

## **Making sense of *Te Whāriki a te Kōhanga Reo* through toi Māori: A whānau approach**

**Hoana McMillan, Tiria Shaw, Heather Patu, Abigail Parekura, Jannalee Hano Tihema, Victoria Ulrich, and Kamorah Shaw.**

### **Abstract:**

The involvement of whānau in the teaching and learning process is important at every juncture of a child's educational journey. Rich understanding of the curriculum enables whānau to make deep and meaningful contributions to discussions about their child's development. It also presents an interesting challenge for educational settings to create opportunities for whānau to increase their knowledge of the curriculum. This article outlines the benefits of a toi Māori approach to support whānau understanding.

### **Introduction:**

In 2021 Te Kōhanga Reo ki Rotokawa, (a Māori immersion setting in the early years) located in the central North Island of New Zealand, embarked on a Teaching and Learning Research Initiative (TLRI) entitled *Mātai mokopuna – he tirohanga wairua, hinengaro, tinana, whatumanawa*. The project explored how whānau and kaiako give expression to the mana (enabling power) of mokopuna whilst also providing opportunities to deepen understanding through their knowledge of the kōhanga reo curriculum *Te Whāriki a te Kōhanga Reo* (Te Kōhanga Reo National Trust, 2018). However, the impact of COVID-19 lockdowns limited face to face options forcing whānau to consider alternative ways of working together. This article discusses the use of toi Māori to overcome the challenges imposed by COVID-19 lockdowns to engage whānau in a collaborative sensemaking process of *Te Whāriki a te Kōhanga Reo* (Te Kōhanga Reo National Trust, 2018).

### **Toi Māori**

Toi Māori is a term used to encompass a wide range of Māori arts, such as tā moko, raranga, whakairo, waiata, and mōteatea (Creative New Zealand, 2012), each with their own narratives of origin that locate the practices within the Māori world. For example, in some tribal narratives, Rua-te-pupuke was responsible for discovering the art of whakairo during a visit to Tangaroa's house, some of which he brought back with him to the natural world (Harrison, Te Kanawa, & Higgins, 2007). Another example is the art of tā moko, which is associated with the journey of Mataora who went to Rarohenga in search of his wife Niwareka. It was during this time that Mataora observed Niwareka's father engaged in the art of tā moko which he desired for himself, and like Rua, brought the art form back to the natural world (Harrison, Te Kanawa, & Higgins, 2007).

The arrival of settlers to Aotearoa New Zealand has resulted in new contemporary forms of toi Māori such as painting and printmaking, and together with traditional approaches, they provide avenues for Māori to convey important messages. The 2022 silk screen prints of Māori activist Tame Iti entitled, "I will not speak Māori" is a powerful example of how Māori have used toi Māori to express their views. The exhibition is a reminder of an education system that has not served

Māori well, and issues a challenge for all to consider attitudes towards the Māori language that are inherent within society today. Waiata have, and continue to be used to convey the history and encounters of the Māori people (McRae, 2007) to ensure knowledge is passed onto future generations.

Symbols and metaphors are also a strong feature within toi Māori and the wider Māori world. For example, there are numerous kōwhaiwhai patterns each with their own meaning, such as the mangopare design symbolising the hammerhead shark for courage and strength. Metaphors such as the popular whare tapa whā have been developed to help explain Māori understandings of the interconnectedness of health and well-being (Durie, 2013). Another popular metaphor includes the use of the harakeke which is a symbol to Māori of the intricate nature of whānau (Watson, 2020). With a strong whānau network children are able to thrive (Pihama et al, 2015).

Beyond the cultural significance and messages that toi Māori help to convey, representations of toi Māori can provide individuals with a deeper connection to their cultural identity. Toi Māori “allows a person to learn about who they are and where they come from. It impacts all aspects of their lives, which radiates to the people they are connected to, their whānau and beyond” (Creative Waikato, n.d, p.4).

