

Capturing connections in busy lives: The 'drop off service' or authentic connections.

Galina Stebletsova | *Unitec/Te Pūkenga New Zealand*

Elizabeth Polley | *The Open Polytechnic / Te Pūkenga New Zealand*

With the accelerated pace of life in the 21st century, workplaces and education settings have witnessed changing social dynamics, alongside changes to ways in which relationships are built. With the nature of partnerships evolving, children's learning, development and growth could be impacted. This shifting meaning of 'relationships with people, places and things' (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2017, p. 21) puts an extra strain on kaiako (teachers) teams across Aotearoa New Zealand and on Initial Teacher Education (ITE) providers to prepare kaiako for the busy Early Childhood Education (ECE) sector. This article, written through the lens of the Pā Harakeke model, considers the importance of authentic relationships with parents and whānau. It explores the changing meaning of relationships and the ways of understanding such changes in early childhood contexts.

Connections and belonging through a retrospective lens

I am observing ākonga Kaiako (student teacher) in one of the busy early childhood centres before our triadic conversation. I can see the door to the Under two's area opening, a pair of hands putting a toddler through the door, leaving him alone in the area with his backpack. Two kaiako who are busy with other children take brief note of K. arriving at the centre and continue with their business. K., who is still standing by his backpack, begins to cry...

Communities and connections that enhance reciprocity are valuable to early childhood environments, aligning with *Te Whāriki* which emphasises the importance of reciprocal relationships (MoE, 2017). Putnam (2000) refers to connections among individuals as social capital, with the benefits derived from these social networks being reciprocity and trust. However, the shift in ECE services in the 1990s saw altered understandings of belonging and community with a 'user pays' approach (Hedges, 2010; May 2019). Perceptions changed and many viewed childcare as a commodity with ECE services operating as privately owned in what had become a competitive market. Kindergarten parents in the 1990s paid a nominal voluntary fee, however, as government funding increased, there was less need to rely on parents, changing the fundamental nature of relationships between parents and teachers (May, 2019).

With parent participation reducing and rising economic pressures, neo-liberalism ideology began to challenge reciprocity (May, 2019). Becker et al. (2021) assert that within a neoliberal ideology, people's sense of connection to one another is decreased and a sense of disconnection from others is produced. Neoliberalism acknowledges individual responsibility rather than working for the good of the collective (Becker et al., 2021). Kaiako must understand Aotearoa New Zealand's changing history, the influences on parent – teacher relations, and consider the idea that some parents may see early childhood education as a commodity (May, 2019). This brings to fore the question that if connections that bring communities of practice together are lost and social disconnection occurs, could teachers working to build authentic parent connections be challenged? (Wenger, 1998).

The changing meaning of connections and belonging in an early childhood community today

There is a plethora of research on the importance of meaningful partnerships with parents in early childhood education, alongside how these partnerships have the potential to positively improve children's wellbeing (Shuker & Cherrington, 2016). It is well known that connections between parents and kaiako in the early years are powerful influencers in children's future trajectories (Aspden et al., 2019; Murphy, 2021; Powell & McCauley, 2011). Research documents the importance of creating these connections, acknowledging the crucial role parents play in a child's life and the need for strong teacher-kaiako relations (Powell & McCauley, 2011; Weir, 2014). As a legislated requirement of early childhood services in Aotearoa New Zealand, policy also recognises partnership with parents and the commitment to respect and recognise the aspirations of parents, family, and whānau (Ministry of Education, 2024).

Belonging is a key concept of early childhood education in Aotearoa New Zealand and *Te Whāriki* recognises the role relationships play in developing a sense of belonging, with the strand 'Belonging I Mana Whenua' requiring connecting links with the family and the wider world to be acknowledged (MoE, 2017). Central to understanding belonging is understanding the value of relationships and networks with people, place and things. Hagerty et al. (as cited in Pardede & Kovac, 2023) explain, "a sense of belongingness occurs when people feel like they are an integral part of a system or environment" (p. 173). Similarly, Pardede and Kovac (2023) suggest that humans have a desire for connectedness and for a community to which they can belong. Greer and Macdonald (as cited in Stratigos et al., 2014) also support this, stressing it is fundamental for an individual's wellbeing to experience belonging. Communities make connections, recognising reciprocity, focusing on collaboration and building a shared identity (Clarkin-Phillips, 2011). These communities of practice support belonging and are characterised by a collective approach that recognises respect and reciprocity, seeing individuals working together in trusting relationships (Murphy, 2021; Wenger, 1998).

