromatawai (a common translation for assessment) has not been used in the document. An alternative term has instead been provided that is considered more acceptable for use within kōhanga reo, that is - Mātai mokopuna.

Mātai mokopuna occurred naturally within traditional Māori society where mātai translated means to observe (Ministry of Education, 2017). Mokopuna were considered a direct link to the atua (Māori deities) (Jenkins, Harte, & Te Kahui Mana Ririki, 2011) where the mana (power of the gods) (Barlow, 1991) would be bestowed on the mokopuna only after careful observation (mātai) and thought (mahara), and through the ritual of 'tohi'. The tohi signalled the child was to be educated in the knowledge and craft of that atua (Mead, 2003; Royal, 2007). Mātai mokopuna within the context of *Te Whāriki a te Kōhanga Reo* places the same responsibility on the whānau collective to observe and critically reflect (pūmahara) on the mokopuna and his or her development. Whānau are also encouraged to wānanga together

(engage in meaningful discussions) (Ministry of Education, 2017) as part of this process.

The possibility of a counter-discourse?

During the course of our journey we found we were not the first to grapple with questions concerning assessment. Participants in Rameka's (2012) doctoral research also wrestled with similar questions in their journey to define kaupapa Māori assessment for themselves. The research involved three case studies - one kōhanga reo, one bilingual early childhood service, and one Christian kaupapa Māori bilingual centre. Two of the case studies had participated in both the *Kei Tua o Te Pae Assessment for Learning: Early Childhood Exemplars* (Ministry of Education, 2004) project and the development of *Te Whatu Pōkeka: Kaupapa Māori Learning and Assessment Exemplars* (Ministry of Education, 2009). The kōhanga reo participated only in the latter (Rameka, 2012). All of the services adopted a narrative approach to assessment with a keen focus on noticing, recognising and responding. Beyond the narrative approach each service developed a Māori framing to assessment that was unique to their individual services. Based on the journey of services in this research the suggestion of a counter-discourse emerging from kōhanga reo was not only plausible, but also encouraged.

The important role of communities in deciding how well assessment approaches captures learning that meets their needs (Ministry of Education, 2004) also provided a strong rationale for a kōhanga reo counter-discourse. Cultural, historical, political and economic factors impact differently on communities, and in turn, their approach to assessment. For this reason, assessment approaches need to be moulded to reflect the culture and community it serves (Basford & Bath, 2014). It is also for this reason that assessment approaches are best understood from within the community, with outsiders needing greater support to appreciate the subtle nuances that might otherwise go unseen (Rameka, 2012) or dismissed in favour of dominant discourses.

Additionally, a Māori approach to assessment is crucial "if it [was] is to make sense to Māori" (Rameka, 2011, p.246).

Conceptualising Ngā kōrero tuku iho

The whānau unit is an important feature of traditional Māori society and is equally important to the kaupapa of kōhanga reo. Whānau are represented in one of the four pou (pillars) that underpin kōhanga reo operations (Te Kōhanga Reo National Trust, 1995) and which requires whānau to be active participants. Another pou holds whānau accountable to mokopuna, to

one another, to the movement and to upholding Māori identity (Te Kōhanga Reo National Trust, 1995). Wānanga matawhānui (whānau gatherings) occur on a regular basis (Ministry of Education, 2017) and whānau are also encouraged to learn te reo Māori alongside their children. Royal Tangaere's (1992, 2012) research describes the intricate relationship between the whānau, mokopuna and kaiako in a model she coins the *Sociocultural Ecology of Whānau Development*.

Insert figure

Figure 1: Sociocultural Ecology of Whānau Development (Royal Tangaere, 2012, p.96)

An adaptation of Urie Brofenbrenner's bioecological model of development Royal Tangaere contends that within kōhanga reo, whānau and kaiako (kōhanga) operate within the same space (microsystem) to support the mokopuna rather than acting as separate entities. In short, kaiako are whānau and whānau are kaiako. The intention then was that whānau would also have a key role in the conceptualisation process together with kaiako. As discussions began whānau found it challenging to offer initial suggestions where it was more fruitful for kaiako to share their initial thinking and then glean further insights from whānau.