### **A curriculum for kōhanga reo**

The kōhanga reo curriculum known as *Te Whāriki a te Kōhanga Reo* (Te Kōhanga Reo National Trust, 2018) was developed at a time when the Ministry of Education had placed significant pressure on the early childhood sector to develop a curriculum of its own. The suggestion of an early childhood curriculum had the potential to impact on the objectives of kōhanga reo whose primary focus is the revitalisation of the Māori language. Te Kōhanga Reo National Trust responded by enlisting the services of Tilly and Tamati Reedy who travelled the length and breadth of Aotearoa New Zealand to gather together the aspirations of the Māori people with which a curriculum for kōhanga reo could be developed (Ministry of Education, 2017). Feedback from Māori signalled the importance of a curriculum that incorporated Māori beliefs, for example, the importance of nurturing the mana (enabling power) that exists within every child so they can live successful and fulfilling lives (Te Kōhanga Reo National Trust, 2020). The framing of the kōhanga reo curriculum also provided the bicultural foundations of the early childhood curriculum *Te Whāriki: He Whāriki Mātauranga mo ngā mokopuna o Aotearoa - Early Childhood Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 1996). When the early childhood curriculum was published it included a section for kōhanga reo, but kōhanga reo were disappointed as the section did not include all aspects of the 1993 design by Tilly and Tamati Reedy (Te Kōhanga Reo National Trust, 2020). Consequently, many kōhanga reo went back to using the version of *Te Whāriki a te Kōhanga Reo* (Te Kōhanga Reo National Trust, 1992) that was attached as an appendage to an internal document known as *Te Korowai* (Te Kōhanga Reo National Trust, 1995), which outlines the philosophy and goals of kōhanga reo. In 2017, the redevelopment of the early childhood curriculum resulted in another version of *Te Whāriki a te Kōhanga Reo* (Ministry of Education, 2017) that was included on the reverse side of the early childhood document and showed better alignment with the original curriculum designed for kōhanga reo.

## **Te Whāriki a te Kōhanga Reo**

*Te Whāriki a te Kōhanga Reo* (Te Kōhanga Reo National Trust, 2018) draws on the metaphor of a whāriki. Clusters of rau harakeke represent an important aspect of the curriculum and are all needed to weave together the whāriki. The first cluster of rau harakeke are ngā kaupapa whakahaere, the four principles: whakamana, empowerment; kōtahitanga, holistic development; ngā hononga, relationships; and whānau tangata, whānau, people, and community. The second cluster of rau harakeke is referred to as te katoa o te mokopuna (the whole child), signalling important dimensions of the child that are the focus of development within kōhanga reo. These dimensions include: wairua, the spiritual dimension; whatumanawa, the emotional dimension; tinana; the physical dimension; and hinengaro, the intellectual dimension. The third cluster of rau harakeke are the taumata whakahirahira, cultural settings (Te Kōhanga Reo National Trust, 2020) that form the basis of teaching and learning within kōhanga reo. These are: Mana atua, the power and status of ngā atua; Mana whenua, the power and status of the land; Mana tangata, the power and status of people; Mana reo, the power and status of the language; Mana aoturoa, the power and status of the environment (Te Kōhanga Reo National Trust, 2020).

## **Whānau involvement in kōhanga reo**

Whānau have an important role in kōhanga reo and in contributing to the lives of mokopuna (term used for children attending kōhanga reo). Since the establishment of kōhanga reo, whānau, hapū, and iwi have been the driving force of kōhanga reo. Whānau were encouraged to learn te reo Māori alongside their children whilst also supporting the day-to-day operations by providing resources and physical support where needed. According to *Te Whāriki a te Kōhanga Reo*, all whānau, hapū, and iwi share a collective responsibility to support mokopuna to develop within the dimensions of wairua, tinana, hinengaro and whatumanawa of mokopuna, “Kei te whānau, te hapū, me te iwi te mana ki te whakapakari i te oranga wairua, te oranga tinana, te oranga hinengaro me te whatumanawa o ia mokopuna, kia pakari ai te toro atu ki ngā hua o tōna ao Māori” (Ministry of Education, 2017, p.29). Whānau also have an important role in observing and analysing the development of mokopuna, a practice that is synonymous within traditional Māori society. Whānau work alongside kaiako to make visible valued learning.

