

Chapter 6

Whānau Learning Journeys

This chapter draws on the personal journeys of six whānau of Te Kōpae Piripono. These personal journeys each provide vibrant and dynamic examples of our research and particularly of our key findings. Each journey strongly links with most, if not all, of our findings and in many cases with each other. The personal stories provide an authentic and personal face to our research, which many people will be able to relate to. In almost all of the stories, whānau have used their real names. However, where pseudonyms are used this is indicated by a footnote.

6.1 The Critical Involvement of Fathers – Sheldon’s Story

Sheldon’s Story is an example of the role of fathers, fear and the power of positive action! Sheldon and his partner Kiriana have two daughters, Jade and Waimarino, who attend Te Kōpae Piripono. Kaitiaki observed that, when he brought his daughters every day, Sheldon seemed reluctant to engage in conversations with Kaitiaki and avoided eye contact, rushing in and out before any meaningful contact (and relationship) could be made. In our conversations with Sheldon, we learnt that he had been brought up by his grandfather who spoke mainly Māori to him. However, his grandfather died when Sheldon was eleven, and by his own admission Sheldon went “off the rails a bit” and “just forgot about everything”, until enrolling his daughters at Te Kōpae Piripono.

This is a conversation one of our Tumu, Aroaro, had with Sheldon:

Sheldon: It’s been scary bringing my girls here. I come here and I see the kids and they all kōrero Māori. When I bring the girls and they’re all in a circle on the whāriki I go, “Oh no! I’m sitting in the circle and it’s coming around and I’m going to get asked a question!” I start sweating. It’s quite embarrassing and scary. It’s the not knowing that’s the issue, that I will not give the right answer.

Aroaro: *But if you knew that even if you gave the wrong answer, that it was still ok, would that make it easier?”*

Sheldon: Yes! But for myself I would prefer to be bang on.”

Aroaro: *But before we get to bang on, because there is always a learning time, how do we get on before we get to the bang on?*

Sheldon: Yeah I know that I should be trying to attempt it, even if I do get it wrong, because I know that it reflects on my kids, if they see me. I know they don’t

know it fully yet but if I'm talking it they won't be afraid to learn and attempt to learn themselves.

Aroaro: So, how about when you are at Kōpae, how would you feel about doing the actual opposite of what you want to do, which is, you want to get out of the door fast. But the opposite of that is to actually stay? And for the first few times, you won't be responding very much but just taking it in, so that you're immersed just like your children. How would you feel about that?"

Sheldon: Yes, I'll do that! ...I'm just worried about it coming around the circle and not being able to respond!

Aroaro: But if you knew that you were not going to be put on the spot,...you'd be ok?

Sheldon: Not really! I'd feel stink because you'd be skipping me and going onto the next person!

Aroaro: But you're not stupid. You would understand! Let's just say we were on the whāriki and I started here and I went round the circle, you would have understood what you needed to say by the time I got to you?

Sheldon: Yep. I would. Because it's for my kids! So you make sure if I'm sitting down, you start from there (*points to where I am sitting*), so by the time it comes around to me, I will be: Oh yeah I know that! (*laughter*) (Interview with Sheldon, 17.8.06)

This conversation is a dynamic example of acknowledging the fear, but also making the expectation clear of what is required and our belief that Sheldon can do it. Sheldon shows that he is up for the challenge.

Five days after this kōrero, Sheldon, who is a talented musician, brought in one of three songs he and his partner, Kiriana, had written for Te Kōpae Piripono. He showed the words to one song but asked for help with some of the Māori (taking responsibility). We agreed that we would collaborate to create this new Kōpae song (sharing responsibility). Within a day, Sheldon and Aroaro were performing the song for the children at Wā Huihui (mat time). Here is Sheldon's waiata:

He raukura te whānau e Tū tangata, Tū kaha Te aroha i a tātou e He Piripono e	Our whānau is precious Helping us stand tall and strong The aroha that we have among us Is steadfast and everlasting
Ngā tāonga a rātou mā Ko te reo me ōna tikanga Hei korowai rangatira Me Piripono e	The treasures of our ancestors Language and traditions A chiefly cloak that we embrace
Whakarongo ki ngā tamariki Te kitakita a Tātarakihi Ngā whakatupuranga e Kaupapa Piripono	Listen to our children The sounds they make Our future generations Our utter commitment to them

