Reflexivity in Kaupapa Māori Research: “He Ua Kōwhai”

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Nō Hea Tēnei Rautaki - Background

In 2012 Te Wāhanga, NZCER¹ alongside kaupapa Māori educational research collaborators² embarked on a project to explore the critical issues that face whānau in Māori education. While whānau are integral to the educational wellbeing of Māori ākonga, little research had been undertaken to explore whānau educational aspirations in more depth. Our research report *Kia Puāwaitia Ngā Tūmanako: Critical Issues for Whānau in Māori Education* (2012) identifies these critical issues in some depth, while also developing a Māori-led and whānau-informed research agenda for Māori education.³

Our research into diverse whānau educational aspirations presented us with an opportunity to construct a conceptual framework that helps us, as kaupapa Māori researchers, demonstrate ways that mātauranga Māori can guide and deepen our thinking, action and reflexivity in relation to whānau-led education priorities. *He Ua Kōwhai*, is a whakataukī that describes the kōwhai blossom and signals the appearance of the tūī and the availability of some food sources (Mead & Grove, 2007, p. 131 # 793). We have used this whakataukī as a metaphor in this space and time to support reflexivity in our kaupapa Māori educational research. Whakataukī or whakatauākī have long been used by Māori to explain human experiences and their connections to Te Ao Turoa. This paper briefly outlines the development of the *He Ua Kōwhai* through addressing four key points:

- He Aha Ai – Why Kaupapa Māori Reflexivity?

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¹ Te Wāhanga is the Māori research team within the New Zealand Council of Educational Research.
² We acknowledge the assistance of Drs Leonie Pihama and Jennly Bol Jun Lee for shaping the framework for the research and undertaking field work with whānau in kōhanga reo, wharekura and Pākehā schooling settings. Te Rōpū Tikanga Rangahau, our kaupapa Māori research reference group, also provided invaluable critical oversight of the project as it evolved. Members include Moana Jackson, Ani Mikacre, Lee Cooper and Hazel Philip.
This learning paper contributes to the NZARE conference theme of “innovative research design” by sharing our collective thinking regarding the reflexive life-cycles of He Ua Kōwhai. We explain how each element of the life cycle keeps our research grounded within Te Ao Māori. By exploring our subjectivities and reflexivity this paper provides creative room for complex methodological elements to emerge in relation to kaupapa Māori research practices. This paper is not intended to be a definitive description of what reflexivity ‘looks like’ in kaupapa Māori educational research. Rather, it provides a very brief overview of our thinking about the important role of reflexivity in our goal to create and sustain mātauranga Māori through kaupapa Māori research. In some small way, we want to engage people methodologically through critical reflection regarding an evolving kaupapa Māori research paradigm.

The risk of ‘putting pen to paper’ about kaupapa Māori reflexivity is that we present a one dimensional or singular view of how to be reflexive in kaupapa Māori research. This is not our aim or intention, and we welcome kaupapa Māori researchers to add to the kōrero presented here. Our aim is to build off collective experience, knowledge and intuition about ways of thinking and acting in kaupapa Māori research spaces.

He Aha Ai? – Why Kaupapa Māori Reflexivity?

The theoretical framework of Te Wāhanga educational research is anchored in kaupapa Māori approaches, generally described as research of direct relevance and benefit to Māori. We are particularly interested in the creative possibilities of mātauranga Māori and ngā kaupapa tuku iho - the philosophies and knowledge passed down from our ancestors - and how these can shape Māori educational research theory and practice in the 21st Century. During our kaupapa Māori research we continuously reflect on the potential power and complexity in undertaking kaupapa Māori approaches in creating mātauranga Māori.

Our reflexive model is influenced by the work of critical geographer Elizabeth Chacko (2004), who deliberately ‘unpacks’ ideas about researcher positionality when undertaking research:

Researchers face problems both of a general nature and specific to the setting in accommodating a range of identities. Positionality is a critical factor in framing social and professional relationships in the field; it sets the tone for the research, affecting its course and its outcomes. Moreover, due to its relativity, positionality is contingent and contested. Conflicts that stem from positionality could result in apprehension about both the disclosure of personal information and politics of representation of the Other, unequal relations of power and possible exploitation, and even lead to ethical problems for the researcher (Chacko, 2004, p. 52).

