



# Weaving together a sense of belonging

How cultural narratives  
can develop and build  
whanaungatanga

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**CORE** EDUCATION  
Tātai Aho Rau



## Setting the scene

*Kia ora*

*Ko Taranaki te maunga*

*Ko Waiwhakaiho te awa*

*Ko Oriel rāua ko Patrick ōku matua*

*No Tamaki Makaurau, Kemureti me te Montreal, Kanāta haoti no Nga Motu  
toku kainga inaianei.*

*Ko Puketapu te kura*

*Ko Claire tōku ingoa*



Hello, my name is Claire Wigley. I am a mother, wife, sister, daughter, teacher and role model, and I have a driving need to create whanaungatanga. Born and educated in Auckland, I lived in England and French speaking Canada before settling in New Plymouth, Taranaki; our town is small but mighty and rich in Māori culture. Creating a connection to our place, our people and our history is important to me and I want to help people connect, both to each other and to our whenua.

In 2021, I successfully applied for a Dr Vince Ham eFellowship. My eFellowship research was driven by my own personal need to feel that I belong. I wanted to look at how I fit into our community, with my varying backgrounds and life experiences. Looking to my own children, and the children I teach, for inspiration and motivation, I wanted to know how they (and I) can feel valued and that we belong here. How could I embrace the culture that has been shared with me in a meaningful and inclusive way, so that I could share in this gift of te ao Māori?



## The context of my research

The school that I teach in, Puketapu School, Bell Block, has the privilege of being named after our local hapū, Puketapu. I believe this honour comes with a responsibility to recognise and celebrate Puketapu and its people.

We are lucky enough to be able to draw on waiata, kōrero, stories, and narratives around our rich Māori history. For years this has been taught throughout the school, but I felt, as an outsider who wants to be part of this narrative, that it could be explored for a deeper meaning.

- What is our cultural narrative at Puketapu School?
- What are our own personal narratives and how do they fit into the bigger picture?
- What do we already know about our narratives and why is this important?

## Designing my approach

To answer my research questions, I really had to think about how I was going to gather information and feelings from the ākonga in my school. I knew I needed to bring something that all ākonga seemed to love, and that is kai! Sharing kai, kōrero and listening is not a new concept and is a big part of Māori culture: “In a teaching and learning context, it is common for Māori to share food as a means of welcoming people, celebrating success, or building rapport. However, another important function of food is to remove tapu so it needs to be handled carefully around things that are considered to be tapu.”<sup>1</sup>

I invited a class of year 6 and 7 ākonga to participate in some action research, as a research group. The ethnic makeup of the class meant a diverse range of ākonga agreed to take part in the research. I had not had any previous relationship with some of the ākonga, so creating meaningful connections with them was an added bonus.

Three pathways influenced my research design:

- action research with ākonga and kaiako
- creating a piece of art with ākonga
- place-based education, for myself.

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1 Victoria University of Wellington. Tikanga tips. <https://www.wgtn.ac.nz/maori-hub/ako/teaching-resources/tikanga-tips>



## Action Research:

*“Here you can identify a question or problem, test out a strategy, gather data, and determine if it works. Action research dissolves the barrier between participants and researchers. In other words, the teacher actively participates in the situation while conducting the research” (Spencer, 2017, n.p.).<sup>2</sup>*

Action research is a qualitative research approach that uses a wide variety of methods. In my research, I used mind maps, a google survey, art, and conversational interviews with both individuals and groups. These methods were fit-for-purpose because I wanted authentic voices to help me understand the cultural narrative at Puketapu School, how this intersected with personal narratives, and what the big-picture cultural narrative looked like.

## Mindmapping

*“A Mind Map is an easy way to brainstorm thoughts organically without worrying about order and structure. It allows you to visually structure your ideas to help with analysis and recall.”<sup>3</sup>*

As a Design Technology teacher I enjoy using this method as it breaks down the barriers with ākongā with low literacy levels. ākongā can also draw their ideas. This technique works well with a large range of ages.

Going back to my original question “What is our cultural narrative at Puketapu School,” I rewrote this into a question for the ākongā to document their own idea of this.

What does the Puketapu School story mean to you?

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2 Spencer, J. (2017). How action research sparks innovation and boosts creativity in the classroom. <https://spencerauthor.com/how-action-research-sparks-innovation-and-boosts-creativity-in-the-classroom/>

3 Mindmapping.com. (2022. )What is a Mind map? <https://www.mindmapping.com/mind-map>



## From the questionnaire:

*What does the words 'Cultural Narrative' mean to you?*

- One main element was that it is unique to a place or school.
- In the case of Puketapu – a relationship between people and the land.
- Learning about our past/history and learning from it.
- Creates a sense of belonging by looking at stories from our past and understanding our links to the land.