Kaiako identified that within traditional Māori society valued knowledge was passed on from generation to generation orally by what is referred to as kōrero tuku iho (literally translated to mean information passed down). Kōrero tuku iho encompassed an understanding of the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values necessary for the future well-being of the whānau, hapū and iwi (Hemara, 2000) - a reminder of ones' Māori identity (Mahuika, 2012). Kaumātua played a key role in the sharing of kōrero tuku iho acting not only as the storehouses of knowledge (Walker, 1990) but also as the teachers of children (Hemara, 2000). The emphasis on kōrero (talking), the sharing of valued knowledge, together with whānau resonated well with kaiako and led to the naming of the approach *Ngā kōrero tuku iho* [NKTi]. These sentiments were also reflected in *Te Whāriki a te Kōhanga Reo* through the use of *wānanga*. Kaiako also felt an oral approach would be preferred as historically the written word has been a form of oppression for Māori leading to the possibility of misinterpretation (Mahuika, 2012).

Mahuika (2012) provided additional insights relating to NKTi where "the essence of the kōrero tuku iho grows out of its original form (which was oral), thus in the process of revisiting we are inscribing and adding to it, growing it in various ways. . . In other words, our kōrero tuku iho can be expressed and carved out in multiple shapes from its aural origins to regurgitations in

the same form, or new and enhanced versions in visual and other forms” (p.134). This meant NKTi as an approach could continue to evolve and be adapted to suit new kōhanga reo whānau at any point in time.

Other aspects of Māori iconography and cultural landscape were also important considerations during the conception stage. For example, inspiration was drawn from the poutama (a traditional Māori tukutuku or lattice design) depicting the child’s upward development over time and through the support of whānau (Royal Tangaere, 2012). The story of the Māori goddess Hinetitama also provided inspiration, who, when in search of her father was told “*Uia ki ngā pou o te whare*” (Addis, Hall, Higgins and Higgins, 2011) translated to mean ‘ask the posts within the house’. These points helped inform what NKTi would look like where each child’s NKTi would adorn the walls of our whare and second that it would be appropriate to take the form of a poutama. As NKTi evolved it became both the name of the approach to mātai mokopuna and the way in which learning would be documented.

NKTi findings and links to Mana Whenua/Belonging

A final wānanga was held with 11 whānau members (which constituted the representation of all of the kōhanga reo whānau except for one) toward the end of the TLIF project to ascertain whānau views of NKTi as an assessment approach. The act of wānanga enabled whānau to explore and share ideas, to discuss and create meaning (Ministry of Education, 2017). During the course of the wānanga whānau often built on one another’s ideas or agreed through a nod of the head or saying ‘āe’ (yes). These sentiments are captured below through the use of the term ‘whānau’. The wānanga captures the changes that occurred for whānau as a result of NKTi which can also be understood in relation to Mana Whenua/Belonging.

1. Ko ngā wawata o te whānau - Mana whenua/Belonging by acknowledging whānau aspirations

NKTi encouraged whānau sense of belonging by valuing whānau aspirations for their children and including these aspirations in the curriculum design and mātai mokopuna process. As in traditional Māori society the aspirations reflect the knowledge, skills and values whānau deem necessary for the well-being of the mokopuna.

Whānau used a wide range of words to describe their aspirations such as: things which are important to them as parents, their hopes and aspirations, talents, goals, and gifts of the

whānau for their tamaiti. Examples of whānau aspirations for their tamaiti included being happy, to be able to walk confidently in both worlds (te ao Māori – the Māori world /te ao Pākehā – the Pākehā world), to learn te reo Māori me ōna tikanga, to know where they are from (identity) and to develop their leadership abilities. Some whānau were able to articulate in more detail how they had arrived at their aspirations for their tamariki. Arana commented “I quickly wrote down the things I thought were her strongest gifts that I could see at that time or the things she enjoyed doing at the time but could also improve in”. Regan described his goals for his tamaiti as a natural extension of her whakapapa and commented on the significance of this in terms of his own accountability:

You naturally take ownership of it cos you are naturally extending your whakapapa. It's not some stranger coming in and saying this is gonna be your child's goals for the year. It's actually you setting the goals and it's based on whakapapa and where you come from and you see those traits coming through and you want to carry those good characteristics and values that you have as a whānau on and it's all part of goal setting within it so as a parent there is more ownership and motivation to want to see your child achieve those things because it's naturally a part of who you are.