## **Background to the project:**

The TLRI project entitled Mātai mokopuna – he tirohanga wairua, hinengaro, tinana, whatumanawa explored how whānau and kaiako (teachers) give expression to the mana of mokopuna through the dimensions: hinengaro, wairua, tinana, and whatumanawa. This involved identifying what whānau knew about the rau harakeke representing the taumata whakahirahira and how these are used to discuss the dimensions of the mokopuna. The project involved two cycles of data gathering where whānau recorded their initial understanding of the taumata whakahirahira - Mana atua, Mana tangata, Mana whenua, Mana reo, and Mana aoturoa - and te katoa o te mokopuna dimensions, hinengaro, wairua, tinana and whatumanawa. Wānanga

mātātara (gatherings where whānau and kaiako share and make sense of their observations of mokopuna) were also recorded and transcribed. After the first cycle of data collection, whānau and kaiako analysed the data using *Te Tauira Whāriki* - a model in *Te Whāriki a te Kōhanga Reo* which combines the taumata whakahirahira and four dimensions. Kaiako and whānau noticed that as a kōhanga reo whānau they had varying degrees of understanding according to their experience within kōhanga reo. A number of suggestions were made to help deepen whānau understanding including the creation of artwork for each of the taumata whakahirahira. The artwork could also be completed in a COVID-19 environment by moving the artwork between homes.

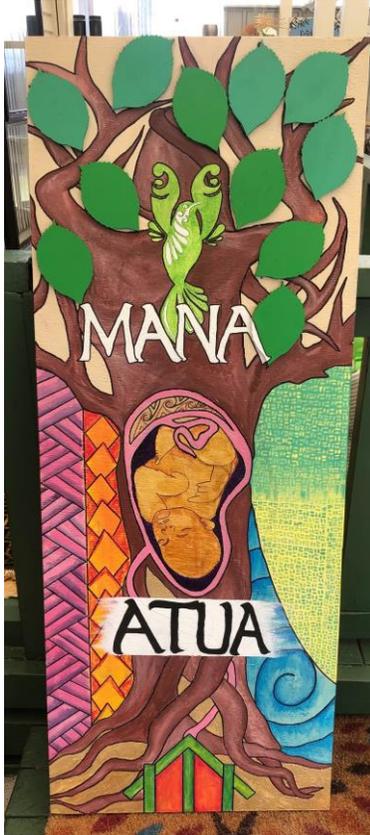
Whānau were assigned to groups based on mokopuna groupings at kōhanga reo. This meant there were four groups in total and a fifth group was needed in order to cover all five taumata whakahirahira. For this reason, one of the taumata whakahirahira was completed by a kaiako and her son who was also a manu pīrere of the kōhanga reo. Whānau contributed to conversations via Facebook where they discussed the taumata whakahirahira assigned to their group and ways they could demonstrate their understanding through art. Once whānau had gathered together their collective ideas, a canvas was circulated amongst the group with each individual whānau taking responsibility for a portion of the artwork. The completed artworks along with an explanation were shared with the wider kōhanga reo whānau at a wānanga matawhānui – a gathering to discuss the operations of kōhanga reo. The kaiako and son group brainstormed what pikitia they could paint and felt strongly that the pikitia needed to be simple in design for the mokopuna to understand what they meant and symbolised. The Facebook discussions, along with the recording of whānau sharing, and brainstorm were gathered by the kaiako and the university researchers and are represented here as pūrākau. The use of pūrākau to convey whānau understanding of the taumata whakahirahira is a deliberate action to ensure whānau messages remained culturally intact. The pūrākau are written as much as possible using the words and descriptions of whānau. In some instances, kaiako and university researchers have altered the sequence of ideas to enhance the flow of the pūrākau. Some kaiako also chose to use Māori vocabulary or write completely in te reo Māori and did so ensuring the text accurately reflected the descriptions made by whānau. While an English translation has not been provided, the discussion of the pūrākau affords readers important insights about the Māori text.

