Whakapapa: Culturally valid assessment in early childhood

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E kore au e ngaro; he kākano i ruiruia mai i Rangiātea.

I will never be lost; the seed was sown in Rangiātea.

—traditional Māori proverb

This proverb emphasises that the speaker knows his or her whakapapa links to the Māori spiritual homeland of Rangiātea, so is confident and secure with a positive future. Whakapapa provides a continuum of life from the spiritual world to the physical world, from the creation of the universe to people past, present and future. While whakapapa permits Māori to trace descent through to past generations, it also allows movement and growth into the future. Furthermore, the literal translation of whakapapa is "to place in layers". The multiple layers of whakapapa involve interpretations that are fundamental to Māori values, beliefs and ways of knowing (Te Rito, 2007; Walker, 1993).

Introduction

This article illustrates how traditional Māori forms of knowing, such as whakapapa, can provide culturally valid frames for assessment within contemporary Māori early childhood contexts. I discuss work completed for my doctoral thesis (Rameka, 2012), which studied the progress of Māori early childhood centres and kōhanga reo towards the development of kaupapa Māori early childhood assessment understandings, approaches and framings. The doctoral research was firmly positioned within a kaupapa Māori research paradigm. This paradigm has been described as "an attempt to retrieve space for Māori voices and perspectives" (Tolich, 2001, p. 40). Basic to the research, therefore, was the articulation of Māori values, understandings and epistemologies in relation to early childhood teaching, learning and assessment theory and practice. The research questions included the following.

- What is assessment in a kaupapa Māori early childhood setting?
- What does kaupapa Māori assessment look like?
- Why is kaupapa Māori assessment important? Why should we do it?

The frameworks developed as a result of my doctoral thesis were also grounded in kaupapa Māori theory. This theory can be regarded as a local version of critical theory, which holds that the social context is shaped by the conflict between the powerless and the powerful, the excluded and the included. Transformation is required to expose, confront and challenge these disparities, injustices and inequalities. Kaupapa Māori refers to a "Māori philosophical approach to a field of practice or theory that focuses on challenging well-established Western ideas about knowledge" (Eketone, 2008, p. 1). The Māori experience is central to the kaupapa Māori theoretical base, which accepts Māori and Māori processes as reality and uses them within a Māori philosophical framework. It is important to understand that kaupapa Māori does not compel the rejection of Western theory and practice: it is not a matter of using either one or the other. Rather, kaupapa Māori requires the repositioning or recentering of Māori theory, knowledge and world views. Smith (1999, p. 39) states "it is about reconciling and reprioritising what is really important about the past with what is important about the present".

The initial phase of my doctoral research—from 2003 to 2005—involved monthly meetings of 1–2 hours'

duration with a kōhanga reo and two bilingual early childhood services. Between 10 and 30 meetings were held, depending on the service. These meetings focused on three areas. The first was to capture each service's journey, including:

- successes and achievements
- what had happened over the month
- any issues that may have arisen
- what was supporting or inhibiting work
- problems
- emerging assessment and kaupapa Māori understandings.

Secondly, the meetings were a forum for collaboratively critiquing, challenging, interpreting, reinterpreting, exploring, making sense of and further representing thinking on teaching, learning and assessment. Thirdly, the meetings were a platform to plan what might be worked on in the upcoming month. Notes were taken of discussions and emergent thinking (Research Notes). From 2003 to 2005 the doctoral research ran concurrently with the development of *Te Whatu Pōkeka: Kaupapa Māori Assessment for Learning Early Childhood Exemplars* (Ministry of Education, 2009), a professional support resource.

The second phase of the research—from 2006 to 2008—entailed one or two follow-up meetings a year being held with services, from three to six meetings in total. These meetings focused on two areas. First, we discussed and highlighted issues related to each service's journey; their thoughts about the journey; what had been achieved; how and why; outcomes of the work; and how this had impacted on thinking. Secondly, the kaiako aimed to flesh out understandings of issues, patterns, thinking and developments on kaupapa Māori assessment from the documentation developed in the first phase of the research. Depending on circumstances, these meetings took the form of either taped interviews that were later transcribed, or informal discussions where research notes were taken.

In this article I first explore sociocultural assessment understandings and emphasise the importance of culturally valid assessment, especially to indigenous peoples such as Māori. Next I introduce the concept of whakapapa and its relevance to learning and assessment. I then draw upon the three *Te Whatu Pōkeka* whakapapa phases of thinking and learning—Mōhiotanga (Knowings), Mātauranga (Learnings) and Māramatanga (Understandings)—to construct assessment understandings, and relate these understandings to the whakapapa assessment

framing developed by one of the case study services. This particular case study service is an urban kōhanga reo located in Hamilton with a strong focus and commitment to te reo and tikanga Māori (Māori language and culture). Comments from Manu, the Infants and Toddlers group supervisor, are taken from interviews held during the second phase of the research and are included to illustrate and accentuate key aspects of the framework. Research notes from phases one and two are also included. Finally I describe how the whakapapa process of layering is utilised as the structure for the kōhanga's assessment framing.

