

From the rākau to the ngākau: In pursuit of authentic and reliable research partnerships, experiences, and findings

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The Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (MBIE) in Aotearoa New Zealand has funded 11 National Science Challenges (NSC), which aim to tackle a series of big questions affecting wellbeing in society. One Challenge, A Better Start: E Tipu E Rea, is investigating four key focus areas that children encounter in their early development and is seeking to identify the factors that contribute to forming a solid foundation for fostering wellbeing and lifelong success. Central to the principles of this Challenge is the Treaty of Waitangi in that the Treaty provides a framework to guide whānau engagement, policy change, and praxis. This article describes how a 'ngākau' rather than a 'rākau' approach to shaping research inquiry within this Challenge facilitates more authentic and mana-enhancing whānau engagement in research interactions (Macfarlane, 2019). The development of a whānau questionnaire is drawn on to illustrate the ngākau approach in practice.

Keywords: research, collaboration, Māori, wellbeing

A rākau approach vs a ngākau approach

There is growing awareness among researchers that the process of undertaking research should do no harm to participants (Gillon, Macfarlane & Derby, 2017), and this Challenge embraced that notion as fundamental to all of its aspects. This imperative is synonymous with the tenets of Kaupapa Māori research, which maintain that research must not only not harm participants but must in fact accrue benefits for the communities involved (Bishop, 1996). With a rākau approach (Macfarlane & Derby, 2018), the primary intention is to gather sets of data in order to answer the research question. However, concern lies in the way in which the information may be gathered, and the potential harm that could result from questions that have a deficit framing or pejorative tone. In this study, one participant noted that the use of a rākau approach would have resulted in her either withdrawing from the research or not answering the questions honestly. This indicates that a rākau approach may not only intimidate participants but could also lead to findings that are not an accurate depiction of the participants' reality. The researchers feel strongly that by adopting a ngākau approach, the participants felt valued and heard, and, as a result, the data better reflected their actual experiences.

So what do rākau and ngākau approaches look like in practice, and how are the three most commonly understood and accepted Treaty of Waitangi principles of *Partnership*, *Protection* and *Participation* responded to in each approach? We argue that a rākau approach:

- does not engender a collaborative partnership
- does not protect the mana of the participants
- does not encourage authentic participation

Conversely, we reason that a ngākau approach:

- values collaboration and partnership
- protects wellbeing and mana
- fosters engagement and participation

A ngākau approach in action

As part of *A Better Start: E Tipu E Rea*, the research team was tasked with exploring, gathering, and reporting on whānau perspectives and approaches to early literacy practices in the home, specifically (and solely) caregivers reading to their preschool children. A questionnaire from a prior and similar study was drawn on to guide the development of a whānau questionnaire regarding literacy and reading practices. It was clear that the initial questionnaire employed a rākau approach, with questions which could be interpreted as making inference, being judgmental and laden with deficit assumptions about whānau, their practices and perceived literacy outcomes. In order to move from a rākau to a ngākau approach, the research team decided to do two things. Firstly, the entire questionnaire was framed around four holistic domains of wellbeing, adapted from Durie's (1994) *Te Whare Tapa Whā* framework; and secondly, the questions were reframed to be more mana-enhancing and non-judgmental. This sometimes meant that two questions were able to be replaced by one, or that one question was expanded into two or more. Ultimately, the same sets of data were able to be gathered by using a ngākau approach, but with no harm being done to any of the participants, who reported that the research inquiry process was a positive experience.

The four holistic domains of wellbeing for the study were:

- *Hauora* (health and wellbeing)
- *Hononga* (reading together at home)
- *Hinengaro* (reading practices and skills)
- *Harikoa* (positive identities and interests)

Questions were grouped according to the theme of each of these domains, and the responses from the participants allowed the researchers to gain a broader insight into particular literacy practices as they related to each domain. The ecological focus of the questionnaire also enabled correlations to be made between various questions within different domains. The *Hauora* domain focused on children's overall health and wellbeing, specifically physical, psychological, and emotional aspects. A variety of elements – including sleeping habits, behaviour, speech and hearing – were explored. Questions in the *Hononga* domain sought to gain insight into perspectives about reading together at home. More specifically, this domain considered the frequency and enjoyment of reading together. The *Hinengaro* domain addressed reading practices and skills, and had a particular focus on children's engagement in certain reading-together activities, and their recognition of specific language features. Finally, the *Harikoa* domain focused on children's identities and interests, with questions that centred on motivators,

bilingualism, and digital media. The questionnaire was both quantitative and qualitative in nature.

It must be noted that the rākau approach questions that were reworded and reframed were mainly related to the domains of *Hononga* and *Harikoa*. The other two domains (*Hauora* and *Hinengaro*) were able to be populated with questions that were selected from the original questionnaire because they were deemed to be non-judgemental by a small group of whānau who provided feedback on both questionnaires. Further ngākau approach questions were developed from scratch by the research team, and were added to the questionnaire. It is also important to note that questions with phrases like: “... do you read to your child ...” included in them (an individual focus) were reworded to: “... does reading together at home ...” (a collective focus) to remove any inference of finger-pointing at, or perceived judgement of, the person who was completing the questionnaire. This was a way to avoid engaging in *takahi* – trampling on someone else’s dignity.

Table 1 illustrates how some of the rākau approach questions changed following the application of a ngākau approach. The reframing process resulted in 12 rākau approach questions becoming seven ngākau approach questions – which also reduced the number of questions that whānau needed to complete.