In taking heed of Chacko’s critical approach to positionality we were challenged to think of different and new approaches to frame our work and ourselves. During Kia Puāwaitia Ngā Tūmanako we had to inquire into our multiple identities and power relations when working with diverse whānau and our research collaborators. For example, whanaungatanga anchored our methodological approach for the project. However this also meant thinking and acting in a way that upheld the mana, rangatiratanga and kōrero of whānau we were working with, and the collective research team as a whole. Upon reflection, we realised the need for a
conceptual framework that deepens our understandings of whanaungatanga and associated kaupapa that overtly and covertly guide our thinking and actions as researchers. The emergence of the kaupapa Māori method kōrero ā-whānau (Hutchings et al., 2012, p. 6) which locates the multiple voices of whānau involved in kaupapa Māori and Pākehā educational systems at the centre of our work, enabled us to think about how kaupapa can evolve over time and throughout different contexts. This reflection helped focus our research on the aspirations and priorities of diverse whānau, not on disconnected or abstract researcher priorities.

As we entered into new realms of kaupapa Māori inquiry through learning, experiencing and enacting the methodology of whanaungatanga and methods of kōrero ā-whānau and wānanga, our awareness of researcher power relations deepened. We became conscious of our position as proponents of kaupapa Māori research approaches. We realised that our learning about what constitutes ‘kaupapa Māori research’ was on-going and can never be reduced to an essentialised template of ‘what kaupapa Māori researchers should do.’ Overall the multiple challenges of supporting Māori educational initiatives through our kaupapa Māori research became clear.

A motivator in developing this reflexivity framework was to support our safety and wellbeing as Kairangahau. We are a diverse team from a variety of backgrounds; yet we all share a commitment to strengthening and supporting rangatiratanga of diverse Māori communities through our research work. Developing an approach to kaupapa Māori reflexivity became necessary for us to navigate and survive the politics of kaupapa Māori as an approach to creating mātauranga Māori. We also realised that we have an opportunity to stretch and grow the field of kaupapa Māori theory and methodologies. We understand reflexivity as a constructive move towards kaupapa Māori research theory and practice (practice and theory), and we want to create room where we can interrogate and critique what has become essentialised as critical to kaupapa Māori research approaches. This means interrogating our own individual subjectivities and collective team identity. A focus on the subjective positioning of the self in reflexivity provides us with a frame to focus on the intersubjectivities of those we relate to as Kairangahau throughout the kaupapa Māori research passage. This retains an emphasis on whanaungatanga, as a team, and with those we are working with.

For us kaupapa Māori reflexivity means finding real-time ways of adapting our thinking, ideas, methods and practices in relation to the diverse Māori communities we work with. Chacko’s reflection about researcher positionality encourages us to reconsider the explicit and unseen power structures at work during our kaupapa Māori research. For example, there are times when how we work with whānau will need to change depending on our and their unique circumstance and context. This brings a degree of uncertainty as to how our research develops, who is collectively part of the process, and what will eventually emerge from our explorations. In this way kaupapa Māori reflexivity is iterative; an on-going process of exploring and being reminded about how we connect theory and practice and vice versa in our research. Being critical about what theories and ideas are used to frame issues in Te Ao Māori is vital. Tied to this are the practical ways we put theories and ideas into action with the people and organisations we work with. We must continually ask ourselves whether our assumptions, processes, projects and practices uphold the integrity of multiple kaupapa tuku iho, are they congruent with our visions for social and cultural justice, and do our research processes and outcomes positively contribute to the wellbeing of diverse Māori communities?

Kia Puāwaitia Ngā Tūmanako - The Research Context
We started to think about the need for a kaupapa Māori reflexivity framework as a result of our research that identified diverse whānau aspirations in Māori education. Kia Puāwaitia
Ngā Tūmanako asked a variety of whānau the question: What sorts of educational research would be of benefit to your children and whānau in education? The whānau responses to this question resulted in refining a Māori-led and whānau-informed research agenda for Te Wāhanga, while also uncovering a range of whānau educational research priorities across kaupapa Māori and Pākehā educational environments. Three overarching themes connected the many issues raised by whānau, including Ngā Moemoeā, Rangatiratanga and Te Reo Rangatira. These three themes created an umbrella for a number of key messages whānau wanted to make about the education system. These key messages included:

- More reo Māori and tikanga Māori support in the home and community is vital
- Structural racism and a lack of understanding and recognition of Māori world-views are continual barriers to Māori education
- Whānau need high-quality information in order to make informed decisions about Māori education
- Whānau are drawn to centres and schools that have a clear educational philosophy which they can believe in and where Māori student “success” encompasses academic, cultural and general life skills
- Whānau want more say over initiatives and access to appropriate management and governance processes
- More kōhanga reo and kura are needed.