Sociocultural assessment

In a broad sense, assessment is inherent within all interactions. Individuals reflect their understandings of one another's intended meanings, which influences the ways in which the interaction progresses (Greeno & Gresalfi, 2008). According to Moss, Girard and Haniford (2006), all assessment practices occur within a "particular activity system, community of practice, or learning environment" (p. 137). Furthermore, developing understandings of learning and how assessment documents and supports learning requires an understanding of the entire activity system. From a sociocultural perspective, learning is an interaction between the learner and the social setting, and it occurs as people move through understandings (rather than to the end point of understanding). It involves transformation of understanding and assessments that are active and dynamic (Greeno, 2002; James, 2006; James & Pedder, 2006; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rogoff, 2003). Assessment is not seen as something to be done to children—a technical activity that can reveal or display learning. Rather, it is something that is actively produced through social interaction that entails consequences (Pryor & Torrance, 2000). Sociocultural assessment can be likened to "assessment as inquiry" that focuses not only on what learners are learning, but also on how and why. It moves away from assessment practices that seek defined behaviours and prescriptions, to educational practice and assessment involving participation in activities and events where learners develop interpretations to understand and transform their worlds (Delandshere, 2002; Lund, 2008; Moss et al., 2006). Rogoff (1998, p. 691) explains that "key to transformation is participation in community activities, and not

the acquisition of competences, separate from the sociocultural activities of the community in which people participate".

Greeno and Gresalfi (2008) add that it does not make sense to claim to assess learners' knowledge in "simple qualitative terms" without taking into account the activity system. It entails a shift in emphasis, from the individual learner, as the unit of analysis, "to a learner-operating-with-mediational-means and, in a more complex way, to the larger activity system, community of practice, or learning environment" (Moss, 2008, p. 228; Wertsch, 1991, p. 12). Gipps (1999) concurs, stating "the requirement is to assess process as well as product; the conception must be dynamic rather than static; and attention must be paid to the social and cultural context of both learning and assessment" (p. 375). Greeno and Gresalfi (2008) state that knowing:

> is fundamentally relative to a frame of reference in which it is observed and interpreted. The frame of reference for an assessment of someone's knowing is the activity system in which the person participates in generating information that is used in evaluating what he or she knows. (p. 187)

Culturally valid assessment

Weenie's (2008) writing on curriculum development for Aboriginal peoples in Canada highlights features of indigenous cultures that must be taken into account when addressing the issue of cultural validity and culturally valid assessment. Weenie states that we are "embodied knowers" who "enact the world we inhabit and know about" (Weenie, 2008, p. 550). She states:

> The landscape of Aboriginal curriculum involves the colonial history, worldviews, philosophies, languages, cultures, stories, songs, literature, art, spirituality, ceremonies and ethos of Aboriginal people. These are the 'things' or objects that make up our embodied ways of knowing. They form a body of knowledge that represents the order of things in the worlds we live and work in. (Weenie, 2008, pp. 551–552)

Key to understandings of kaupapa Māori assessment, therefore, is the recognition that assessment should be designed to reflect culturally located interpretive systems, and that these are different for Māori and non-Māori.

Consequently, different learning and assessment practices are required. These differences must be recognised and addressed in ways that are culturally appropriate and responsive (Bishop & Glynn, 1999; Durie, 2001; Smith, 1997). Lund (2008, p. 33) concurs, stating that: "How learners' efforts are evaluated will reflect a particular view of knowledge and what counts as relevant competencies, goals and results."

Whakapapa

Whakapapa has many meanings, but can generally be viewed as genealogy and history. The Williams' *Dictionary of the Māori Language* (2001) definitions of whakapapa include:

* to lie flat
* place in layers, lay one upon another
* recite in proper order genealogies, legends etc
* genealogical table.

"Papa" describes something that is broad and flat, such as a board or slab, and "whaka" can be translated as "to enable" or "make happen". Whakapapa relates to the idea of placing in layers or laying one on another. It operates at various levels, but is most commonly concerned with genealogical narratives, stories that are recounted layer upon layer, ancestor upon ancestor, generation upon generation, up to the present day. Māori are able to trace descent lines back through time to the birthing of the world. The birthing of the world is normally told using a whakapapa format. This outlines the process of creation from the beginning of time to the primal parents, Ranginui (sky father) and Papatūānuku (earth mother), and their children, including Tāne, from whom Māori descend. Following is an example of the creation whakapapa.