Table 1

Mana enhancing questions: From judgement (rākau) to non-judgement (ngākau)

| Domain | Rākau questions | Ngākau questions |
|---|---|---|
| Hononga | How old was your child when you started reading to them? | How old was your tamaiti [child] when reading together at home started for them? |
| | How many times do you read to your child each week? | How many times does reading together at home happen each week for your tamaiti? |
| | How many children’s books do you own? | Where do books that are used for reading together at home usually come from? Choose any that apply: The school The library Friends and whānau Your own books None of the above |
| | | Approximately how many reading-together books would you usually have at home? 10 or more 5-9 1-4 none |
| Is reading to your child at home important to you? Yes | How important to your whānau is reading together at home with your tamaiti? | |

| | | |
|---------|--|--|
| | No | Extremely important Reasonably important Not that important Not sure |
| | If you answered 'YES', how important is it? Extremely important Reasonably important Not that important Not sure | Not that important Not sure |
| | If you answered 'NO', why not? Please explain: | Please explain |
| | 7. Do you enjoy reading to your child? Yes No | When read together at home with your tamaiti happens, what things do you enjoy about it? (select any that apply) |
| | If you answered 'YES' which of the following do you enjoy? The physical closeness The social/interpersonal aspects The learning and knowledge gains for your tamaiti The growth in your tamaiti's personal confidence Other | The physical closeness The social/interpersonal aspects The learning and knowledge gains for your tamaiti The growth in your tamaiti's personal confidence Other |
| | If you answered 'NO' why not? Please explain: | |
| Harikoa | Do you monitor your child's use of digital devices? Yes No | How do you regulate your tamaiti's use of digital devices? (select any that apply): |
| | If you answered 'YES' which of these methods do you use? By having designated times each day for device use By having device-free days By having device-free times each day By checking internet/browser history By installing a use-monitoring app No strict plan | By having designated times each day for device use By having device-free days By having device-free times each day By checking internet/browser history By installing a use-monitoring app No strict plan |
| | If you answered 'NO', why not? Please explain: | |

Impact and uptake

The questionnaire was sent to 144 whānau, and 74 were completed, resulting in an uptake of 51 percent. The completion rate of 51 percent is significantly above the average uptake for questionnaires, which sits generally between 30 and 40 percent. 50 questionnaires were completed face-to-face and were then entered into an online platform (Qualtrics) by the research team. The remaining 24 were completed by the participants directly online. Feedback from the participants indicated that they enjoyed completing the

questionnaire. One of the researchers asked a mother, who had completed the questionnaire, how the questions had made her feel, in particular if any of them had made her feel uncomfortable. She replied saying, “They were good – yeah I felt good.” The researcher then asked her how she would have felt if she had been asked the questions in a different way – specifically the *Hononga* ones in the rākau column in Table 1, and she replied, “Oh my gosh ... they would have made me feel angry ... a bit judged. I probably would not have answered them at all ... or I would have made the answers up.” This clearly highlights a major risk for many research projects regarding the validity or integrity of the data when questions are framed in a pejorative (rākau approach) way. This risk equally applies to large-scale research projects, where it is regularly argued that the larger the size and scale of the research, the more rigorous the findings will be. We argue that a ngākau approach is crucial to generating rigorous and accurate research findings no matter the size or scale of the study. How accurate may the data be in instances where a rākau approach is employed? How honest might the participants’ responses be to particular questions that may make them feel judged? We argue that by adopting a ngākau approach to research, and in particular to the research inquiry aspect of a study, then the data that are gathered are more likely to be a true representation of the participants’ realities. The ngākau approach enabled the researchers to gather more authentic data, some of which are presented in the following section.

Correlations

The Qualtrics platform enabled the research team to analyse the data, and to make correlations between different questions. The following correlations were made:

- There was a strong correlation between the age that reading together at home started for the child, and two other factors, specifically their enjoyment of reading overall as well as the strength of their reading skills. The earlier reading together at home started, the higher their enjoyment of reading was and the stronger their reading skills were.
- There was a strong correlation between the frequency with which reading together at home with the child occurred, and one factor, that is their enjoyment of reading. The more frequently reading together at home happened, the more the child enjoyed reading.
- There was also a strong correlation between the child’s enjoyment of reading, and two other factors, those being their behaviour, and their reading skills. Tamariki who enjoyed reading tended to display more positive and prosocial behaviours, and had more highly developed reading skills.
- There was a strong correlation between tamariki (children) who had speech/language challenges, and their behaviour. The greater the speech/language challenges, the more concerning the child’s behaviour became.

Conclusion

This study, and in particular the whānau engagement aspect of it, sought to move away from a rākau approach, which is typically characterised by deficiency and judgement, and as a result, has the potential to harm not only the research participants but also the validity of the findings. Instead, we employed a ngākau approach – one that was effective in fostering authentic whānau engagement that did no harm to those engaging in the study. We argue that the ngākau approach was crucial to the success of this element of A

Better Start National Science Challenge, and that it has huge potential not only in facilitating mana-enhancing whānau engagement but also in generating more authentic and accurate research findings and experiences generally. Ultimately, by working with the ngākau rather than the rākau, a powerful research approach to whānau engagement emerged – one that is premised on an authentic partnership between the research team and whānau. The ngākau approach encourages the active targeting of identifiable barriers to whānau engagement in research, and brings promise and life to whānau experiences and aspirations whilst aiming to ensure that the mana of whānau and their tamariki remains intact.

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