Tori felt her aspirations for her tamaiti were valued where “we get to learn about how our wawata (aspirations) are being supported and how they are doing with it”. In this way Arana and Tori commented on how the inclusion of their aspirations meant their tamariki (children) could experience ‘tailored learning’ or learning ‘personal to each tamaiti’.

2.He tūhono i te whānau - Mana whenua/Belonging by connecting whānau

NKTI encouraged whānau sense of belonging by building the home in to the mechanics of the approach. NKTI also encouraged whānau conversations of belonging within homes and across homes. Whānau and mokopuna developed as a ‘kaupapa whānau’ (a family constituting all whānau and mokopuna attending the kōhanga reo) where whānau were interested in the learning and development of all mokopuna, and where mokopuna were able to recount and identify the connections and whakapapa (genealogy) of all whānau members. NKTI supported the socialization and well-being of the whānau unit in line with traditional Māori practices of kōrero tuku iho.

Matt and Maurice felt that on one level the approach connected kōhanga reo and the home. Matt explained that it was useful in that whānau were capturing learning at home and sending it in to kōhanga reo. In this way Del, Maurice, Hano and Matt felt the approach allowed for collaboration between kōhanga reo and the parents. Maurice also commented ‘it brings it all

together, not just home and kōhanga reo separated’.

On another level NKTi connected whānau within their homes. For example, Anita and Casey commented on how NKTi initiated conversations within their home relating to their background and culture. Anita described the process as a spiritual journey. Casey also explained “we talk about our own whakapapa like I just expected her [her daughter] to know me as mum but now she knows my full name, Daniel’s full name, everyone’s full name”. Whaea Hano had used NKTi as an opportunity to also involve other whānau members who weren’t residing in their immediate home. She explained “I have extended mine out with the other nanny and father who don’t live with us so they have their input as well and to bring in any new [ones] wawata”.

A number of whānau recognized NKTi also brought the kōhanga reo whānau together. They shared specific examples of how their tamariki (children) had made connections between other tamariki and their whānau. Caroline explained “He just said it the other day yeah slow down slow down we’re going past Waitaha’s marae, that’s Waitaha’s one and Ngaio’s and then . . . rattling off everyone’s, but not mine I have a different one”. Casey also commented “She can rattle off everyone’s nans and koros not just her own, she is now learning everyone else’s and I thought that is just awesome”. Whānau noted that the ability of their tamaiti to demonstrate such behavior was ‘a skill in itself’, and ‘valuable’. Regan expanded more as to how this might be considered valuable:

There is value that’s attached to that learning so it’s not just them learning a name and stuff but it’s also they have been taught that behind that is all these values that come with being a part of kōhanga and the whānau, so identity and belongingness.

Kōhanga whānau also connected with one another not only as kaupapa whānau but also through blood lines and whakapapa. A number of whānau members gave examples of how NKTi had connected them as kōhanga whānau. Matt commented “you get to learn not just about the tamaiti but the extended whānau as well. We learnt about Regan’s grandparents and where Waitaha’s name came from in the South Island, things that you would never know”. Del also shared an example:

Yeah, I was talking about my Porter heritage and we spoke about our Kahungunu heritage and you asked me questions and I didn’t know you weren’t from Te Arawa so there is the link you guys are half Kahungunu which is me so there is the link.

Another whānau member Maurice commented “You look across and think oh we are related

we are whānau it's not just us and them, it's learning connections". It is for this reason that whānau were also comfortable to share their child's progress with one another. As Tori commented "it's like these are our tamariki, it's like a big whānau". Del, who was a teacher and had been in three-way conferencing situations between the student, teacher and whānau felt that having other whānau members present was a different experience again and one which he felt positive about.