This fascinating set of events shows that Kaitiaki persistence, in fostering whānau relationships, especially with those who are visibly most uncomfortable, is critical in fostering leadership and a sense of whānau. It is about shifting people's thinking to be comfortable and open to the idea of acknowledging their self worth and that they have much to offer and contribute to Te Kōpae Piripono and their children's learning (taking up the challenge of leadership). Working together with Sheldon provides a strong message that he and his whānau matter to us. Talking and saying the right words just does not cut it. Persistent Positive Action was the “glue” that helped cement our relationship. The ripples of Sheldon's learning have been dynamic. In a subsequent conversation I had with Sheldon and Kiriana (21.11.06), this is what they said:

Kiriana: To me, a high was Sheldon coming in yesterday and spending a lengthy amount of time with the tamariki. I thought that was awesome – him feeling comfortable to do so. Breaking through that barrier. What brought that on, Sheldon was asked. *“I felt more comfortable to come and do it. But I'm at home now. I'm just part of the furniture,”* was his reply. Sheldon said the turning point for him was our persistence, our dogged determination to build a relationship with him. Rather than feeling judged, he felt encouraged and acknowledged. Kiriana added, *“I reckon it's the time that you guys have spent, to actually sit down to kōrero with us and to share our fears. It's the sharing the fear that takes it away.”*

And the wider ripples of Sheldon's learning continue to occur. One of their daughters, Jade, was shy and cautious in forming friendships. Sheldon's transformation has been Jade's transformation. What follows is a learning story written about Jade in 2007:

Today Jade arrived early with Dad and her sister. With eyes glistening, Jade told me excitedly about her sister's birthday – all the whānau and friends who were there, the birthday hats, the food, the cake, the singing and the presents. Her face showed her excitement and enjoyment. Wow what a magical moment! Jade has previously been a quiet girl who rarely conversed with adults or made eye contact. Yet, here she was initiating an animated kōrero, in te reo Māori, with smiles and direct eye contact! Since Jade parents have seen themselves as valued and respected members of the whānau at Te Kōpae Piripono, Jade now sees herself in a similar way (Learning Story, 28.11.06).

6.2 Whānau Leadership - Hiria's Story

Hiria first came to Te Kōpae Piripono in 1997 when she enrolled her baby grandson, Mikaere. She later also took on the care of her granddaughter, Shaquille, who, in turn, attended Te Kōpae Piripono. It would be an understatement to say that their young lives have not always been easy. The family's experience as whānau members of Te Kōpae Piripono has changed all of their lives. While, both mokopuna have since moved on to Kura Kaupapa Māori (Māori immersion primary school), (Mikaere in 2001 and Shaquille in 2005), their strong whānau relationship with Te Kōpae Piripono continues.

In Hiria's case, her experiences motivated her to embark on study toward a Diploma of Teaching (ECE) with the field-based component at Te Kōpae Piripono. For her mokopuna, the ongoing relationship has been enabled by one of our whānau organising and coaching Kōpae hockey teams. This has meant that no less than 30 children continue to maintain their whanaungatanga or kinship, outside of Te Kōpae Piripono's early childhood operation. Hiria's mokopuna have both stayed at different Kaitiaki homes and they also continue to participate in Te Kōpae Piripono activities. Fostering the relationship outside of Te Kōpae Piripono hours has sent the message to Hiria and her mokopuna that we (the whānau) continue to care. This connection through sport and other activities provides continuity for the children of Te Kōpae Piripono and our kaupapa.

