



Exploring Identity and Power Through Participation

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Me and my 'Why'

Ko Karen Nicholls ahau. I am an educator currently living and working in Matamata. I whakapapa to Papakura, where I was born and raised, and to Friesland, where my father was born and lived until emigrating to New Zealand in the 1960's.

I first confronted inequalities in education when I was 18 and studying to become a primary teacher. Until then, I was barely aware of any differences between my experiences at school and those of others. I began to explore Paulo Freire's ideas about critical pedagogy and literacy, and the power of education to transform or oppress. Since then I have been very conscious of how school denies many of our aakonga freedom and opportunity.

“Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world.”

Schaull, 2005. p. 32

I am passionate about students being represented, strongly and securely in their identities in our school environment. A strong and secure identity is a key aspect of student empowerment and achievement (Ministry of Education, 2013). All students deserve to be seen, heard, and celebrated in our place.

My research questions were:

- How do multimedia texts contribute to empowerment and achievement of our students? and,
- How can we use multimedia texts effectively to represent and empower all of our students?

I wanted to look at the way multimedia narratives might be used to represent and empower students to share a strong and secure identity. I chose to focus on multimedia narratives because multimodal theory states that all texts reflect the author and are not neutral (Whitin and Whitin, 2012). Non-neutrality poses many questions: Whose stories? Whose position? Whose power? My plan was to work with students as participant collaborators to:

- Analyse recent media narratives that have been used for learning experiences at Matamata Intermediate School
- Critique the current narrative told by these media
- Create media texts that narrate the stories and identities of the diverse student body.

This mindset and challenge influenced thoughts, conversations and desire for change. I brought all this to my journey as a VInce Ham e-fellow in 2020.

What did we do?

My research design was qualitative and followed action research methods. I was really interested to find out what aakonga thought so I chose to use a focus group.

After successfully completing an ethics process, I issued an open invitation to participate to all aakonga. It was important that the research was ours. I wanted to design the research in a way that would enable power sharing and student ownership, and move beyond gathering voice towards a reflective, responsive and relational learning process. Thirteen students chose to join the research as co-researchers.

Our research group met most Wednesday mornings for about an hour over two terms. To create an environment where aakonga were able to be open and heard, we subverted the staffroom by moving furniture around and creating a space that was theirs. It was a space where I consciously positioned myself away from the centre, both literally and figuratively.



Focus group sessions included casual conversations and guided discussions, and where we created and shared multimedia texts. With support, aakonga delved into their conversations and stories and became analysts of their own data -coding conversations and looking for themes in our discussions about their sense of identity, belonging and representation in our school.

To celebrate our time together, at the end of the research each student was asked to create a multimedia representation of their identity - what they wanted others to know or understand about them. We shared our experiences as a research group at an assembly aimed at celebrating the diverse identities of our student body.



What did we find out together?

This experience revealed that no matter how planned a research project is, it has to respond to context and circumstance. For me, that meant my original idea of casual conversations before the focus group work began was shifted dramatically. Rather than multimedia texts being the research focus, casual conversations became the core of the research because these revealed authentic aakonga voice in a way that I could not ignore.

My original question asked how multimedia texts represented student identity. In one of our earliest sessions, a couple of students were considering the task I had given them: Find examples of texts in our school environment that reflected their identities.

"I don't really have anything that is me. I don't know what does reflect me. That's the thing. I don't know who I am yet."

Girl, 12 years

"I found it was difficult because, I don't really, at this point in my life, I haven't learned much about myself if you know what I mean. I don't know much about myself."

Boy, 12 years

I assumed aakonga had a clear sense of identity that they would bring into the analysis and coding process. What I heard caused me to reconsider whether coding and analysing was the priority for the group at that time. Would diving into analysing texts be meaningful without first diving into deeper discussions of identity? How could making space for authentic conversation allow us to answer my question around multimedia and representation of identity?

These reflections altered the course of my research and rather than analysing texts, we started talking about identity:

*How do I see myself - my identity?
How do others see me?*

Each sub-section below is headed with a key finding that I identified from our mahitahi.

Kai and koorero - Make space for authentic conversations

Taking time to build space for authentic conversations was foundational to establishing a sense of whanaungatanga. To address this, we embedded what we called kai and koorero into our focus group sessions.



This was when we all breathed out and connected, returning to face-to-face interactions, especially after eight weeks of lockdown isolation. This gave us many opportunities to build relationships of trust, and to become vulnerable to share with one another.

“When you come in here it breaks the bubble. It is like a new start, we go into a new place in our minds.”

Girl, 13 years

“I feel like it gets us more comfortable to share more when we talk to each other first and get to know each other.”

Boy, 11 years

“I find it easier to talk after [kai and koorero] because we might not realise it, but we are already discussing stuff. We all have a common theme about it. We’ve already talked to each other so much that it doesn’t matter and we can share our ideas - we have shared so much personal stuff already.”

Boy, 13 years

Through kai and koorero, we gathered rich, conversational data. We had invested time in building a safe, trust-based group so we were then able to come together to analyse our conversations in ways that were rigorous, challenging and, at times, sobering.