## **Results and discussion**

The following pūrākau are the representations of whānau understanding of the taumata whakahirahira followed by a discussion in relation to *Te Whāriki a te Kōhanga Reo*.

### **Mana atua**

E ai ki ngā kōrero o nehera, na te ira atua a Tane (represented by the rākau) me te one o Kurawaka (depicted using the whare) ka puta ko tātou te ira tangata. The vibrant colours symbolize warmth, the start of the ira tangata, tapu, noa, values from ngā atua Māori, the birth place from Papatūānuku. From the top of the whare the umbilical cord intertwines through the rākau and is attached to the sac of the baby. This is the life force, this is the act of nurturing and feeding the mokopuna i roto i te ao Māori. The pēpi in the kōpu represents the pureness of the



tamaiti and the state of calmness, surrounded and nurtured with aroha, to stand tall, strong, and pono, like a rangatira. This is an aspiration that all parents have for their tamaiti. The rau are a representation of the many uara and momo āhuatanga of the tamaiti. The four coloured sides represent the four seasons and all the āhuatanga it contributes to the learning and wellbeing of the tamaiti. The manu pīrere whose wings are from the kōhanga reo tohu is a representation of when the child leaves the kōhanga reo nest.

### Discussion

In *Te Whāriki a te Kōhanga Reo* one of the key messages relating to the taumata whakahirahira *Mana atua* makes reference to the idea that within each child is the spiritual essence of godliness on account of the atua known as Tane who was responsible for creating mankind (Ministry of Education, 2017, p.18). Similarly, whānau at Te Kōhanga Reo ki Rotokawa made specific reference to Tane and included more information that sits behind the creation of man including the gathering at Kurawaka, and the taking of soil from Papatūānuku to create man (Victoria University of Wellington, 2016). The whare used by the whānau is also symbolic of the Māori term “whare tangata” meaning house of humanity used to describe the woman’s womb but it also links back to the way in

which mankind was created from Papatūānuku.

The creation of life involving ira atua and ira tangata (Mead, 2016) means there are many dimensions of the mokopuna to foster and develop during their time in kōhanga reo. For example, *Te Whāriki a te Kōhanga Reo* writes about the ability of children to care and show respect for others through Māori expressions of manaaki, atawhai, and whakaute - Nā tēnā, he nui ngā wehenga o te tangata. Other pieces of literature also make reference to dimensions of the Māori child such as tapu, wehi, mana, ihi, and pūmanawa, tinana, wairua, hinengaro, and whatumanawa (Cooper, Arago-Kemp, Wylie, & Hogden, 2004; Royal Tangaere, 1997; Te Kōhanga Reo National Trust, 2018; 2020). Whānau at Te Kōhanga Reo ki Rotokawa recognised the different dimensions by describing the different characteristics of mokopuna.

### Mana tangata

Whānau understanding of Mana tangata was portrayed through four key images that demonstrate their understanding of both the importance of and the breadth of whānau relationships. The first image represents the word ‘tangata’, including māmā, pāpā, and pēpi. The colours yellow and red have been deliberately used because when mixed they form the colour orange which is a tohu of te ira tangata. The second image relates to the pā harakeke. The parents understood the pā harakeke to symbolise whānau and relationships. In te ao Māori the rito represents the child, the awhi rito represents the parents, and the outer leaves represent the grandparents. They also

linked the pā harakeke to the Māori whakatauki, “Hutia te rito o te harakeke. Kei hea te komako e ko. Ki mai ki ahau, he aha te mea nui o tēnei ao, maaku e kii atu ki a koe, he tangata, he tangata” which emphasises the most important thing in the world is people. These ideas were closely intertwined with the third image as a portrayal of the immediate whānau supporting the mokopuna. The clasping hands represents collaboration and acknowledges through various colours that every child has their own characteristics and uniqueness. Finally, the whāriki represents “how we weave together the strengths of the collective (kaiako, tamariki, whānau, hapū, and wider community) to achieve the best outcomes for tamariki”.