The whanaungatanga methodology, kōrero ā-whānau and wānanga methods taught us that the voices of whānau must appear in the report as they were communicated to us. This also meant we consciously avoided ‘distilling’ and layering our own analysis of whānau experiences of the education system. Our process enabled the voices and intended meanings of whānau to remain intact, and has been a distinctive feature of the whanaungatanga methodology, the kōrero ā-whānau method, and a motivation to strengthen our ability to be reflexive about the research we undertake with whānau.

As practitioners of kaupapa Māori research approaches, we see the potential of expanding and building on ways that Māori can be in control and shape educational research, so it is of benefit to them. Kia Puāwaitia Ngā Tūmanako enabled us to see that if our research is to support rangatiratanga, a reflexive approach to our kaupapa Māori research is vital. For example, by thinking deeply about our use, critique and application of tikanga we can find new ways that locate and identify whānau educational priorities, voices and aspirations in the political and cultural landscapes of Aotearoa.

We have found that while there has been change in research orientations, especially in education, there continues to be scepticism about research processes and about the potential of research to create tangible benefits for Māori people. Throughout the research project we became keenly aware of the fatigue that some Māori communities experience in relation to research. For example, the real-life benefit of some research projects involving Māori do not always result in a positive contribution to Māori wellbeing in the short, medium or long term. There is a sense that some Māori educationalists and whānau continue to see little practical benefit from research. This is especially the case when Māori have previously given up

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4 In this context we are referring to whānau aspirations.
5 In this context we are referring to whānau autonomy and authority.
6 In this context we are referring to learning and maintenance of reo Māori.
energy and shared insights regarding pressing Māori educational dilemmas, with little or no action resulting ‘on the ground’.

*He Ua Kōwhai* signals the beginning of an attempt to create a kaupapa Māori research framework for reflexivity. None of the cycles and elements described in the framework are fixed or definitive. Each area intersects and overlaps, and will continue to grow; mirroring the uncertain terrain of our work with multiple whānau. In this regard our reflexivity must also return to the rhythmic cycles of Te Ao Turoa. Again, this can entail great levels of complexity. Accordingly, we continue to negotiate our subjectivities and positionality based on the realities of the different whānau we work with.

**Ngā Wāhanga o He Ua Kōwhai – Elements of The Model**
The figure below depicts the life-cycle of the kōwhai tree and illustrates *He Ua Kōwhai*, the beginnings of our conceptual framework for kaupapa Māori research reflexivity. Each element is discussed in broad terms in relation to our kaupapa Māori research practice.
**Te Wāhanga – He Whānau Mātau, He Whānau Ora**  
At the centre of the diagram is our guiding team whakataukī *He Whānau Mātau, He Whānau Ora*.

We have placed our identity, subjectivity, and team mission at the centre of the framework because it is our individual and collective work that we are committed to critically questioning in order to meet the aims of our whakataukī.

We are all part of different whānau, and they all express themselves differently. We gain strength and are challenged by whānau through our own respective and unique relationships *and in* the process of “building whānau” through our research. Our line of inquiry needs to be based on ensuring that our team position, within NZCER and externally, is contributing to the theory and practice of kaupapa Māori research approaches in education and to the wellbeing of various whānau. Beginning to construct a framework for kaupapa Māori Kairangahau reflexivity is part of a broader challenge to cultural essentialism in Aotearoa, and uncovering multiple ways of supporting rangatiratanga. We see our beginnings of mapping kaupapa Māori researcher reflexivity as an invaluable part of our capacity to uphold a critical Māori educational research team.

**Te Kākano**  
This is when the seed is germinating in the earth. To do this it must be in good soil, and if the light and water conditions are right, the seed will start growing. In our kaupapa Māori approach this relates to conceiving ideas that have their roots and methods in Papatūānuku and a range of different kaupapa that we have inherited through our tūpuna. We ask ourselves:

- Are our ideas grounded and in-tune with diverse whānau realities, not based on abstract and disconnected research priorities?
- How are we framing research issues in ways that enhance and uphold whanaungatanga, and how might this frame intersect with related kaupapa of rangatiratanga, manaakitanga, pūkengatanga, ngā moemoeā and reo Māori?