Challenge assumptions and listen

Before looking at multimedia texts, I took the opportunity to include the students in the process of coding and analysing our focus group transcripts. They identified the following themes and presented them as summary statements:

- We all have strong ideas and opinions
- Sometimes people at school only notice or care about some parts of who we are
- It sometimes feels like teachers only care about your identity when it helps them
- Some teachers really know us, but some don’t take the time to find out about us
- Some kids are listened to more than others
- Some kids are racist and put people down for who they are
- We are all different, but we all have lots about us that is the same
- We don’t completely know who we are yet



The statements, and indeed the process of students being active participants, collating their own stories revealed a group of students who were empowered to represent themselves and their experiences. Involving students proved they were competent co-researchers. They were gracious, but they were also honest and clearly expressed their experiences. Many of the statements are challenging and deserve to be taken seriously. Our school vision is “*Inspired learners, empowered to achieve*”. If our students do not feel known, heard or respected for who they are, how can they be inspired and empowered?

After reading their summary themes, I was faced with a choice - to sanitise and soften their themes, or to honour their research findings. This led me to consider more fully my position as a teacher and adult in this space. I had the power to shape the research and findings to suit my own assumptions, comfort zone or desired outcome.

Critique who holds the power and control

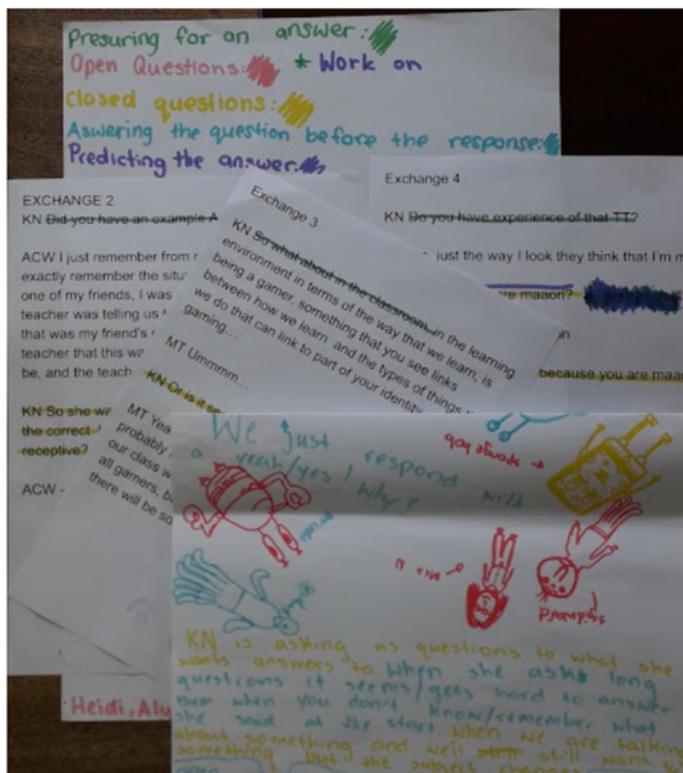
The research established its own trajectory. As I observed it unfolding, I was committed to not only capture student voices, but to work alongside the group to create a picture where they controlled the narrative that emerged. This meant that I had to consider my role in the group, and my responsibility to genuinely share power.

As we coded our texts, I noticed a number of occasions where the conversations were dominated by me, or where they stopped abruptly after I had spoken. I could see how often I controlled conversations and opportunities for aakonga to share what they were thinking.

I realised, on reflection, that I undermined agency and rather than shifting the balance of power towards aakonga, I unconsciously entrenched the existing hegemony of adults in charge.

Based on that insight, I selected four excerpts from the focus group transcripts and asked the students to analyse them in response to the question: “What did Mrs N do to shut down the conversation?” I made myself vulnerable.

The question of multimedia texts as vehicles for representation of identity was sidelined as we explored the students’ day-to-day experiences of being heard and able to express themselves. I was excited because this provided an opportunity for an authentic, shared critique of power.



Three key points emerged from our analysis of the excerpts:

- Mrs N asked complicated questions
- There were a lot of closed questions
- When Mrs N restated and clarified, she shut down conversation

These points offered important insights into the power dynamic in these teacher- student conversations.

When we discussed these findings, it became clear they were consistent with the students' experience in general at school. Many felt unheard much of the time and they wanted opportunities to be themselves, as still emerging in their identity, but with a right to express what was important to them.

Students are astute and honest co-researchers

At this point, we returned to our original questions:

*How were we represented at school,
and how did we want to represent ourselves?*

Personal experiences and stories were brought into the analysis of multimedia texts used in classroom learning programmes. Students were respectful and considered as they noted who was seen, while they judged the degree of relevance of the texts to the group members' identities and to the topic being learned about in class.

Students used a 5 point rubric to decide the degree of relevance with 1 indicating highly relevant and 5 indicating not relevant at all.

