

“I Am We”: The Whānau (Extended Family Network) Voice in Research

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Keywords: • Māori Social Workers • Family Voice in Research • Grandchildren’s Wellbeing •
Parihaka Peace Resistance Movement

Abstract

My PhD research focussed on Māori (Indigenous people to Aotearoa New Zealand) social workers and how their growing up experiences impact on their social work practice. A secondary aspect to this research was that social workers’ whānau (extended family network) were also interviewed and shared family wellness and wellbeing perspectives. The author presented at the 7th International Indigenous Voices in Social Work conference in August 2025 and focussed on two aspects from the whānau voice of the research – the Parihaka peace resistance movement and Mokopuna Ora (the flourishing and wellbeing of our grandchildren).

Indigenization Statement

The author is Indigenous to Aotearoa New Zealand, with iwi (tribal) affiliations to Te Āti Awa, Taranaki Tūturu, Ngāti Mutunga, and Ngāti Pākeha. Although her family and land connections are to Taranaki, the author currently resides on the lands of mana whenua Rangitāne in the Manawatū region of the North Island of Aotearoa. The Indigenous community mentioned in this article is Parihaka, and the author connects to Parihaka through her Taranaki affiliations.

He Kākano āhau i ruia mai i Rangiātea!
And I can never be lost for I am a seed born of greatness,
Descended from a line of chiefs, He Kākano āhau!
(song by Hohepa Tamehana)

Introduction

My PhD research focussed on Māori (Indigenous people to Aotearoa New Zealand) social workers and how their growing up experiences impact on their social work practice. The research also interviewed the social workers’ whānau (extended family network) who shared

their perspectives on family wellness and wellbeing. The presentation at the 7th International Indigenous Voices in Social Work conference focussed on two aspects from the whānau voice of the research – the Parihaka peace resistance movement and Mokopuna Ora (the flourishing and wellbeing of our grandchildren). The above song reiterates that we are all seeds born of greatness, particularly our grandchildren.

Parihaka Peace Resistance Movement

Research participants identified that Māori have always been natural social workers, practicing lay social work within whānau, hapū (subtribes) and iwi (tribal groupings). To strengthen this argument, the Parihaka peace resistance movement in the area of Taranaki within Aotearoa (New Zealand) was presented, and a case made that Parihaka was the first documented community development model and form of Māori social work in Aotearoa.

Parihaka was a pan-tribal settlement founded in 1866 by Te Whiti o Rongomai III and his uncle, Tohu Kākahi, establishing a collective wellness and peace approach at a time when war was prevalent and Taranaki land was being wrongfully confiscated. The leaders adopted non-violent resistance to land confiscation and initiated the teaching of peace and peaceful ways to contest land confiscation and the impact of colonisation through the building of a strong community. Many who came to Parihaka were refugees from the land wars and land confiscations. Parihaka was a social justice movement, founded on non-violence, resistance, and peace teachings emphasising a strong community development approach. Hohaia (2001) states that Parihaka was “a political, social, and spiritual force. They were fighters for Māori governance and stood against the land grabbers” (p.12). Hond (2013) shared that the leaders intertwined peace teachings of non-violence with customary community values and, “what separated Parihaka from other forms of resistance ... was not any underlying difference in

objective or ideology but simply a difference in method or strategy” (p. 45). The strategies included non-violence, peace, authority to self-determine, sustainability, community development and helping others.

The second part of the conference presentation from the whānau voice of the research considered Mokopuna Ora – the concept of the flourishing and wellbeing of our grandchildren.

Mokopuna Ora

From my PhD research, the framework ‘He Whāriki Haumarū’ was developed. The word whāriki denotes a mat on the ground and haumarū encompasses the idea of safety and keeping well. This framework evolved from asking research participants, “What is whānau wellness and wellbeing to you?” and eight essential threads were identified - aroha (loving relationships), mokopuna ora (grandchildren’s wellbeing), ngā mātāpono ā whānau (whānau values and beliefs), te taiao (the natural world and environment), hāpaitia (whānau happiness, unity, and connection), pou manawa (whānau resources and resilience) kōrero (clear communication), and moemoeā (whānau dreams and aspirations). He Whāriki Haumarū is a holistic wellness approach for the future of our mokopuna. The presentation considered the three threads of mokopuna ora, te taiao and moemoeā and how they intertwine into the flourishing and wellbeing of grandchildren.