Viewing relationships with whānau through Pā Harakeke lens

Interestingly, findings of multiple studies on children’s social-emotional development are less consistent than on children’s cognitive and language development. While it is widely assumed that quality early childhood experiences positively contribute to children’s social and emotional development, longitudinal studies indicate that the long-term effects appear to be weak and consistency is key to long-lasting positive outcomes. Continuous and consistent positive social climate around growing child and young adolescent is key to their strong capability to build social connections and positive relationships (Gialamas et al., 2014; Melhuish et al., 2015; Seiler et al., 2022). Kaiako realisation of the importance of this continuity and thus being prepared to actively engage in an ongoing whakawhanaungatanga (building relationships) process is paramount to each tamaiti (child’s) long lasting positive outcomes. It is equally important for kaiako to see each tamaiti through a holistic lens that views them as an integral part of whānau system that functions as one.

Applying Pā Harakeke model to galvanise this understanding would be suitable for a beginner kaiako to promote whakawhanaungatanga as a collective tool needed to embrace whānau uniqueness and the richness of their funds of knowledge. Pā Harakeke is traditionally utilised as a metaphor for whānau and is a model of protection for tamariki and whānau structure and hauora (wellbeing) (Watson, 2020). With rito (the baby) being the central shoot of the harakeke plant, awhi rito (the parents) as the surrounding leaves, and the outer leaves representing awhi rito of tūpuna (the grandparents and ancestors), Pā Harakeke symbolises the inseparable intergenerational connection, collective care, and protection.

Reflecting on Pā Harakeke as a philosophy, it becomes apparent that strengthening relationships with whānau is at the core of social and emotional hauora of each tamaiti. It is, therefore, pivotal for ITE providers to ensure ākongā kaiako (student teachers) fully understand the importance of viewing each whānau collective strength, connection to Papatūānuku, hapū and iwi, understanding the connection to the past, present, and future (Watson, 2020). The role of tūpuna (grandparents) should also be viewed as an inseparable part of Pā Harakeke, helping to strengthen the whānau as a holistic system and thus helping the beginner kaiako to view the multifaceted role whānau plays in supporting the hauora of the child. Valuing rito (baby) as taonga and supporting whānau by recognising their funds of knowledge, background and whakapapa, contributes to kaiako growing kete (basket) of knowledge about the complexity of each family and the importance of working together to promote *Te Whāriki* vision that tamariki are “...competent and confident learners and communicators, healthy in mind, body and spirit, secure in their sense of belonging and in the knowledge that they make a valued contribution to society” (MoE, 2017, p. 2). Similarly, *Our Code Our Standards* (Education Council/Matatū Aotearoa, 2017) adds that commitment to leaders is demonstrated through “promoting the wellbeing of learners and protecting them from harm”, and through “... respecting the diversity of the heritage, language, identity

and culture of all learners” (p. 10). Ongoing whakawhanaungatanga with whānau is at the core of this success.

The relevance of Pā Harakeke stretches beyond just being part of Māori worldview. We suggest that this is a universal model that is highly relevant to any education setting. Working alongside whānau is one of the aspects of Pā Harakeke (Watson, 2020), and viewing partnerships with families through this lens is a much needed perspective for a beginner kaiako to support positive outcomes for each tamaiti.

Whakawhanaungatanga is a scaffolding process when kaiako use empowering communication with whānau to foster openness and collaboration. It is paramount to consider whānau aspirations related to their child’s education and to embrace non-judgemental empathy and understanding in working towards common goals for each tamaiti. This understanding supports hauora of the whole whānau and promotes positive climate of trust and respect. Rameka et al. (2022) reinforce this statement by adding that haraimaitanga (an open-door policy) contributes to building positive relationships with whānau and “... ensures whānau feel comfortable, respected, welcome, and part of the service’s whānau. This sense of respect, aroha (love), āwhina (support, help) and whanaungatanga (relationships, kinship) are key to the expression of mana for mokopuna” (p. 51).