> I te tīmatanga, ko te kore—In the beginning there was a void.
>
> Ko te pō—Within the void was the night.
>
> Nā te pō—From within the night, seeds were cultivated
>
> Ka puta ko te Kukune—It was here that movement began—the stretching.
>
> Ko te Pupuke—There the shoots enlarged and swelled.
>
> Ko te Hihiri—Then there was pure energy.
>
> Ko te Mahara—Then there was the subconsciousness.
>
> Ko te Manako—Then the desire to know.
>
> Ka puta i te whei ao—Movement from darkness to light, from conception to birth.
>
> Ki te ao mārama e—From learning to knowing.
>
> Tihēi Mauri ora—I sneeze and there is life. (Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 48)

Whakapapa as assessment

Smith (2000) makes the point that whakapapa is a way of thinking which is fundamental to almost every facet of a Māori worldview. She states: "Whakapapa is a way of thinking. A way of learning, a way of storing knowledge, and a way of debating knowledge. It is inscribed in virtually every aspect of our worldview" (p. 234). Whitt, Roberts, Norman and Grieves (2003, p. 5) add that the importance of whakapapa within Māori culture cannot be overestimated. It acts as a "fundamental form of knowing: it functions as an epistemological template". An example of this is the way the creation whakapapa is utilised to represent the process of conception and birthing, of the world "te orokohanga", of the child "te whānau tangata" and of learning of the child "te āhuatanga o te tamaiti" *(*Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 49). These birthing concepts relate not only to the physical evolving of matter, but also the evolving consciousness, thinking and learning. *Te Whatu Pōkeka* outlines three generic whakapapa phases of consciousness, thinking and learning: Mōhiotanga (Knowings), Mātauranga (Learnings) and Māramatanga (Understandings).

Mōhiotanga—Knowings

The first phase, Mōhiotanga, relates to the first two periods of the creation whakapapa, te kore (the void) and te pō (the night). This is a time of unlimited potential, a time of latent power where all possibilities were contained and from where all things were developed (Ministry of Justice, 2001). Walker (1990, p. 11) states:

> Te kore signified space, it contained in its vastness the seeds of the universe and was therefore a state of potential. Te Pō was the celestial realm and the domain of the gods.

Te Whatu Pōkeka relates this to learning of the child "te āhuatanga o te tamaiti". It asks three questions: Ko wai koe? Nā wai koe? I ahu mai koe i hea? (Who are you? From whom are you? Where have you come from?) *(*Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 50). *Te Whatu Pōkeka* describes *Mōhiotanga* in relation to the child's learning: "what a child already knows and what they bring with them highlights new knowledge, new discoveries" (p. 49).

For the kōhanga reo, "Mōhiotanga" was the starting place for their assessment framework. Kaimahi were expected to focus on the questions: Nō wai koe? Nā wai koe? I ahu mai koe i hea? (Who are you? From whom are you? Where have you come from?) This required that kaimahi know the child, their whakapapa, their temperament, personality traits, likes/dislikes, interests and maybe most importantly their rich potential for growth. Manu, the Infants and Toddlers group supervisor, emphasises this when she states:

> …where they come from? who they're connected to? and what experiences or tikanga or kawa or traditional practices and experiences at kōhanga? … are they having that link back into who they are?
>
> I think it's a big thing … it's something that you've got to be aware of when you're talking about the whakapapa of the child … getting to know that child … meeting with the whānau or just standing back and watching.

Mātauranga—Learnings

The second phase, Mātauranga, relates to the next periods of the creation whakapapa:

* te kukune (the stretching)
* te pupuke (the enlarged)
* te hihiri (pure energy)
* te mahara (the subconscious)
* te manako (the desire to know).

This is a period of growth, change, challenge and increasing potential. For the child this is a time of apprehension and uncertainty, but also excitement and expectancy. There are two features of the "Mātauranga" phase that have major significance for children's learning and assessment. Manu refers to these two features when she asks:

> What is [the child] trying to show me? How can I support this child's development?

For the kōhanga reo, a key to assessment was ascertaining what the child was saying as opposed to what the child was specifically learning. What are the messages about learning here? What stretching is occurring? What's happening here for the child? Underpinning these questions is the fundamental belief that all children learn, given the right conditions, so

what are the conditions required to enhance the child's opportunities to learn? Manu describes the process as asking herself:

> What are you trying to tell me?
>
> …you know the ones who are … maia, … confident and then there's the ones who are quite whakama (shy). But why are they whakama? It is for us to try and build their confidence up so that they're not whakama?