Shaquille's experience dramatically demonstrates, a sense of personal worth, and knowledge that personal worth does not depend on today's behaviour or ability. It was Kaitiaki choice to love her unconditionally, no matter what her behaviour. Kaitiaki recognised that Shaquille was asking us: "Can I trust you, as I have varied experiences of trust?" and, "Will you help me, because I don't know how yet?" The commitment and persistence of Kaitiaki resulted in a transformation for Shaquille, helping her to rediscover her own mana (or self worth). Kaitiaki believed in her when she wasn't able to, yet. Through Kaitiaki actions, our answer to Shaquille's questions were, emphatically, "Yes!" We could see past the, at times, challenging behaviour to the "true" Shaquille. Hiria explains that, despite going to Kura Kaupapa Māori, Shaquille still strongly identifies with Te Kōpae Piripono:

Hiria: Last week, I played the Te Kōpae Piripono CD for the first time. I put it on and Shaquille just stood beside the stereo listening to it. She heard the Kōpae’s pepeha and she just bawled her eyes out. Tears just came down. I just couldn’t believe it. She was wailing. And it really got me. And I said to her, “He aha te raru? (what’s wrong?)” And she goes, “Pīrangi au Kōpae (I want Kōpae)!” And I just couldn’t believe it. I thought it was memory coming back and maybe she didn’t want to go to school anymore. You know, she loved it here (at Te Kōpae Piripono).

Kaitiaki: *Why do you think she feels that way?*

Hiria: Well... she enjoyed it here. It was a safe place for her and she knew you.

Kaitiaki: *Does she feel she belongs here still?*

Hiria: Oh yeah, I think so, because I’m still here. That’s why I’m here.

(Hiria interview, 14.8.06)

Hiria’s consistent actions over a sustained period of time show her utter commitment to her mokopuna. They also provide a glimpse of the caring and reciprocal, dynamic and multi-dimensional relationships she has with Te Kōpae Piripono whānau. Hiria displays key aspects of leadership. She is taking responsibility for the well-being of her mokopuna. She understands that she plays the central role in providing vital continuity for them - in terms of education, of whānau, of kaupapa, of reo, of sport and of relationships. By actively taking on the role of being that continuity, she displays all of the four responsibilities – being, having, taking and sharing responsibility.

Hiria has actively chosen to maintain her connections with Te Kōpae Piripono whānau. Her self-initiated “tākoha” (contributions), such as the creation of significant arts, language and mathematical resources, and also considerable amounts of time, are ongoing evidence of leadership in action. Our reciprocal relationship is, therefore, the whāriki/context that embraces and supports learning for all the whānau.

6.3 A Father's Learning Journey - Scott's Story

Since the birth of my daughter, Te Ahupo, I have realised the importance of my role in her life. Both myself and my wife, Kiri, had decided that I would be an 'at-home papa' for our unborn baby and this was a role that I was extremely excited about. I was involved in the whole pregnancy of my baby - at every scan, check-up, blood test, you name it - after all, this pregnancy was just as much mine as it was Kiri's.

When our daughter was born I had an instant bond with her from the minute I welcomed her into the world with the common name I called her through the pregnancy 'Puku'. As soon as I said that name she turned her head and looked at me it was love at first sight, for both of us.

Kiri returned to work when Te Ahupo was three months old, a task that Kiri found difficult, as she was still breast feeding and didn't want to be separated from Te Ahupo. Despite this, I stayed at home with Te Ahupo for the first year of her life and we had a ball. Kiri would come home and the house would be in a state but it was more important to me that my girl and me had a good day and, more importantly, a lot of fun.

Both Kiri and me had decided our baby would go to Te Kōpae Piripono, prior to her birth. For us, it was the only centre we would ever entrust with our special taonga, due to the commitment and competency of the Kaitiaki and whānau. This was a movement that we wanted to be part of, for our tamariki. I started going with Te Ahupo to Kōpae at the end of 2004, to prepare her for attending full time in 2005. Unfortunately on the 14th of January 2005, Te Ahupo's 1st birthday, she was diagnosed with leukaemia. She immediately underwent six months of intensive chemotherapy at Starship Hospital. This was an extremely difficult time for us as a whānau. It is the most difficult thing to see your sick child wanting you to take all their pain away. Fortunately I got a part-time job, which allowed me to work in the evenings and weekends to help us through this challenging time - mentally, emotionally and financially.