### Discussion

In *Te Whāriki a te Kōhanga Reo* the cultural setting *Mana tangata* involves knowing one’s whakapapa, building relationships with immediate and extended family, friends, elders, Ranginui, Papatūānuku, and their children (Ministry of Education, 2017, p.20-21). Likewise, whānau use of the pā harakeke (flaxbush) signals whānau understood and appreciated the expanse of the whānau unit. *Mana tangata* is also concerned with strengthening the power and self-esteem of individuals, ‘te mana ahua ake’ (Ministry of Education, 2017, p.20), through maximising opportunities for growth and using their knowledge and abilities for the benefit of the collective (Hemara, 2000; Reedy, 2013; Te Kōhanga Reo National Trust, 2018). Similarly, whānau also expressed the unique nature of individual tamariki through the use of a mixture of colours.



### Mana reo

Kāore i waimarie ngā whānau Māori katoa ki te tipu i te reo. He waimarie ngā mokopuna ki te ako i te reo hei reo rangatira, hei reo tuatahi. Ko ngā ringa o ngā hei tiki e toru e whakaatu ana i ētahi ara akoako i te reo, otira mā te kōrero, mā te waiata, mā te whakarongo, me te pānuī. Ko ngā manu e toru e hāngai ana ki te whakatauki, “E koekoe te tui, e ketekete te kākā, e kūkū te kereru”. Kei tēna manu tōna ake tangi pēnei i a tātou. Ka rangona hoki i ngā momo reo mā te reo waiata, mā te reo ā tinana hoki. Ahakoa he rerekē ngā reo o ia tangata, ka kōtahi te reo akiaki i ngā mokopuna kia eke panuku, kia eke tangaroa. Te toi o Hine-Reihia me Tanerore, ka taea e koe te kite i te kōrero o te tinana katoa, mai i te mahunga tae noa ki ngā waewae. Koinei he taonga tuku iho ki a tātou inaianei i roto i ngā momo haka me ngā waiata, ngā pakiwaitara, ngā reo kōrero ohāki, ngā hītori me ngā kōrero mo ngā pouwhenua ā rātou mā hei hono ki ngā uri whakaheke. A kite koe te ihi, te wana, te wehi o te tinana kōrero. E ai ki te whānau “mā te nekehanga o te tinana me tō mata ka taea e koe ki te whakaaria mai te āhua o ngā kōrero o roto i ngā waiata/haka rānei”. Ko ngā pū, ngā more, ngā aka, me ngā reo e korowai ana i ngā kupu he tohu mo te tipuranga o te tamaiti me te whanaketanga o te tamaiti i roto i te mauri o te reo Māori. Whāngai te reo kia pūāwaitia te tamaiti pēnei i te putiputi, whāngai te wai kia tipu kia rea i ngā hīhī a Tamanuiterā.



## Discussion

According to *Te Whāriki a te Kōhanga Reo, Mana reo* is the power of language and communication (Te Kōhanga Reo National Trust, 2020). Within traditional Māori society oral and aural language skills were the primary modes of communication (Pere, 1994), with reading and writing now also desirable (Durie, 2006; Turuki Pere, 2006). The whānau at Te Kōhanga Reo ki Rotokawa also recognised the different modes that enhance language development through reference to hearing, speaking, and reading the Māori language. The use of body language to communicate was made sense through haka (Māori performing arts) as has been noted by other Māori writers such as Trinick and Dale (2015), with facial expressions and hand movements helping to convey the messages of songs. *Te Whāriki a te Kōhanga Reo* also acknowledges the significance of the Māori language to one's identity as Māori. The account from one whānau who contributed to the artwork and were not fortunate to grow up immersed in the Māori language showed awareness of the important role of the Māori language and the need to nourish it. Life without the Māori language would impact on culture, the mana and connection of Māori to the land (Hemara, 2000), and the connection of

mokopuna to their ancestors (Penetito, 2010).

