

Commentary

Ehara taku toa i te toa takitahi, he toa takitini

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Ki aku tīpuna, ki aku kaumātua, ki taku whānau, me mihi kia tika! Nā koutou ahau i poipoia kia tū māia, kia tū pakari, kia tū māhaki i roto i tēnei ao. My strength is not mine alone. It is the strengths of my tīpuna, my kaumātua and my whānau that have guided me, nurtured me, and challenged me to flourish in this world. Reflecting on what they have done, the knowledge and wisdom they have bestowed, continues to inspire me to be confident and humble in who I am today as a Māori woman.

Published in 2009, *Te Whatu Pōkeka: Kaupapa Māori assessment for learning* (Ministry of Education, 2009) was designed to support assessment within early childhood services that embody kaupapa Māori. This unique document was titled *Te Whatu Pōkeka* as a reflection of the traditionally woven whatu pōkeka (a baby wrap made of softened muka and raukura from the albatross) (Walker, 2008). With a vision to nurture the uniqueness of every Māori child, *Te Whatu Pōkeka* encourages kaiako to respect tamariki Māori as empowered and gifted individuals that have the potential to be powerful in whatever they do (Ministry of Education, 2009). Walker (2008) describes the metaphoric nature of *Te Whatu Pōkeka* as being a place of protection and growth, a place where each tamaiti will grow and develop in their own unique ways. As I reflect on the metaphoric nature of *Te Whatu Pōkeka* and the understanding that “[t]he Pōkeka takes the shape of the child as he or she learns and grows” (Walker, 2008, p. 5), I believe that my pōkeka was woven long before I came into this world, long before I was conceived. My tīpuna and whānau intricately wove my pōkeka to ensure that the world I was born into, transformed as a reflection of who I was (my mana āhua ake), while nurturing the unique story I bring with me into the world. Who I am and the story I share with you, is a gift. A gift I share in the hope that you glean from it the values, beliefs and morals that have continued to inspire me to be who I am today, and who I strive to be in this world. A gift I share with humility and respect for what my tīpuna, kaumātua and whānau have gifted to me. Ko rātou kē aku rangatira, aku tuakana, aku kaiārahi. They are, in all essence, my leaders.

He kuru pounamu te tamaiti Māori:

The Māori child is a treasured gift from our creator.

The origin of my story, like the stories my tīpuna have shared before me, stems from the beginning of time. A time where the world, as a reflection of the Māori worldview, was created. A time where Ranginui and Papatūānuku were formed within a realm of potentiality, and later gave birth to our atua, who fashioned human form from the sacred soil of Papatūānuku (Barlow, 1991; Kameta, 2009; Reilly, 2004). This is where my whakapapa, my story and mana āhua ake begins. Similarly, the underpinning philosophy of *Te Whatu Pōkeka* is based on a commonly used tauparapara that encapsulates the creation of the world within te ao Māori (Walker, 2008, p. 5). The philosophy of *Te Whatu Pōkeka* draws upon the phases of the creation; te kore (nothingness and potentiality), te pō (the night in which growth, expansion, energy, memory and desire emerged) and te ao mārama (the world of light and enlightenment) (Ministry of Education, 2009; Walker, 2008). The essence and uniqueness of each phase is woven into the three generic phases of learning and growing referred to by Charles Royal as mōhiotanga, mātauranga and māramatanga (Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 49). As a reflection of these phases, and kaupapa Māori, I continue to share with you my story. My story in a way that captures some of the significant people, moments and experiences that have played a part in shaping the pōkeka that protects me today.

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Mōhiotanga: Ways of knowing

“Mōhiotanga – What a child already knows and what they bring with them highlights new beginnings, new knowledge, new discoveries” (Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 49). To understand me, is to understand my whakapapa, my tīpuna, my histories, and the stories I bring with me. I am a child, a woman, a mother that “emerges from rich traditions... both visible and invisible” (p. 49). In my kete, I share with you my uniqueness, my strengths and the innate knowledge I bring into this world. I was born during the early eighties, a time where Māori continued to strive towards regaining tino rangatiranga and kaupapa Māori in education (Ka’ai, 2004). Unbeknown to me, my whānau and tīpuna began paving the way for me to be nurtured and educated in a world where I could be secure in who I was as a Māori, where my stories and whakapapa would be protected, where my unique potential would be nurtured. My tīpuna fought for the survival of our language, our culture, our taonga tuku iho. It was their fight, their achievements and their determination, that gave rise to initiatives that celebrate who we are as Māori, who we are as tangata whenua, ultimately, who we are as whānau. As a child, and as a woman today, I bring with me these stories. Stories that will continue to empower me, continue to inspire me, and continue to shape my pōkeka.

Being a child of Māori descent, my mother made the effort to raise me in an environment that nurtured my identity, my culture and my language. Our home was a Māori speaking home. A home where I was immersed in te reo Māori and kaupapa Māori, a home where my siblings and I developed alongside each other as tamariki Māori. Our developing reo was imbedded in all that we did as siblings, from debating to exploring our natural world. Although my father is of Dutch descent, he supported my mother’s desire to raise me as a Māori child. As I developed my confidence to communicate in te reo Māori, he too developed his ability to speak te reo Māori, while learning more about who I was as a Māori child. My father and my mother continued to shape my pōkeka as a reflection of my individuality within te ao Māori.