Our daughter pulled through the six months of chemo and made a quick recovery and in Term 4, 2005, Te Ahupo started attending Te Kōpae Piripono full-time. I returned to full-time work and we moved on with life and set new goals for ourselves. The first of these

goals was regaining our financial security as we had lost this while our daughter was sick. With me working full-time for the first time in nearly two years it was a great change for us, or so we thought. With Kiri also working full-time, as a teacher, we found it difficult to negotiate Kōpae's hours of operation and our work hours, so we relied on others to take and pick up Te Ahupo each day. Initially we thought we were very fortunate to have great friends and whānau who would do this for us, however, it became increasingly difficult at home - constantly rushing every morning and evening. We were all close to burn out.

It is for this reason that I, once again, left work to spend more time with our daughter and give her the attention she needed and was missing out on. I began taking Te Ahupo to Kōpae each day and picking her up. Initially, this was uncomfortable for me as the Kōpae is a total immersion Maori environment. I felt intimidated and uneasy due to the language barrier. After a short time this burden lifted and I began to feel comfortable and looked forward to taking Te Ahupo to Kōpae. Soon, I was spending most of my days there with my daughter or with the other Kaitiaki whom I had developed great relationships with. I enjoyed getting involved with the other tamariki and watching my daughter thrive in such an environment. One of our concerns for our daughter was the fact that, at 3, she still wasn't walking independently but on the very first day I took her to Kōpae Te Ahupo took her first steps. This was an emotional time not only for Kiri and myself but also for all the Kōpae staff as it was obvious to us that all Te Ahupo wanted was some of our time and we were not paying the attention that we should have due to our work commitments and busy lives.

Te Ahupo continues to thrive. Our household is much less stressed and I have returned to work during the day. I continue to drop Te Ahupo off at Kōpae in the morning and Kiri now picks her up in the afternoon. We have found the right balance in our lives between work and whānau and we look forward to our lives in the future.

6.4 Kaitiaki Leadership Learning - Kahumako's Story

*Ko Tuhua te Maunga
Ko Taringamotu te Awa
Ko Tainui te Waka
Ko Ngāti Maniapoto te Iwi
Ko Ngāti Hari te Hapū
Ko Hia-Kaitupeka te Marae
Ko Peter rāua ko Te Heitiki Turu ōku Matua
Ko Keith Wilson taku Hoa Rangatira
Ko Oti-Te-Rangi tā māua Tamatāne
Ko Sapphire tā mātou Mokopuna
Ko Kahumako Wilson taku ingoa
No reira, tēna koutou, tēna tātou katoa.*

I am the eldest of seven children, and also a girl. From birth, I was brought up by my mother's parents (their first mokopuna). Had I been a boy, I would probably have been brought up by my father's parents (their fifth mokopuna). My grandparents were native speakers of te reo Māori but they wanted their mokopuna to grow up in the Pakeha world. They had a hard life. My parents were strapped for speaking Māori at school, therefore from a very young age my life was already pre-determined by my grandfather. After leaving school, I moved to Taranaki and got a job at Tegel Poultry, sending money home to the whānau to support my younger siblings coming through high school. By this time, my younger sister, her tamariki and my younger brother had begun their own journey of learning te reo Māori. Not me. I was the whānau breadwinner.

Another episode of my story began on Monday 13 September 1993 when my husband and I became first time parents to our adopted son Oti-Te-Rangi. This was the biggest and scariest challenge we had ever encountered, both as individuals and as a couple. A baby was not something we could trade-in for a later model, like we had upgraded new cars over the years. This required careful planning and commitment. I envied watching my younger sister, brother, nieces and nephew speaking te reo Māori, only speaking English when I was around. I wanted that for my son. Throughout Oti-Te-Rangi's early years, I was determined that he have nothing but the best care and education within a total immersion Māori environment.

I faced many barriers. I couldn't speak or understand te reo Māori and I didn't take kindly to people giggling and snickering, because of it. But I was determined that I would not sacrifice my son's right to learn te reo Māori and that I would learn alongside him. I enrolled Oti-Te-Rangi in a Māori language early childhood centre and it soon became apparent that the centre did not meet my expectations. This led to my decision to become an early childhood teacher. It was not easy. It meant working with children during the day, studying and attending whānau meetings and Māori language classes at night! Then there was the messy house!