## Mana whenua

Kei te pūtake o te rākau te whenua hei tohu i te hononga o te tangata ki te whenua. Ko te marae, ko ngā maunga, ko te awa, ko te waka, he tohu anō i ngā hononga whenua, he kōrero whakaahuahanga hoki ki roto i te pepeha o te tangata. E noho ana a piwaiwaka ki te waharoa hei waha kōrero i ngā pūrākau me ngā hītori o te whenua ki te marea. Ko ngā kōhanga reo kei ngā tōpito katoa o te motu, he hononga whenua anō. Otira ko te manu pīrere hoki e noho ana ki te waharoa, e kitea ana i te wehenga o te mokopuna i tōna kōhanga reo. Na ēnei hōnonga ki te whenua me whakaaro nui tātou ki te taiao. Ko ngā ika he whakaahuahanga o tō tātou kaitiakitanga o te whenua. Kia kua tātou e wareware ki ēnei hononga whenua, ko te ahi tēnei e tohu ana i te ahi kā.

## Discussion

In *Te Whāriki a te Kōhanga Reo* Mana whenua relates to the power of the land and the importance of Māori relationships to it. Māori are connected to the whenua (land) through whakapapa (genealogy) and the atua Papatūānuku (the Māori deity of the land) (Ministry of Justice, 2001 as

cited in Rameka, 2018). Tribal landmarks such as marae, rivers, mountains help inform identity and belonging (Ministry of Education, 2017; Mead, 2016), all of which are evident in the artwork from the whānau at Te Kōhanga Reo ki Rotokawa. *Mana whenua* also involves understanding various kupu (words) that connect Māori to the land. In *Te Whāriki a te Kōhanga Reo* words such as pito, tūrangawaewae, papa kāinga, ūkaipō are all used (Ministry of Education, 2017, p.25). The whānau also made links to some of these words in their own sense making process using ahi kā used by mana whenua in traditional times to signal the right to the whenua through whakapapa. However, a point of difference is that whānau also made connections to other whenua they were connected to by association. For example, kōhanga reo as depicted by the orange bird image representing a manu pīre. One last major theme relating to *Mana whenua* in *Te Whāriki a te Kōhanga Reo* is the importance of taking care of the whenua which the whānau have portrayed using fish and the need



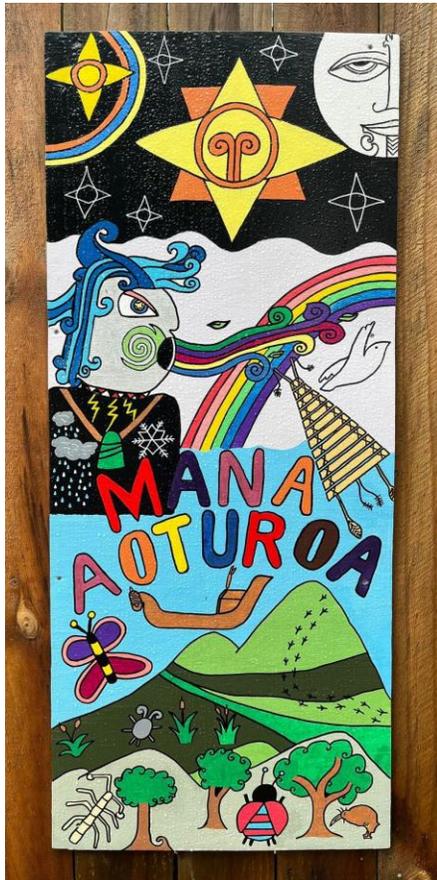
to ensure they are always plentiful, passing on valuable knowledge to future generations. Māori whakatauki such as “Toitū te marae a Tāne, toitū te marae a Tangaroa, Toitu te tangata” remind Māori that if the land and sea are taken care of, then the people will thrive.