Positive relationships are closely connected to the wellbeing of both children and their families in educational settings where kaiako work (MoE, 2017; Roberts, 2017). At a child’s level, consistent relationships (responsive, respectful, warm and sensitive) have been attributed to later positive outcomes for children in terms of their social, behavioural and emotional development (Vu et al., 2015). In contrast, inconsistent or abrupt social connections in early childhood can result in difficulties forming relationships later in life, negative socialisation patterns, and a lack of skills for building positive connections. Shifting the perspectives of beginner kaiako from primarily focusing on multiple immediate responsibilities to finding ways to strengthen relationships by fostering a healthy social-emotional climate in learning spaces is therefore crucial for the future outcomes of each tamaiti (Spielberger et al., 2024).

Research on kaiako-families relationships reveals that kaiako often find it challenging to have difficult conversations with parents (Almendingen et al., 2021). Kaiako with various levels of experience, particularly those new to the profession, tend to encounter “substantial difficulties” when sharing concerns with parents that may become barriers to effective collaboration and finding joint solutions (Almendingen et al., 2021, p. 582). Respectively, surveys of ECE kaiako appear to see engaging parents and the broader community as critical and believe additional training for kaiako might be needed in these areas (Almendingen et al., 2021; Parenting Research Centre, 2019). This implies the gap in preparedness of the new kaiako to confidently engage in discussing challenging topics and concerns in relation to tamaiti learning and development in early childhood contexts. Reluctancy of the new kaiako to engage in conversations at drop off and pick up times in an early childhood setting might be explained by lack of confidence and social tools to use in making the first step to start collaboration and joint decision making

with whānau. Further Professional training on fully understanding the implications of *Our Code Our Standards* 'Commitment to families and whānau' by "using effective approaches to communicate with families about their child's learning, aspirations and progress" (Education Council/Matatū Aotearoa, 2017, p. 19) is therefore needed to ensure social and emotional wellbeing of each tamaiti is effectively supported. Fully understanding this commitment empowers the beginner kaiako to learn multiple ways of building and strengthening partnerships with whānau, and the role of ITE providers is paramount in this process.

Ensuring a commitment to families and whānau

The moving dynamics of the parent-teacher relationship highlights the challenges and complexity of parent-teacher partnerships, alongside the depth of professional knowledge a kaiako requires coming into this role in Aotearoa New Zealand (Education Review Office, 2024). These skills, knowledge and attributes are identified in *Our code, our standards* for graduates entering the profession with the standards guiding the content of ITE programmes (Education Council New Zealand/Matatū Aotearoa, 2017). Pivotal to *Our code, our standards* is the foundational value of the commitment to families and whānau, acknowledging the importance of partnerships with parents. ITE programmes must prepare kaiako to understand the importance of partnership while working in a rapidly changing society (Education Council New Zealand/Matatū Aotearoa, 2017).

Research recognises that computer mediated communication has advantages for parent-teacher communication in early childhood education, therefore initial teacher education programmes must offer insight into the multiple purposes computer mediated programmes can offer. Clear expectations and on-going training must be provided for kaiako combined with understanding privacy and security issues that come with working with technology (Abubakari, 2020). Thompson (as cited in, Abubakari 2020) adds kaiako must be supported to understand the complexities of using technology to communicate with parents, as without gestures and emotions available ambiguity can arise causing kaiako potential uncertainty and insecurity when communicating to parents using technology. Suggesting further challenges for ITE programmes when preparing kaiako for parent-teacher partnerships.

Research supports the need for ITE programs to offer more robust training around the challenges faced for beginning kaiako particularly when considering parent - teacher relationships (Education Review Office, 2024). Real world teaching differs significantly from what is learnt and kaiako in training have limited opportunities to interact directly with parents within their initial teacher education programs (Sutton et al., 2020). Effective strategies to develop connections must be available for kaiako working with parents caught in the business of life (Booth & Ibanez, 2017).

Moving into an online world could create tensions for kaiako, having limited access to hard copies of assessments for both parents and children can challenge the sociocultural approaches of *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) and the opportunities for children to have agency (Beaumont-Bates, 2017). Pre-service kaiako working in a fast-paced society, adopting new technology to work with busy parent schedules must be supported. Relevant knowledge from initial teacher education programmes must ensure authentic parent – teacher connections in the 21st century.