I graduated with a Diploma of Teaching ECE in 2002 and joined Te Kōpae Piripono's teaching team in 2003. What a huge sigh of relief and a breath of fresh air. This was a centre I would be happy to work in - trained teachers, understanding, respectful, trustworthy and KAUPAPA MAORI too. Also in 2003, I took on another role within Te Kōpae – that of a kuia. My whānau was graced with another baby, our mokopuna Sapphire. We were a package-deal (hehehe!). However, despite the joy in my life – my mokopuna, my teaching status and being a valued member of Te Kōpae's teaching team - I struggled with self-confidence. I didn't realise it at the time but I was constricted by the fear of making mistakes and the scary prospect of trying new things. Something had to change!

In November 2006, my beloved Koroua (grandfather) died. One night, following his death, I was having a restless night, contemplating the COI research and what that truly meant for me and my family. At about two or three o'clock in the morning, I had the feeling of something sitting on my shoulder. Thinking about my Koroua, it suddenly became quite clear to me, "Ok, what legacy did you leave me? Apart from the happy memories of my childhood, you left me your turangawaewae, your whakapapa, and your reo, tikanga and kawa." I realised this was something I needed to pick up or otherwise it was going to be lost. I wouldn't be able to pass it down to my mokopuna when the time was right for her to learn about her whakapapa. All of sudden I felt a new sense of purpose and determination.

The outcomes of my change in thinking have been profound. On a family level, there has

been significant growth in Sapphire's language development and confidence. Her level of reo Maori is strong and she is not afraid to use it, wherever she goes. People look at her and she's quite adamant that she's not going to change to English, even if they don't understand what she's talking about. I'm proud of her for that. A big loud of applause must go to my husband whose development has come 'full circle'. Before, te reo Māori and tikanga wasn't something he would even think about - maybe for a minute and then the thought would be gone. But now he's got a cellphone, he's texting in Maori. He hates cellphones! But we bought him one for Christmas and it has turned him around, texting Oti and I every chance he gets. The changes for my family have a lot to do with Te Kopae's COI research, particularly the Four Responsibilities of Leadership. At home it has become a type of ritual or game - finding examples of Taking Responsibility, Being Responsible, Having Responsibility and Sharing Responsibility. Keith will do something and Oti will say, "Hey that's taking responsibility Dad!" So those have been some big highs for us as a whanau, and for him. He's starting to realise that, yes, you are appreciated and valued. You work long hours to support our whanau but there are also little things that you do that you probably don't think about which we all benefit from, and you're taking charge of that.

Te Kōpae Piripono's COI journey has proven to be an amazing leadership-learning journey for me. I have learnt to ask for clarification if I'm unsure and I now feel comfortable to ask for help. I am more confident to express my point of view, without feeling whakama. I feel safe that others are around me to support me, should I need it. Te Kopae Piripono is a safe haven where I can practice, try new things, make mistakes and learn from them. Parents and Kaitiaki have noticed the shift and it has had a positive impact to my self-esteem. One parent made the comment, "This time last year you would never have dreamt of taking on the role of kaikaranga." I think about this all the time. Yes, I can do it. I hope that parents and new Kaitiaki will see us as role models and feel safe to take up the challenges too. Before the COI research, I believed I had only once chance so I always to had 'get it right.' That was the perfectionist in me talking. Now, it's okay. I'm human. I am allowed to make mistakes. If I get it wrong, I am open to feedback and I will learn from that. I have started on a long journey but it is awesome.

I am buzzing at the moment. Writing learning stories and discussing children's learning with other Kaitiaki and parents, in a more in-depth way, has done a lot for my teaching practice. I'm having fun. We have lots of laughter. There are no barriers. There is too much good stuff to have time for barriers. For myself, an unexpected consequence of sharing and celebrating children's learning has been the considerable positive feedback I have received. The positive feedback I got took away the rest of the fear I had of getting it wrong. I feel really happy that there is that deeper involvement with whānau and it's not about them just being parents, it's about us being a whānau.

