

Chapter 8

REFLECTIONS OF OUR COI JOURNEY

This chapter provides the opportunity for research team members to step back from the research and reflect on our research journey, including our unique researcher/teacher relationship. This chapter also celebrates our amazing journey, and reflects what our time as a COI has meant for children and families, teachers, researchers and the early childhood sector.

8.1 Working as Whānau - Our Teacher-Researcher Relationship

“Ko koe ki tēna kīwai, ko au ki tēnei kīwai o te kete.”

(You carry your handle and I'll carry my handle of our kete)

The above whakatauki (tribal saying) has come to symbolically represent our research journey - the fundamental concepts of our research, the research process itself, our findings and conclusions and, above all, our learning. As previously mentioned, Ngā Kīwai o te Kete (the handles of the kete) whakatauki denotes contribution, interdependence, responsibility, working together, supporting each other and having a shared purpose - symbolised by the metaphoric kete. “Ngā Kīwai o te Kete” therefore provides a perfect representation of our unique research associate and teacher-researcher relationship – working as whānau.

Throughout the COI research, we have adopted a whānau approach. Working as whānau brings with it all the benefits of shared understandings, shared ownership and shared responsibility - particularly the support from the whole whānau of Te Kōpae Piripono. In keeping with the ethos of ‘Ngā Kīwai o te Kete’, it was essential that our research associate share our collective worldview and was a speaker of te reo Māori. As one of our founding whānau, Erana Hond-Flavell, ably fit this criteria. Because of our long-standing relationship, right from day one, we were already up to speed, ‘research-relationship’ - wise.

Because of our existing shared understandings, we were able to progress our research quickly and easily. As a whānau member, Erana's support went beyond the actual research itself. Bishop (1996) argues this whānau approach is a familiar aspect of kaupapa Māori research where groups, that are constituted as a whānau, embark on research based on principles of whānau – traditional or contemporary.

The whānau is a location for communication, for sharing outcomes and for constructing shared common understandings and meanings. Individuals have responsibilities to care for and nurture other members of the group, while still adhering to the kaupapa of the group... ..Group products and achievement frequently take the form of group performances, not individual performances.

(Bishop, 1996, pp.148-149)

One issue for us has been that, because we are a small, stand-alone kaupapa Māori and Immersion Māori early childhood centre, sustaining the research over a three-year period has been difficult. In our case, because we require registered teachers who are also speakers of te reo Māori, recruitment issues, and the provision of research release time for staff has been a challenge. In these circumstances, cooperation and open communication have been essential requirements of working effectively together. Our whānau research team made the COI research work by being well planned and task and outcome oriented. Each team member assumed responsibility (or leadership) for their areas of strength. Each took on complementary roles that involved both collective and individual effort.

8.2 A Greater Emphasis on Teaching and Learning

A dynamic trend that has emerged in the course of this research has been a greater emphasis on teaching and learning within the Kaitiaki team. There has been a much deeper understanding of the significant learning that can be recognised in children's play. Recognising and responding to that learning is refining teaching practice and teachers' reflection on practice. An example of this deeper level of reflection is shown in one teacher's comments, "I've realised that I need to step back more, that I've been intervening too quickly, that I need to step back and look for children's signals when they need me," (Kaitiaki reflection, 31.8.06). An enabler has been an

interview process that we established between each Kaitiaki and Lynsi Latham-Saunders (research assistant and professional development facilitator). Through the interview process, a number of questions were asked every week, which gave Kaitiaki the opportunity to clarify their thinking and their practice, individually and collectively. The interviews made very clear the expectation that Kaitiaki understandings would be applied in practice. Such questions included, “What have you documented about children’s learning and what has that told you about (the child)?”

8.3 Documentation of Children’s Learning

The research has helped spearhead and drive the dynamic documentation of children’s learning. Kaitiaki are not only enthusiastically motivated to document children’s learning on a constant basis, the learning they are documenting is authentic and real. The learning stories are the formal recognition of depth of children’s learning. The stories and Kaitiaki professional discussion are focussed on the learning, not the activity. The series of interviews with Kaitiaki posed reflective questions about the documenting of learning. Through this process Kaitiaki critiqued and refined their learning stories, to help them get to the depth of the learning. Kaitiaki are now better able to focus on noticing, recognising, and responding (Cowie, 2000) to the recognised learning (the ‘noticing’ was often documented well through the photos, which often illustrated the activity adequately but not the deeper learning).