### **Mana aotūroa**

*Mana aotūroa* is depicted in this artwork by Tāwhirimatea, ngāngara, whetū, marama, and rākau. The hiwi and whenua in the middle of the board represent exploring the taiao. The waka symbolises how tīpuna Māori explored new lands and the moana. The exploration of new lands was made possible through mātauranga associated with navigation and the stars. The manu tukutuku represents how tīpuna Māori used their mātauranga to design and select materials for manu tukutuku that would fly the best. The harakeke bushes represent some of the materials tīpuna Māori used and the textures created when woven into taonga such as whāriki. The bold and colourful palette used in the board help convey how Mana aotūroa is about expressing one’s tuakiritanga and creativity.

### **Discussion**

In *Te Whāriki a te Kōhanga Reo* (Te Kōhanga Reo National Trust, 2018) key ideas relating to *Mana Aotūroa* involve “mana kimihanga” and “mana rangahau” within the environment. The



artwork and explanation by the kaiako and manu pīrere locate the practices within traditional Māori society providing additional emphasis on its cultural importance for mokopuna. Durie (2005) also discusses at length the challenges that Māori voyagers likely faced upon arrival to Aotearoa due to a different landscape which required innovation including new food gathering techniques, plants for medicine, and materials to make garments. Like the manu tukutuku example provided by the kōhanga reo, Māori voyagers found harakeke with which to weave new clothing, and plants such as kawakawa for medicine which are still used within contemporary Māori society today. The explanation provided by the kōhanga reo advocates an approach to “mana rangahau” and “mana kimihanga” through a Māori cultural lens.

### Implications and conclusions

Using toi Māori to deepen whānau understandings of *Te Whāriki a te Kōhanga Reo* involved the representation of ideas in abstract forms. For this reason, whānau understandings shifted beyond repeating information to thinking critically about what they had come to understand, and symbols that could be used to express their ideas. Some whānau were inspired by Māori metaphors which were used in the artwork, and others drew on their lived experiences as

Māori, pūrākau, and whakatauki. While there are many connections to key ideas within each of the cultural settings of *Te Whāriki a te Kōhanga Reo*, the explanations that sit behind the artwork are personal to the whānau at Te Kōhanga Reo ki Rotokawa. The implication is an increased sense of mana and tino rangatiratanga over their lives, and the lives of their children - and an understanding of *Te Whāriki a te Kōhanga Reo* that is their own. The experience is a call for all to consider the ways in which toi Māori and the arts can benefit whānau in a similar manner.

### Acknowledgements

We wish to acknowledge the New Zealand Council for Educational Research as coordinators of the Teaching and Learning Research Initiative for funding received to make the research project possible.

### Glossary

Te reo Māori as used in this article.

**ahi kā** burning fires

<b>haka Māori</b>	performing arts
<b>ira atua</b>	atua genes
<b>ira tangata</b>	physical genes
<b>mana kimihanga</b>	exploration
<b>mana rangahau</b>	investigation
<b>mana whenua</b>	those with authority over an area of land
<b>manu pīrere</b>	graduate of kōhanga reo
<b>pā harakeke</b>	flaxbush
<b>papa kāinga</b>	home base
<b>pito</b>	navel
<b>tūrangawaewae</b>	place where one has the right to stand
<b>ūkaipō</b>	source of sustenance
<b>whakapapa</b>	genealogy
<b>whakatauki</b>	sayings
<b>whenua</b>	land

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## **The authors**

**Hoana McMillan** is a lecturer at the University of Waikato. The kaiako are based at Te Kōhanga Reo ki Rotokawa in Rotorua, a past winner of the Prime Ministers Education Award for Excellence in Teaching and Learning

**Email:** [hoana.mcmillan@waikato.ac.nz](mailto:hoana.mcmillan@waikato.ac.nz)