6.5 Stepping outside your comfort zone - Bob's Story

Matua Bob has been involved in Te Kōpae Piripono since the centre's foundation. Over the years, Bob's three youngest children (of six) have been enrolled. Although Bob didn't realise it at the time, he was a godsend to the whānau. He had much to contribute, as a carpenter and handyman, as a landscaper and machine operator of all types and sizes, as a father figure to the children, and a mate to the adults. We relied on Bob's expertise to problem-solve away property issues. We were a small whānau, and quite a close bunch. It hadn't occurred to us to tell Bob how important he was to the group, or how much we appreciated his contribution. We were just all there together making it happen, whānau. Bob worked long hours and there were many times that he could not make it to the Kōpae. He was reticent and distracted at times, but we barely noticed, we used to say he was a deep thinker, that though he might not say a lot, what he did say was spot on. So he was shy...there were a few of us!

We also found Bob frustrating over those years because, although he was skilled in areas highly valued in the community, when career pathways opened up to advance Bob in business, he didn't take them. In the positions he held, he would not assert himself. At home, decisions would be made to improve the family home, or to do other things, but the job would often not be followed through to completion. As a speaker of Māori, Bob was an asset to the whānau, but he spoke hesitantly. He was slow to put himself forward. We

would joke about wanting to put a bomb under him, or to give him a boot, to get him going. But that was Bob. We came to accept the way he was.

In 2006/7, we questioned Bob, along with other whānau members, on the barriers to participation and father involvement, and he began talking about his experience. Bob told us about how every step of his life journey had been a struggle with his feelings of inadequacy, and his fear of failing and disappointing others. His lack of self-belief had confined him to a comfort zone in which he excelled, but success in that restricted range of activities did not allow him to take risks and venture beyond that zone to test the upper limits of his abilities. Therefore, he lived a safe existence, doing things he felt comfortable doing, telling himself things were ok, yet feeling frustrated and embarrassed that he could not go further. This, despite being the top joinery apprentice in Taranaki, in his time; raising six wonderful children and having the support of a devoted (but frustrated) wife, and being sought after by many in the community. We learned that when Bob got married, he believed his role in the family was that of breadwinner and provider. Work therefore, always came first. Bob's view of parenthood had the wife as the homemaker who raised the children. The husband was out earning the money. Family life and relationships had revolved around that understanding. In Bob's own words, "I didn't think I needed to be there with the kids...my upbringing was so different, and I never questioned it. I came to realise all that, later on." (interview, 8.8.07)

We didn't know it at the time, but early involvement in Te Kōpae Piripono had also been difficult for Bob. He felt challenged on many fronts, from his stereotypical preconceptions about family and gender difference, to parenting style, to what he sensed were people's expectations of him as a Māori-speaking Māori male, and to the very use of te reo Māori. We didn't know it at the time but there were occasions when he had to force himself to come in to the Kōpae (interview, 8.8.07). Bob could recall incidents in his upbringing, which he suspected had something to do with his lack of self-confidence.

Bob is from a large whānau of 11 that settled in Auckland in the late 1950s. He is the middle child, with four older and four younger siblings. Both his parents were native speakers of te reo Maori. Here is what Bob had to say about that at a wānanga whānau:

My parents were native speakers of Māori and you would think it would have brushed off on to me, but it didn't. That's the way that my parents were. Māori was here (confined to certain times and places) and everything else was in English. When I entered Te Kōpae Piripono, I thought, "Yes, let's learn te reo Māori, it will be good for our kids to learn te reo Māori." But what I didn't realise was the bigger picture of what that really required, as far as involvement, commitment and all the rest. It's huge, and as it started to get bigger and bigger, I started to think, "Oh, this is not for me." Then I'd have some tamariki come around and they would start to kōrero Māori to me and I'd go, "Uh, oh!" I did used to do that. But then I realised that it was not good, because these young tamariki were going, "What's wrong with this? Why is he running away from me?" And I realised I was passing how I was feeling on to the kids. So I thought the next thing to do was to get into te reo Māori. It was really, really hard, but by the same token, it was a huge learning curve for me (15.11.05).

How could Bob not have known that his reo Māori was already pretty good? His children, through him and his wife's efforts had te reo Māori as their native language. Bob told us how inadequate and unconfident he had felt around us at Te Kōpae Piripono. How did we miss that? If only we had known then all that we have learned about fear and anxiety since.

