Whanaungatanga via digital media within early childhood education: *A cultural lens of knowing, being and doing.*

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The Covid-19 lockdown experiences became the catalyst for kaiako (teachers) in New Zealand to seek new and innovative ways to establish, maintain and retain relationships with children and whānau through digital media. In the absence of kanohi ki te kanohi (face to face) interactions, kaiako have needed to extend their use of digital technologies to foster a strengthened sense of whanaungatanga (relationships and partnerships) between whānau (families), tamariki (children) and kaiako. As lecturers, we were interested in exploring how children and their families' mana was upheld through the use of remote technologies. This led to reflecting on a sense of wellbeing which is fundamental to children's development as it supports them to be holistically healthy (Rameka et al., 2021; Ministry of Education [MoE], 2017). A korero tahi (discussion) was undertaken by the authors with kaiako, associate teacher (AT), student kaiako, parent/kaiako in order to understand how whanaungatanga was facilitated through remote technologies. This was viewed using the conceptual lens of knowing, being and doing. The article concludes with recognised innovative and practical ways to enhance digital connections with whānau, tamariki and kaiako, whilst maintaining the integrity of whanaungatanga.

Introduction

Te manu e kai ana i te miro, nōna te ngahere; te manu e kai ana i te mātauranga nōna te ao

*The bird who partakes of the miro berry owns the forest;
the bird who partakes of education owns the world*

This whakatauki (proverb) recognises how kaiako in New Zealand have partaken in matauranga (knowledge building) in order to remain effective during Covid-19 lockdowns. New Zealand early childhood education places great emphasis upon kaiako implementing whanaungatanga with tamariki, whānau, and colleagues in order to best support their care and education (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2009). While kanohi ki te kanohi connections reflect traditional Māori practice (Walker, 2008), the impact of Covid-19 has heralded a shift in how whakawhanaungatanga (the enactment of relationships and partnerships) is realised. Smith (1999) placed emphasis upon Māori ways of knowing, doing, and understanding in order to authentically enact values from the Māori culture within research and education. However, this article repositions Smith's notions to serve as a paradigm that focuses on kaiako ways of knowing, being (leading into wellbeing), and doing whanaungatanga

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via digital technology. The premise is that in relation to whanaungatanga; if we truly know, then it becomes a natural part of our core being, which allows us to enact (do) relationships and partnership more effortlessly, intentionally, and authentically. By reframing this according to how kaiako in early childhood settings promote whanaungatanga, this article reflects on building and maintaining whanaungatanga relationships online through the repositioned lens of knowing, being and doing.

Knowing whanaungatanga

Whanaungatanga for Māori places emphasis on knowing that one belongs to a whānau, hapu, iwi or waka (Bishop, 1999). Implicit in this is the idea that 'he kakano ahau e ruia mai I Rangiatea / I am a seed sown within the futile soils of Rangiatea (I will never be lost) (Rangihuna et al., 2018). The value and process of whanaungatanga is established, maintained and retained through connectedness and engagement in the recognition of kinship with others. Within the context of early childhood education, whanaungatanga, as a core Māori value, serves to connect families and build relationships so that tamariki, whānau, and kaiako may work in partnership. Maintaining and growing relationships could be a way to understand this value. However, to understand the deeper meaning behind the concept of whanaungatanga, a separation of the word into its individual components can support this:

- Whānau, in the literal sense, means family or 'to give birth' (Rameka, 2018, p. 372). In Māori society, this word is used to understand family collectives.
- 'Ngā tanga' is defined as all concepts associated with, in this instance, 'whānau'. This invites teachers to build relationships that are not limited to genealogy links but inclusive of life experience, shared aspirations, values beliefs and communities (Mead, 2016).

Whanaungatanga can be seen in the closeness that one person has to another either by shared philosophies or physical and spiritual harmony (Rameka, 2018). This could be interpreted as mutual sociocultural understanding of one another. Whanaungatanga can be strengthened through shared experiences and collaborative decision-making. The process of whanaungatanga upholds the mana of each person engaging with the connection, meaning that a high value is placed on protecting and nurturing (kaitiaki) and the whakapapa (genealogy) (Le Grice et al., 2017). Each kaiako has a professional responsibility and obligation to initiate a special connection that is meaningful for whānau and tamariki. Further to this, whanaungatanga connects to the strand of belonging/mana whenua in Te Whāriki (MoE, 2017) where the complexity of this concept is explored in how nga tamariki might know they have a place within the learning community.

Being and wellbeing for kaiako, tamariki and whānau

Considering a Māori perspective of being; knowing ourselves before we can truly know others becomes imperative. Being, looks at the intra-personal connections, which support kaiako wellbeing. This then enables kaiako to effect similar on an inter-personal level (Berryman et al., 2018). It is essential that kaiako are able to focus on their own wellbeing. The korero tahi with kaiako suggested that this more recent lockdown brought stronger feelings of loneliness, possibly due to the novelty of being at home wearing off and also the uncertainty of how long and how many more lockdowns would occur. Additionally, ERO (2020b) explained that

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kaiako spent a lot of their time reassuring parents who were anxious about Covid-19 when they themselves were also feeling uncertain, which led to a decrease in the wellbeing of kaiako. To support staff, the use of regular meetings and informal conversations throughout lockdowns seemed to work well in nurturing wellbeing (Mitchell et al., 2020). Brief digital connections such as informal texts, calls and Zoom sessions would continue to maintain whakawhanaungatanga between kaiako, as these informal chats are what they were missing while isolating at home.

Wellbeing of tamariki

Digital connections could heighten a sense of whanaungatanga and care that kaiako could offer by simply showing an interest in the child's world and recognising what was current to them at the time. This could show that kaiako are acting as kaitiaki (caretakers) to the child's mana, as tamariki are encouraged to explore their belonging to their whakapapa and their inner circle (Rameka et al., 2021). This empowers tamariki to engage in digital reciprocity, hence supporting whakawhanaungatanga to grow between the kaiako and the tamaiti (child).