When Kaitiaki recognised the learning, they brought their professional perspective. They made the learning visible and they were confident to share this with whānau. This enabled children’s whānau to understand the learning, in a context that made sense for them. It also enabled a partnership between Kaitiaki and whānau and a sharing of responsibility for the learning. The documenting and the sharing of the learning is absolutely about rich understandings of outcomes for children. A key part of this trend has actually been about greater Kaitiaki understanding of the learning and the importance of their teaching role. It has meant they have become more responsible for teaching and learning. The interview process we established enabled deep and ongoing reflection on practice. Initially, during these interviews, Kaitiaki identified barriers to their learning about recognising and responding to children’s learning. But this gradually changed. The process of Kaitiaki regularly sharing learning stories and engaging in professional

dialogue about the learning, helped remove the barriers. One Kaitiaki commented that the discussion,

..took away a lot of the fear of, “Have I got it right?”, or, “Am I on the same kaupapa as you, or am I right off the track?” That was a scary thing, but once we got into sharing our own learning stories and seeing that we are all different... ..we could see some really intense learning going on...” (Kaitiaki interview, 21.12.06).

Another Kaitiaki also found sharing the learning helpful.

It is good to see the different perspectives of the other Kaitiaki. I was having a chuckle at a learning story (another Kaitiaki did) of two girls dancing. I took the photos and she saw things that I didn't see. That was cool! (Kaitiaki interview, 19.11.06)

8.4 Greater Partnership with Whānau about Children's Learning

The research has also brought about greater understandings with whānau about their children's learning. Whānau are now assuming more responsibility for their children's learning in, as well as out, of Te Kōpae Piripono. Kaitiaki are now excitedly and enthusiastically sharing the depth of learning with whānau that enables whānau to recognise this deeper level learning. An example is the sharing of the learning about a three-year-old girl. Previously her activity would have been discussed, but there would not have been a lot of discussion about the deeper learning. Now there is daily discussion between Kaitiaki and parents about the learning. Kaitiaki are now confident to initiate discussions spontaneously. As one Kaitiaki put it:

I think I've become more involved with the learning stories, and to feel really excited that I am sharing those with whānau as well as with the tamariki, and looking deeper than what I have been in the past. I've learned a lot” (Kaitiaki reflection, 21.12.06).

As a consequence, relationships between the adults and between adults and children have been strengthened. In another example, a parent is now quick to recognise the deeper learning that is taking place for her son on a daily basis. It was a revelation to her. She now sees him differently, in a more positive light. The parent understands the significant role she has in her son's learning.

8.5 Building Research Capacity

As these trends reveal, the greatest enabler for our COI research has been the nature and level of professional development for Kaitiaki. The interview process, using the reflective questions and the expectation that Kaitiaki would bring something, or have something to offer each week, jump-started reflection on children's learning and Kaitiaki's own practice in a major way. However, we continually had to negotiate the cultural and whānau commitments of our unique setting, including coping with an ongoing shortage of relievers who are both registered teachers and qualified in both written and spoken Te Reo Māori. One point we want to emphasise about our COI research journey is that, for the whānau of Te Kōpae Piripono, research is no longer a separate exclusive activity for university academics. Research has been accepted as inherent to teaching and learning, and fundamental to educational excellence. Kaitiaki, in particular, are comfortable with the research process and some have expressed the intention to continue with further study.

8.6 Dissemination

Our whānau research team understood the need to disseminate our research findings to the wider Māori and early childhood community. However, this did not diminish the fact that, presenting to large audiences, was initially a daunting prospect for some of the whānau. But over the duration of the three-year research project, this anxiety has been mediated by the number and frequency of dissemination activities and requests. We have gained greater confidence to present, share and discuss our journey with others. Having the whānau involved in dissemination, in a variety of ways, has been an important part of the dissemination process. Contributions may have been different but they all added to the collective vision and provided a very real face to the research.