A few years down the track now, and many hours of talking and participation later, Bob was able to tell us what he has got out of involvement at Te Kōpae Piripono, "Personal growth and the growth of the family. Meeting new whānau and joining others to grow together as a whānau." He has moved a long way up the poutama of learning and development over the years, and the poutama continues to stretch up ahead of him. Bob is now a successful trainer in all levels of driver education. He is on the boards of

several organisations, and is highly regarded in the community. At home, he and his wife are able to talk easier about all manner of things they couldn't before, and the family is contented, busy going places. Bob continues to grow, and through sport and other activities he is taking others with him, providing support for males in the same position that he once was. Bob's contribution to the Kōpae's understandings around whānau support and development, and the engagement of fathers, has been substantial. In January 2007 Bob wrote, "Whānau is important and all need to be supportive for the wellness of our tamariki, mokopuna... To learn, we need to step out of our comfort zones."

6.6 "The Kōpae Thing" - Wahi's Story

We lived in Australia for 20 years, and while it was an awesome lifestyle over there, we felt like something was missing. What that was we didn't really know, it was nothing that we could put a finger on. Then, in 1996, Mum brought a group of kids over from Tamarongo. They had planned a school trip to Brisbane, but the airline went bust, and they lost all their airfares and accommodation. The community pulled together and put them on the plane, and then we put them up in our backyard.

While they were with us, the answer to our puzzle hit us like a flash. I remember thinking, "That's it, that's what has been missing, te taha Māori!" We were so impressed to hear the kids kōrero Māori, it was like, "Wow, that's it, that's what we've been missing all these years." We decided then that we would come back home to find it, but it was my husband who actually took that step. He came back for a tangi, and while here he came down to Taranaki to visit Mum and Dad. He rang me from there and said, "That's it, I've got a job." He didn't even go back to Australia to help us pack up or anything, he just left it all to me - because he was worried that if he went back, I might not move. Even though that was what I wanted, we had become set in our ways over there. The kids were settled in school and all their education had been in Australia, but that was that, we uprooted and moved home.

Very quickly we started looking for a place for the kids. We started off at one centre, but it wasn't a good model to follow, and although we didn't know then what was a good model, we knew what wasn't right for us. And then my mother said, "I know this awesome place in New Plymouth. If you are alright travelling every day, we'll make the phone call." And so that is what we did. My youngest son had just turned 9 months, it was 1999. That was one of the hardest things I've had to do in my life, to walk through the door of the Kōpae. Mum had said it was total immersion, and although that is exactly what we wanted for our children, I was terrified.

Mum is a native speaker of Māori, but out of a family of nine children, only Mum and an uncle, speak Māori. My grandfather's philosophy was, if you want to beat the Pakeha, you have to be better than them, so he pushed all his kids through the Pakeha system, and didn't emphasise the Māori, although it was always there. My Dad didn't speak Māori at all, his mother was from an area where she was taken away from her parents and put into a foster home to give her a better education. But at the end of the day she was the cleaner, the flunky, and the babysitter. She got taken away from her parents when she was seven. And she was put into a white pinny, no shoes, and she was not allowed to speak Māori, though that was all she knew, separated from her family...

I remember Mum's parents speaking Māori all the time. I must have understood. And when we were growing up Mum would speak to us in Māori...but we weren't particularly interested at that time. At school there was no Māori language, if you wanted to do Māori you could, but it had to be long distance through the Correspondence School. We also had a kapa haka but it was very sterile, with no room for movement and growth. We had a 1st XV rugby team which did the haka before a game, and that was all they did. When we had a pōwhiri at the school we were only allowed to do the haka and 'Pā mai'. We had a repertoire of three waiata, we weren't allowed to do any more...I had no idea there was anything more, until I became an adult.

When we came to Te Kōpae Piripono, the biggest thing for me was the support here. If that hadn't been the case I would probably have been out the door in pursuit of my kaupapa - I

wouldn't have hung around to put my kids through something that was only lip service. So, as hard as it was to walk through that door, I made myself do it. Even though I really wanted to be there, I still needed a push, and support. We were travelling from Opunake every day, but I really really wanted things Māori for my family so I was determined to make it work. And I saw the beauty in everybody here and that made me determined to stay and learn more.