3. Te whānau hei kaikōtuitui – Mana whenua/Belonging through whānau as weavers

NKTI encouraged whānau sense of belonging by delegating responsibility of mātai mokopuna back to the whānau. While kaumātua traditionally occupied the space of teaching and learning, parents also had a daily commitment to provide for the needs of their children (Nepe, 1991). NKTI created a new space for parents to be active participants in the lives of kōhanga reo mokopuna. Kaiako were fundamental in supporting whānau to become weavers of NKTI.

Whānau viewed NKTI as an approach which enabled mokopuna, kaiako and whānau to assume roles of responsibility. The extent to which whānau explained their level of responsibility varied. Arana described her role as ensuring she is a kaiako (teacher) to her daughter outside of kōhanga reo and within their home. Casey also shared how she now felt more accountable to her tamaiti:

It has encouraged me to delve deeper with her (daughter's) learning and engage more rather than surface level. It has also put expectations on to me to make sure I am supporting her learning which I liked. You know it is not a one-way street. So I have expectations for her . . . but she has now in turn put them back on to me which is good you know.

4. He Māori, he tāwariwari – Mana whenua/Belonging by being Māori in design and flexible

NKTI encouraged the development of Mana whenua/belonging by being Māori in design. Similar to the use of pūrākau, waiata and mōteatea within traditional Māori society to support the transmission of kōrero tuku iho, NKTI made learning and development understandable in a Māori way. Being Māori in design also meant a departure from traditional methods of assessment which whānau had experienced as part of the western education system. In

addition, the flexibility of the approach encouraged the kōhanga reo whānau to acknowledge the different ways of mokopuna being and becoming.

Whānau understand NKTi as an assessment approach which has departed from what they have come to know and accept as traditional methods of assessment within contemporary society. Caroline, Arana, Regan Jason, Anita, and Casey described NKTi as an approach which is organic, natural and Māori. The importance of this was expanded on by two whānau members. Arana found traditional methods “regimental and on a piece of paper, with systems and structures I just don’t understand”. Another member Casey shared similar sentiments where she felt because NKTi derived from Māori understandings of whakapapa it was an approach she could connect with easily.

Whānau also enjoyed the flexibility of the approach. Regan explained this in greater detail where NKTi could vary from one account to the next and the advantage of this:

I think that whole saying a picture says a thousand words – when you look at the poutama and you see the photos. Sometimes something will stick out to you one time and then the next day you might see something totally different and yet it’s all relevant, it’s all connected as opposed to if we stuck to the [learning] stories and stuff like that, literally what they say is what you interpret.

Regan further explained how each account could still remain relevant and connected because NKTi places the mokopuna and his or her whakapapa at the centre of the kōrero. It is for this reason that he considered all accounts of NKTi as valid. Another whānau member Caroline commented further on how she appreciated the flexibility of the approach as it recognized the changes mokopuna experience during their early years “your babies are changing so much at these times in their lives, things that were important fall away as we reach our goal so it is quite flexible like that but it is always moving forward”.

Implications for the ECE sector

While the findings of this TLIF project have been directly connected to discussions of Mana Whenua/Belonging and assessment it offers a useful point of reflection for all early childhood services and practitioners in more broad discussions of Mana Whenua/Belonging. We contend that Mana Whenua/Belonging is not just about acknowledging a space for whānau and mokopuna within early childhood settings. Mana Whenua/Belonging is also about challenging the dominant discourses that exist within services and examining who these discourses benefit the most. These discourses can be embedded within the day to day practices/pedagogy of

teachers, and extend to the routines, rituals, teaching strategies, and the physical environment favoured by a service. Demonstrating an openness to explore and develop other ways that might better enhance the Mana Whenua/Belonging of whānau has the potential to lead to new possibilities.

We are still involved in refining NKTi. However, the initial findings which emerged out of the TLIF project indicate we are on the right track in developing mātai mokopuna that builds the Mana Whenua/Belonging of our whānau in ways that other assessment approaches could not.

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