Supporting beginner kaiako readiness to build social connections: the role of mentoring

In Aotearoa New Zealand practice-based mentoring and assessment relationships are an essential part of a student teacher's journey to becoming a certified and professional kaiako (Education Council, 2015; Thornton, 2015). Mentoring approaches that nurture authentic partnerships with student teachers will positively affect their developing professional identity (Brouwer et al., 2017).

Smith et al. (2012) recognise that when authentic and trustworthy relationships exist professional dialogues can occur, creating opportunities for growth. This stresses the value of face-to-face learning exchanges within the practice-based mentoring space, along with an understanding that reciprocal relationships are required in teaching and learning (Ako Aotearoa, n.d.).

Research from Polley (2023) identifies that mentoring relationships need to be authentic, respectful and collaborative. Lecturers in practice-based mentoring and assessment relationships within ITE understand that these relationships must operate as nurturing and supporting partnerships. Trust and respect are integral and social connections are developed when student teachers have opportunities to get to know their mentors. The Pā Harakeke model metaphorically supports this by representing student teachers as rito and mentors as awahi rito, with trust, reciprocity and respect at the fore (Watson, 2020).

The data reveal the importance of reciprocal relationships and a collaborative approach, such knowledge and understanding can be related to kaiako readiness and the importance of face-to-face exchanges when kaiako are building relationships with parents (Polley, 2023).

Adapting to modern environments: the role of technology

Research reveals that collaborating with parents, and earning their commitment and trust, are some of the requirements of establishing parent – teacher partnerships (Clarkin-Phillips, 2011; Murphy, 2021). Communication must be at the heart of this relational approach, enabling connections to develop, information to be shared and partnerships to grow (Powell & McCauley, 2011; Weir, 2014).

Living in this contemporary society, where mobile technology continues to increase rapidly means that early childhood kaiako must rethink ways in which they communicate and develop connections with

parents (Shuker & Cherrington, 2016). This progressively digital culture, combined with parent work schedules suggests that kaiako are now teaching in ways that are significantly different from how they learnt (Powell & McCauley, 2011).

According to Coelho et al. (2019) limited time is a barrier to parent - teacher communication, with research identifying that drop off/pick up times can feel hurried for both parents and teachers. Similarly, Murphy et al. (2021) have documented the lack of time as a challenge to parent- teacher communication. Lack of time is a common theme for why partnerships with parents and teachers are challenging, with drop offs and pick-ups happening so quickly, there is often little time for communication (Booth & Ibanez, 2017).

Wilkie et al. (2024) identify that drop off/pick up is an important part of the day for an early childhood centre, however it can be impacted by multiple factors, causing a lack of communication between parents and kaiako. These barriers include inflexible work schedules, being dropped off and picked up by other adults and demands on both the kaiako and parent (Booth & Ibanez, 2017). Powell and McCauley (2011) investigate the use of daily blogs to extend and promote parent -teacher connections, providing two-way communication that allows parents to experience connectivity, exchanging information instantly. Improvement to parent-teacher communication can occur when computer-mediated communication is used in conjunction with face-to-face communication in early childhood education (Wilkie et al., 2024).

Beaumont-Bates (2017) suggests the use of e -portfolios within early childhood has potential to support and enrich partnerships with parents and kaiako. Within this 2017 study e-portfolios were used by kaiako to purposefully foster reciprocity, with research recognising that through such online platforms' connections between parents and kaiako could be enhanced. Blogs and e-portfolios are examples of ways technology can support strong parent – teacher partnerships to be promoted. Because of technology and lifestyle, the way kaiako connect with parents has changed, highlighting the need for kaiako to be willing to work with technology perhaps considering social networking sites as an intermediary role.

Conclusion

As the harakeke plant continues to grow and change, so too does our relationship with the world. Though pakiaka (roots) of the plant may not be seen by the naked eye, they are deeply hidden within whenua and Papatūānuku (Watson, 2020). As relationships and partnerships continue to develop, they are rooted in our beliefs, values and worldview. In this article, we have emphasised the importance of the Pā Harakeke model when building social connections within and beyond an ECE setting. Relationships, while fluid and evolving, underpin kaiako quality practice. As an important aspect of teaching in the 21st century, kaiako must be prepared to develop an understanding of the multiple ways to connect with parents and whānau.

Waiho i te toipoto, kaua i te toiroa. (Let us keep close together, not wide apart).

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