From a Māori perspective, the child inherits many characteristics, including spiritual attributes, that are fundamental to the child's holistic wellbeing. These attributes, which are derived from the spirit world, define the nature and sanctity of the person. "The child is also heir to several spiritual attributes which are fundamental to the spiritual, psychological, and social well-being of the individual" (Mead, 2003, p. 60).

These attributes must be acknowledged and supported to make sure that there is a state of balance or holistic wellbeing. They are especially important as they relate to children's abilities to work through challenge and uncertainty. They are:

> Te wairua o te tamaiti: The child is an emotional, spiritual being. The concept of wairua is derived from Māori cosmology. Wairua is a concept linked to spirituality, the sanctity of each individual, and the special attributes that a person is born with, which help to define his/her place in time, space, and locality.
>
> Te mana tō te tamaiti: The child is powerful. Tapu and mana are inseparable. Where tapu is the potential for power, mana is the power, the realization of tapu of the child. The mana of a child is derived from their links with ngā atua. The spiritual powers are their immediate source of mana (mana atua)—they are the source of the child's tapu; they come from their iwi, hapū, and whānau (mana tangata) and from their land, their tūrangawaewae (mana whenua)…
>
> Te mauri tangata: The child as an active force of life. Mauri is a generic life force. People are born with mauri, and it remains with them all their lives. Mauri is an essential and inseparable part of the child. When the body is physically and socially well, the mauri is in a state of balance. (Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 51)

Manu stresses the significance of these characteristics in her comments on what the child is trying to say:

> You know … wairua … it's trying to get … more in-depth.
>
> They talk about behaviour management … why is that child misbehaving? Is it because the wairua is not right?
>
> It's a living thing… So even though they've got that mana, when they get a bit older, their mana it sort of develops a bit more. It's like they're carrying that kete … and they're filling it up.
>
> Rather than thinking that she can show me that she is able to zip a bag, which I could see she could do, or whether she could stand on a chair and tell me what activity she wants to do, I saw other signs of personality. Signs of spiritual personality, which I felt connected my thoughts and observations.

The second question posed by Manu makes reference to adult responsibilities and practice. It requires that children are exposed to new ideas and experiences, so that thinking, understandings and abilities are stretched and challenged, but where they are safe and protected. Research Notes (8 August 2005) highlight these responsibilities:

> Learning doesn't happen in isolation … it has a whakapapa in terms of people playing an indirect and direct role; children's experiences and environments in every setting play a link and meaning towards shaping/influencing that child's whakapapa.

Māramatanga—Understandings

The third phase, Māramatanga, is the enlightenment period of the creation whakapapa, te ao mārama (the enlightenment), when the child comes to understand new knowledge. For the kōhanga, "Māramatanga" did not relate only to the phase of realisation, enlightenment and clarification for the child. It was also a time to recognise the child's being, power, uniqueness and identity. It was a time of celebration and pride. As Manu puts it:

> [We see the child] as a child, as Māori, and as a taonga.
>
> …they (children) leave [kōhanga reo] proud, Māori and knowing … simply, who they are and where they came from.

Assessment as whakapapa

A whakapapa process of layering children's stories one upon another was critical to afford deeper understandings of children's learning and development.

Narratives of children participating in the kōhanga, and in community and whānau activities and events were recorded and collated to create a picture of the child, including holistic wellbeing and openness to learning. This provided a whakapapa platform which demonstrated children's thinking, which was organic, dynamic and connected and formed the basis for further development and support. Manu describes this process:

> Through documenting and collecting a number of narratives from a range of voices (child, staff, and whānau), the child's whakapapa begins to grow. Even though each story stands on its own, we believe that understanding the collective meaning tells of something more organic and that assessment from our perspective isn't seen in isolation to each story but rather assessment is a layering of events that have substance and connection to the whole (all of the stories).
>
> With a whakapapa, there's a beginning and continuation of existence. In terms of assessment, we begin with the child's whakapapa (linkage to te ao Māori me ōna whānau) that in context began even before the child was born. (Research Notes, 22 August 2005)
>
> [L]ittle snippets. You know, like … I had about ten little snippets, and writing a whakapapa story? … having snippets … it's never ending.

Conclusion

Inherent within the concept of whakapapa is the process of conception, birthing and evolution— of the world, of the child, and of consciousness and learning. The "whakapapa" assessment framing developed by the kōhanga recognises and values:

- who the child is and what knowings the child brings—Mōhiotanga
- the child's increasing potential and challenge to learn and grow—Mātauranga
- the child's enlightenment and understandings—Māramatanga.

By layering narratives as a whakapapa, learning is connected and made visible. This layering is

an ongoing process that links past knowings to present learnings and to future understandings. It therefore provides a powerful framing for kaupapa Māori assessment understandings and practice: for the thinking and learning process, as a means of capturing what is being learnt, and as a way of planning for further development.

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