In the recent korero tahi with kaiako on maintaining whanaungatanga and the wellbeing of tamariki and whānau, kaiako found through digital platforms, how much tamariki were missing their preschool along with their friends and kaiako. This suggests that the loss of their usual routines was felt. Children's sense of wellbeing has been closely monitored globally as a consequence of lockdowns with the loss of routines having a clear impact (Biffi et al., 2021; Koen et al., 2021; ERO, 2020a; Jones, 2020). The discontinuation of care, education and connection placed children at risk of feeling a decreased sense of security and belonging. Therefore, the use of remote technologies with whānau and tamariki during the lockdowns could provide a sense of normality because they are seeing familiar faces and engaging in familiar activities, such as waiata (songs) and pūrākau (stories).

Wellbeing of parents

The lockdown changed the role of parents as they became children's main facilitators and supporters for their education over the lockdown period (ERO, 2020a). Nurturing the wellbeing of parents became paramount because of this change. Research suggests that parent anxiety was increased during multiple lockdowns due to the loss of routines, potential loss of current jobs and the loss of additional support in some cases with their children, for example occupational or behavioural therapists (ERO, 2020a; 2021). Further to this, a survey on parents in America recorded that 95% of parents also experienced increased stress (Jones, 2020), while in Italy, parents reported feelings of isolation (Biffi et al., 2021). In the korero tahi, kaiako shared that parents "became like family" because they would often share the struggles that they faced. Due to lockdown, digital discussions with kaiako may have been the only connection that some parents had where they could openly communicate about the struggles they faced, which highlighted the importance of whakawhanaungatanga via digital technologies with them and their tamariki (ERO, 2021).

Doing: Innovative and creative ways are required to build and maintain a sense of whanaungatanga digitally.

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Ka pu te ruha, ka hao te rangatahi

This well-known Māori proverb above recognises the replacement or adaptation of the old ways of doing things to fit the new needs (Kukutai & Webber, 2017). Enacting whanaungatanga via digital technologies provides a gateway to the more practical and beneficial things that happened during the lockdowns, also what was built on, maintained and retained. Ways of doing encompasses responsive environments, where holistic aspects of development are recognised alongside ako (reciprocal teaching and learning) (Walker, 2008).

Practical ways of digitally connecting, maintaining whanaungatanga

Our korero tahi highlighted practical and flexible options of digitally connecting with tamariki and whānau that proved effective. These included Zoom classes (featuring breakout rooms, uploading activity videos and story-time audio files), Educa and StoryPark, creating videos and pre-recorded sessions, daily diaries, community-wide posts, text messages and phone calls. These digital platforms were used as an alternative to the important kanohi ki te kanohi conversations.

Benefits of maintaining whanaungatanga digitally

Benefits of digitally connecting included nourishing and maintaining whanaungatanga through partnership and participation, where stronger relationships were built and new ways of keeping in contact, such as making contact if children are away sick, or for special events like birthdays, meaning that tamariki felt that they are not forgotten. These bidirectional relationships not only supported kaiako to learn and know the interests of tamariki, but also "culturally relevant information" around homelife, ultimately supporting effective planning (Mitchell et al., 2020). This also fostered the "teacher-parent relationship become a true partnership" (Fox, 2020, p. 133), enabling deeper meaningful practice within "Māori approaches to learning, where both the learner and teacher engage in reciprocal, collaborative learning relationships" (Hemara, 2000, cited in Walker, 2008; ERO, 2020, p. 1) and ako (Walker, 2008). Consistency, continuity of learning (Tawill, 2020) and support with what was happening in the centre at the time of lockdown were some benefits of connecting through digital means, also fostering wellbeing.

The digital technology platforms were vehicles to be able to maintain what was already happening prior to lockdown and also to step in and support where needs were identified (ERO, 2020), often building even greater engagement and whanaungatanga with whānau. Discussions, tips and guidance around educational activities, emotional literacy and behaviour management support were found to be most beneficial. Furthermore, many have said that they "would like to retain this stronger connection" (ERO, 2020, p. 1) moving forward as studies show whānau and kaiako had more time to engage in conversations about their children during lockdown through these technologies, albeit worldwide studies showing that although "technology cannot replace the close personal interaction's that young children require" (The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2021, p. 8), adding technology as another medium of communication that has proved beneficial. Thus, initiating goals to intentionally implement and to adapt policies and procedures to incorporate this more in general daily practice (Mitchell et al., 2020; OECD, 2021) with meaningful and effective ways of

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contacting whānau even when centres are fully operational, incorporating other dimensions of whanaungatanga.

Conclusion

Kaiako gained insights into each tamaiti, and their whānau dynamics during various sessions which informed their pedagogical approach in order to remain responsive during the sessions. Establishing, maintaining and retaining whanaungatanga through ways of knowing, being and doing via digital mediums throughout lockdowns proved effective in the early childhood context. This is an ongoing area of development, however reflection on the past and present can greatly benefit where digital reciprocity leads to in the future. Particularly in relation to what has been shown to be effective and the possibilities on what can become new norms moving forward in a more digitally technical world. Overall, it is important to note that digital technology is not a replacement for kanohi ki te kanohi in relation to developing a sense of whanaungatanga with tamariki, whānau and kaiako but more so can act as an enhancement alongside this (OECD, 2021). The lockdowns have forced a shift in thinking and doing, and as a result could create even more effective connections with whānau providing a wider variety of avenues to have deeper connections, ultimately benefitting tamariki and fostering deeper ways of upholding whanaungatanga.

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