As kaupapa Māori Kairangahau we value sharing power with diverse Māori communities, and not imposing external agendas onto them. At this point of the reflexive cycle we are thinking about the multiple ways kaupapa emerge, and how they can play a significant part in our thinking through ways of engaging with whānau, and analysing research issues.

**Te Tupu**  
The kākano lies in Papatūānuku awaiting the right conditions to germinate. A concentration of energy draws the roots outwards and growth begins. A central growing stem emerges and then new shoots eventually branch outwards. Flowers drop kākano and await the next cycle of growth. In our kaupapa Māori approach this relates to the growth of whanaungatanga and associated kaupapa that ground our research relationships with an array of whānau, hapū and iwi. Creating ways that whānau can express their everyday experiences of Māori education, can inform our thinking and work. At this point of the kaupapa Māori research we are asking ourselves the following:

- How are our research questions connected to the every-day questions and aspirations that whānau have about education?

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7 This whakataukī can generally mean “A knowing whānau is a healthy whānau”.

- Can whānau “see themselves” in our work and research approaches?
- What benefits are there for whānau in working with us?

Te Tupu illustrates the growth and form of particular educational issues that whānau are concerned about. As we become familiar with these issues, our research is strengthened and we can find ways of ensuring our research speaks to and with the diverse Māori communities we work with.

Te Puāwaitanga
Kōwhai flowers grow and pollen is shared. Animals, wind and rain carry the pollen. In our kaupapa Māori approach this relates to finding the best ways to share our rangahau. We want to create ways for our research to be easily accessed, understood and used with the communities we have relationships with, and those concerned with Māori educational issues such as whānau, hapū, iwi, community leaders, educational researchers, and policy makers. At this point we are thinking about:

- In what ways kaupapa are expressed in our rangahau?
- How can people understand, reflect and act on the work being produced?

Te Haumako
Kōwhai flowers drop, seed pods develop on the tree, dry out and split open. The seeds then drop to land, or are eaten by birds. This spreads the kōwhai seed and begins the life-cycle once again. In our kaupapa Māori approach this relates to bringing together what have we learnt from Te Kākano, Te Tupu, and Te Puāwaitanga in order to conceptualise new learning that informs future rangahau. Bringing the learning from each element together can lead to new discoveries and pathways. It may also encourage us to consolidate or refine our kaupapa Māori research approaches. At this stage of our reflexive process we ask ourselves:

- What new areas of rangahau have emerged/or need to be re-examined, and what kaupapa tell us this?
- How do we determine the best way to embark on new or existing areas?

This element may mean embarking on, or conceiving of, new passages into Māori educational areas, while also ensuring that our research approach is grounded in a variety of kaupapa. In this way, Te Haumako represents a return to Te Kākano.

As Kairangahau we are deliberate about our subjectivities in kaupapa Māori spaces. Through a reflexive framework such as He Ua Kōwhai we want to encourage kaupapa Māori methodological diversity in order for whanaungatanga to manifest in many forms amongst ourselves, and those we work with.

Ngā Mahi E Whai Ake Nei – Reflections On Our Future Work
We are interested in creating critical discussion about our evolving practices as ‘kaupapa Māori’ researchers. Frameworks for kaupapa Māori researcher reflexivity are needed in order for us to individually and collectively uphold and learn about the cultural-political foundations of this movement.
Through the development of *He Ua Kōwhai* we have only just begun to contribute to theory and practice in kaupapa Māori spaces. *He Ua Kōwai* is still in development. We are testing it in our current research in order to see what we can learn, share and change. While this article lists some reflexive questions, we are constructing further questions that we intend to use as a guide for our kaupapa and whānau driven research. For example, we are interested in the potential of the model to address issues of institutional and structural racism in Māori education, and our role as Kairangahau addressing these covert and overt issues. It is our intention to publish another paper on this next stage of the frameworks development.

Finally our key learning in thinking about kaupapa Māori researcher reflexivity is that there is no ‘essentialised’ or ‘right’ way to undertake kaupapa Māori research. In this way, kaupapa Māori reflexivity is necessary in order for us to steer and sustain the politics of kaupapa Māori as an approach to creating mātauranga Māori. For us, it is about giving expression to kaupapa while negotiating our own subjectivities.
References