The research participants emphasised that whānau are focussed on the wellbeing and flourishing of grandchildren, and that whānau wellness is connected to the health and happiness of our mokopuna. The fundamental role of whānau is to grow and nurture mokopuna as they are future of our Māori communities (Walker, 1990). Teachings from the elders provided a strong foundation for mokopuna to have a secure Māori identity, which in turn leads to positive outcomes. Participants shared:

The value of learning about a mokopuna when a mokopuna is born and seeing the wonders come out of the mokopuna on its own is another one of the values ... where you allow the moko to be the moko and you see whatever blossoms out of them.

I would have to say it is flourishing mokopuna ... watching them grow and become young people and then adults ... guiding them, teaching them, being with them, being there for them ... taking the time with them.

The ways our mokopuna are well and flourish are through kapa haka (our performing arts), learning te reo Māori (our Māori language), by being connected to taiao (natural world and environment) and being in the places they belong, and moemoeā– seeing the adults in their lives fulfilling their dreams and aspirations.

Kapa haka connects our mokopuna with their culture, their reo/language, and their tūpuna/ancestors. Kapa haka helps build their confidence, shapes their social connections, and enhances their physical, mental, and spiritual sides. Being in education systems where mokopuna are learning and immersed in the Māori language - kohanga reo (pre-school language nests), kura kaupapa Māori (primary schools) and wharekura Māori (high schools) helps with their wellbeing and flourishing. Mokopuna immersed in te reo Māori are strong in their identity and culture.

Te Taiao

Te Taiao is our link to the natural world and environment as connection to the land, the waterways and the environment is vital to the wellness and wellbeing of whānau Māori (Pihama & Smith, 2023), crucial to our continuing intergenerational wellbeing and healing (Raumati & Pihama, 2021), and is founded on “belonging to the land rather than owning it” (Hond et al., 2019, p. 45). Research participants reiterated the importance of te taiao to family wellbeing: “Being connected to our land is about whānau, that connection is hugely important - that is whānau wellness!” Our mokopuna benefit from being in the environments where our ancestors lived, walked, and were connected to – the mountains, the rivers, the seas, and the meeting

houses. Urupa (cemeteries) are places we take our mokopuna to sit with their tūpuna, share the whānau stories of our tūpuna, and sing our ancestors' songs.

Moemoeā

Moemoeā focus on whānau dreams and aspirations, moving whānau forward so they can positively affect and lead out their own change journeys to wellbeing. As one participant claimed, “Whānau wellness to me is that everyone in that whānau ... are being supported to achieve their potential ... supporting them to achieve whatever they wanted to do ... and contributing constructively to society.” For mokopuna, seeing the adults in their lives having dreams and aspirations, and reaching those goals and aspirations, sends them the message that they can do this too. It role models successful outcomes to mokopuna and ensures that achieving our aspirations is normalised for them.

Conclusion

From the whānau voice of my research two key points have been emphasised. First, the Parihaka peace resistance movement was an exemplar of the earliest social justice movement and the first documented framework and model of Māori social and community work within Aotearoa/New Zealand. Secondly, Mokopuna ora is intertwined with family wellbeing and our mokopuna need to be reminded that they are seeds born of greatness. It is imperative that mokopuna are connected to the places they belong in te taiao - their mountain, their river, their marae, the urupa; the places where their ancestors lived, walked, and now rest. Mokopuna ora connects our grandchildren to their language, encourages them to participate in kapa haka, and role models the adults in their lives achieving their dreams and aspirations. Our babies are always watching and learning from us - we are influencing them all the time.

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