Students perceptions of topic relevance of multimedia texts indicated a mean score of 1.16 (very - highly relevant). Students' perceptions of identity relevance indicated a mean score of 2.68 (somewhat relevant).

The process of this small sample analysis gave the student-researchers another opportunity to critique what was happening in their day-to-day learning. The original question was being discussed with consideration and thought. The students were able to articulate their response to the mean scores and discuss these using personal examples of times when learning was or was not relevant to them. I noted that there was maturity in the conversation and awareness of the different viewpoints of others.

Below is one example of their insights:

“We looked at videos about how Maaori believe [Matariki] was created, but I didn’t believe that. So, there wasn’t (sic) lots of different viewpoints, only two so it’s like it’s saying that these are the only two that people believe because we only talk about those two. It feels like if you are gonna say that it’s wrong and you believe something different, you are gonna get in trouble.”

Girl, 11 years

“Maybe. Like it is fine to just study that because our country is Maaori basically, so maybe if it was like Australia it is not really relevant to them, but since it is New Zealand, we are like a Maaori country. “

Girl, 11 years

“The teachers don’t want the kids to go off topic. The school has put what we need to learn about, not the other parts.”

Boy, 12 years

I had come almost full circle back to my original question. However, our timeframe limited further exploration. I wondered: Had we answered our original question? Yes and no. We had taken a detour through issues of identity and power in a more personal way. Focusing on the multimedia texts from the outset may have taken us into these issues or it may have yielded a detached analysis. I can only speculate.

What we did do was engage in real conversations that brought about student-led research findings recommendations. I believe these conversations are a powerful piece of the puzzle for our kura moving forward with our vision and strategic goals.

Recommendations: The voice of aakonga.

The recommendations below are from aakonga and can be broadly categorised into two areas: Ways of being, and practical actions. I have used their words.

Ways of Being:

Leave us to discuss without you. Be aware that we feel pressure to say what you YOU want, not what WE want

student recommendations from analysis of transcript excerpts

[Teachers need to] actually act on the information that the students give them

anonymous student - online form

If we do a google form / survey let us know what happens to our answers

anonymous student - online form



[Teachers need to] give us the time to speak. Let kids have time to talk to each other

anonymous student - online form

Practical Ideas:

We can have a wall or pin board and some sticky notes and people can write stuff they want everyone to know about them...There are so many kids out there who would like to express themselves in their own unique way.

anonymous student - online form

[We'd like to have] clubs or groups, enrichment like last year, time to work with other students throughout the whole school.

anonymous student - online form

I had an idea, we could put a few boxes around school and every Wednesday we could open them and collect them and have a look at what kids say and see what we could do to try and fix them. It's kids working for kids.

Girl, 12 years

Moving forward

"There is power in student voice, and it isn't a voice any teacher can give. We don't give voices. We make space for them in our curricula and classrooms, or we don't."

Germán, 2020, n.p.

We have only just touched the surface of the questions that I sought to engage with over this last year. Due to Covid restrictions, the project was downsized.

This research is not concluded, but part of an ongoing process in our kura. These findings need to be discussed further, and I have been asked by the students involved in this research to take them to our senior leadership team (SLT) as we look forward to 2021.

The SLT uses student voice to inform our learning framework and increasing student agency is one of our strategic goals. As an educator in a learning community committed to building a culturally responsive, relational pedagogy, my response to the voice of these students, who have journeyed with me over the course of this year is to honour their recommendations.

In response to the koorero and mahi conducted in this research, I would like to continue to work in partnership with students and staff to:

- Develop whanaungatanga groups in our kura - focused on providing space for authentic, connected conversations
- Create a culture of learning conversations based on identity, core competencies and connections rather than content and compliance.
- Move beyond gathering to honouring student voice by involving students as co-designers of learning frameworks and ways of being in our kura.
- Build teacher capability and understanding of the hauora needs of emerging adolescents.

In conclusion, I embarked on this research with an academic mindset. I wanted to involve student researchers as participants in a process of analysing texts as a way to explore representation of identity in our school.

I learned that before students could safely critique texts put before them by their teachers - adults in positions of power, they needed to have safe spaces to talk about who they were and their experiences in school.

What I found was connecting and belonging in casual conversation allowed authenticity and vulnerability. I learned that this process could not be rushed. Time was a key factor in building those safe spaces.

Overall, I learned that as an educator and researcher, and indeed as a relational human being, I needed to be open to listen, to observe and to have my assumptions challenged. I learned that I need to be responsive in every aspect of my practice and pedagogy.

*“Be flexible, listen
and have open ears.”*

Girl, 13 years



Acknowledgements

I have the privilege and responsibility of having my name attached to this paper, however the mahi is not mine alone.

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To Sarah and Alyssa - you kept us all together and provided the way forward for each of us individually and as a collective.

To the aakonga who agreed to work alongside me in this process. You have taught me so much. You have been open, giving, vulnerable, honest, hilarious and crazy. This is your work. You have given me a gift of your voices - your stories. I will endeavour to honour that gift.

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