My parents’ desire to nurture their tamariki within kaupapa Māori and te reo Māori, also influenced the way in which I was educated from birth. Unlike many tamariki before me, Te Kōhanga Reo movement enabled me to be educated within an environment that valued who I am as a Māori child, that protected my cultural identity and whakapapa and supported me to grow in my confidence to communicate in te reo Māori. At the time, my mother was a kaiako. She, along with other whānau members and kaumātua, nurtured my learning and development until the age of five. Although I was quite young at the time, I still remember being loved, being respected and most of all, being heard. I felt as though I was in a place where I was protected as though I was a rito in my pā harakeke (McKenzie, 2008; Rokx, 1997). Each day was filled with new learning, new relationships and new beginnings.

Mātauranga: Ways of being

“Mātauranga – This is a time of growth for the child. It denotes a phase of increasing potential, negotiation, challenge, and apprehension when dealing with new ideas” (Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 49).

The years following my time at kōhanga reo, were full of challenges; challenges that continued to influence the way in which I understood the world around me. My confidence as a Māori child continued to develop alongside my increasing potential to walk in two worlds, te ao Māori and te ao Pākehā. Considering the fact that many tamariki before me were forced to adopt the ways of te ao Pākehā in education, the possibility for me to learn in both worlds, is an acknowledgment of what my whānau and tīpuna have done for our people (Ka’ai, 2004). My primary and intermediate years of schooling were bilingual, whereby teaching and learning included both te ao Māori and te ao Pākehā. Although challenging at first, my kaiako and whānau supported me to develop my ability to learn a new language, while continuing to protect my identity as a Māori. I was challenged by new ideas that te ao Pākehā brought

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into my life, at times apprehensive about how I could move between both worlds. My kaiako took the time to understand who I was, my potential, and the unique skills I brought into the learning context. Although a cheeky child, my kaiako soon understood who I was. A curious and persistent child, that was eager to learn and challenge the world around her, and confident to push the boundaries. They nurtured my uniqueness in a way that helped me understand my place in the world, and how the world could be shaped to reflect who I was.

Although I was surrounded by te ao Pākehā from a very young age, it was not till my later years that I truly understood what it was and how it would influence my growth and development. At times, I would struggle to understand the complexities within te ao Pākehā, particularly the language and pedagogical beliefs. However, the complexities guided me back to the wisdom our tīpuna passed through the generations. Their wisdom and knowledge became clearer to me, as I began to understand why they did what they did, and how it would influence me today. I began to reflect more on their vision to protect who we are as Māori, and although they were not a physical part of my life, their teachings played a significant part in how I would continue navigating through two worlds. I was particularly inspired by what Sir Apirana Ngata envisioned when he stated:

*Ko tō ringa ki ngā rākau a te Pākehā
Hei ora mō te tinana
Ko tō ngākau ki ngā tāonga a ō tīpuna Māori
Hei tikitiki mō tō māhuna*

This part of his whakataukī *E tipu e rea*, helps me to understand that although I live in a world that has been heavily influenced by te ao Pākehā, my wairua, my mana and my mauri reflects who I am as a Māori. To hold on to the treasures my tīpuna have bestowed upon me, as a way of protecting my cultural identity and belonging, while using the tools within te ao Pākehā to help me thrive in this world. At the same time, a well-known waiata also helped me through times where I felt challenged within te ao Pākehā. At a place I call home, Tokomaru Bay, the late Ngoi Pewhairangi composed a waiata titled *Whakarongo*. This waiata reflected her beliefs and philosophy of teaching te reo Māori, which continues to inspire many Māori today (Toiere, 2017). During my later adolescent years, a time where I began feeling as though I was pressured (internally) towards te ao Pākehā, this waiata helped guide me back to who I am. Where Ngoi expresses *Pupuritia, kōrerotia mō ake tonu* enabled me to reflect on what it meant to protect and speak my language, what my language means to my identity. It reminded me of what my tīpuna have done to help keep our language and culture alive, and that I am part of a journey towards strengthening our language in Aotearoa/New Zealand. To never let our sacred language wither away *Kaua rawatia e tukua e, kia memeha e'* (Kāretu, 1995). These messages helped my pōkeka keep its shape, helped my pōkeka withstand the challenges that I experienced as a reflection of my cultural identity.

Māramatanga: Ways of doing

“Māramatanga – This is when a child comes to understand new knowledge: a phase of enlightenment, realisation, and clarification” (Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 49).

It is today that I reflect on my past and how my story, and those who have helped write my story, have shaped who I am today and the pōkeka that continues to protect me in this world. I reflect on how my tīpuna, kaumātua and whānau, have all challenged me, inspired me and guided me towards understanding who I am and how the world has evolved around me. Today I understand that being a mother, I play a part in shaping the pōkeka that protects my child. Today I realise that what my tīpuna have had to do to fight for our culture, has provided me with the opportunity to be nurtured and protected as a taonga, a taonga that is a physical representation of her tīpuna and whānau. The knowledge I have gained throughout my life becomes clear now and will carry me through the rest of

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my life. As I move forward in this world, I will continue to share with you who I am and the stories before me, I will continue to grow through life's challenges and celebrations, and I will continue to become enlightened, as I know my tīpuna and whānau will be there to guide me along the way.

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