I loved the fact that the Kōpae encouraged people to get educated and to better themselves for the sake of their families...that was a big feather in the cap, and another reason I came here. I have been really grateful for the support I received to do my early childhood training. The training fitted well with the Kōpae, it helped me move in the direction I wanted to go. I completed my Diploma in Teaching - Early Childhood and also Te Tohu Mōhiotanga, and Te Ataarangi, Tau 1 (year 1) and Tau 2 (year 2). I started Tau 3 (year 3) but it was a bit too full on with all other things happening at the time. I still plan to do it when the time is right.

So we have been here in the whānau of the Kōpae for nine years, and it has been an amazing journey. My youngest son has been at the kura kaupapa Māori for some time now, but he and the other kids still feel very much a part of the furniture of the Kōpae. When they come here they are so happy to see all the whāne and the rest of the whānau. They often talk about the Kōpae. Because my youngest son began here at the Kōpae when he was very young, he has what I call the 'Kōpae Thing'. Whakaaro nui ki te tangata – always thinking of others and expecting to deal with issues the way the Kōpae does.

We speak Māori at home. My husband is working on building his reo, although he has been focusing on their English language development at home and preparing them for later on (we have just sent PJ to a Māori boys' boarding school). My husband has also been looking at his Tongan side as well. The kids have been asking questions, such as, "Why aren't we learning Tongan? We have to be fair, we've got Tongan tūpuna as well." So he's doing that as well. We believe that whatever language the kids choose to use, they have to be able to speak it properly.

It is important for me that my kids have a strong taha Māori, and that they can stand where ever they go. For example, before every football game, PJ does a karakia. Even when we've travelled away to Waikato and Wellington, before kai and stuff, there is always karakia. He would just stand up and do it, he expects everyone is going to stop for a karakia, and he'll always stand up and do a mihi to tangata whenua. No one asked him to, he just did it, to him, it's just what you do.

PJ's teachers say he is a strong, happy and confident young man, willing to give all things a go, and he makes friends easily. We, his parents, are very happy to hear this. The day before he left he wanted to dress up in his new school uniform and come to the Kōpae so he could show the Kaitiaki and whāene. He said, "The Kōpae was where it all started for me Mum." I was really touched by that. I have always known that the Kōpae was significant in the lives of my children, but I was a bit taken aback by the depth of this statement. When we talk on the phone he always says "*Me tuku taku aroha ki ngā whāene me ngā tamariki o Te Kōpae,*" (*Please pass on my love to the whāene and children of the Kōpae*).

I have gained a lot from involvement in Te Kōpae Piripono. I have developed self-confidence, and have grown educationally. I know that Māori early childhood education is my career path. I believe I make a good support person for other whānau members, because I empathise with those who find it challenging... I've been there. I can help whānau who are like I was. I have overcome some significant obstacles in my time and I can help others do the same to achieve stability and belief in self, so their children have a really strong standing. Education is important and families need to know they can make choices.

To this end, I have found the co-construction of learning stories a fantastic tool, especially for new whānau who are still finding their feet and where they fit. Through that conversation process, they begin to feel much more comfortable, you can see that when they come in, there is not the 'rush in, and rush out, before someone sees me or notices me'. People are starting to hang around a bit longer, and when you're talking to them they are actually looking you in the eye, at your face. If you get that eye contact and really engage with them, they become a lot more relaxed and comfortable.

It is awesome to recognise learning in children's play and to then share that with families, because whānau are seeing that same thing at home and are thinking, "Oh my God, is that what that is, I thought it was just da, da, da." It changes their outlook on their children's learning. Children's activity is no longer "just play". They are less likely to say to their children, "Just go over there and play." I've had some good feedback from parents regarding that. Some parents say they take the learning home and share it with grandparents and aunties, and that's quite empowering... Then they'll come back and say, "Mum was surprised when I said this." There's a lot of positive development happening in families. There's also positive development amongst the Kaitiaki. It is always good to hear the various perspectives of the other Kaitiaki. We always see different things. To play a positive role in shaping and influencing peoples lives is really empowering stuff. Goodness knows what our lives would look like if there had not been Te Kōpae Piripono.