*How have you linked Rakaeora's story to Puketapu and made this evident to the ākonga in your class?*

Term 1

- With a YouTube video
- When we sing the school waiata
- Through games
- Taking the kids to the beach and writing a retell of the story
- Learner progressions (in Kowhai)
- The questionnaire was a good way to collect information from staff.

I think I got a good range of answers to my questions. Most people have a pretty clear understanding of our narrative and what it means to our kura. A sense of belonging is evident in the results, but it doesn't take other cultures into account.

As quoted by a staff member "A cultural narrative is what is unique and special about where a school is situated and the people - the whenua and tangata whenua. It values the influences of the people, places, and events that have occurred in the local environment. It connects ākonga so that they develop a sense of belonging and a part of a bigger story."

Should it? Our school's narrative is strongly linked to our past, our land and all that is of Māori culture. To create a sense of belonging for all ākonga, they need to either feel part of the narrative, or be able to see their own cultures too.

I think celebrating the history of our school is very valuable, but we might like to link it to the whole school culture, to create inclusiveness and belonging. To help build the links to both the school narrative and the multiple narratives within the school, we can look at a broader version of the story and look at ways to include our community within it. This might be by having more school celebrations, end of term celebrations and gatherings, and also by asking members of our community to come and teach us and help us learn about traditions from our past. This can include but isn't limited to, weaving, carving, fishing and growing our own food.

The google form was useful because staff could complete it when they chose, but I could have also held a hui with staff and had informal conversations to gather this information. I think if we had had a hui, I would have gathered more information from them.

## Creating a piece of art

I am the technology teacher at our School, so using different media creatively made sense when designing my approach. I am also fortunate to have my own space which means we can work on projects over time. I wanted to create a piece of art to reflect our cultural narrative, one that celebrates all the cultures within our school, and one that all ākonga can identify with.

As part of this research, I created two prototype artworks with my group of ākonga.

I liked this photography piece as I thought it would be easy for teachers to photograph each ākonga, and it could easily be added to when new ākonga start at our school. Each circle showed an aspect of a person's face, with the idea that each ākonga could show just an eye or an ear, not their full face. I needed to consider tikanga around faces as Māori people regard the head as very tapu (sacred) (Victoria University, no date)

The concept behind this artwork is to collectively show our whole school, with each ākonga having a circle to represent themselves.

This brought up questions such as:

*Are we all going to be black and white?*

*Can I be in colour? I want to be in colour because I want to stand out.*



The second artwork was an individual piece that was then joined together to create one large piece of art. Each ākonga was given a square of paper to draw what represents their cultural narrative.

From this exercise I observed:

- The ākonga who felt comfortable with their narratives and felt a strong sense of belonging found this artwork easy and their work was bright and colourful.
- Ākonga, who didn't talk about feeling a sense of belonging, struggled to complete the artwork.



*“For children, experiencing the visual arts valued by their cultures within their early childhood settings can transmit powerful messages about how they and their families are valued” (Education Hub, no date)*

Using art to break down writing and literacy barriers worked well. ākonga enjoyed seeing themselves in the photographs and were proud to have them on the wall. Other ākonga asked about what they were, and it sparked some good conversations amongst the ākonga,

The circle art was good, and would look very effective once finished. This style of art would take much longer and would be more time consuming for the ākonga. It would also look incomplete if there were half or quarter circles.

## **Place-based education: “Start where your feet are”**

*“Place-based education is really an excuse to begin where my feet are, if you like. That’s part of the cliché of place-based education, begin where your feet are – where you’re standing. Get to know this place first, and then spread out into the world.” (Penitito, no date).*

To have ākonga be able to learn about an environment, from the environment, will enrich the learning experience.

I think being in the place they are learning about makes the learning experience more meaningful for ākonga. If we are learning about tikanga at the marae, then we should go to the marae and learn from there. If we are learning about marine animals or the ocean, then we should go to the beach and learn. Place based education gives ākonga the opportunity to be part of the community.

## Place based learning from the Marae.

Part of my research included spending a day at our local Marae, Muru Raupatu, and talking to kaumatua from the Puketapu hapū. I found being inside the wharenuī was hugely beneficial because I was able to talk with kaumatua and explain what I was doing and why. I was able to look at whakapapa through photos and paintings that link to our cultural narrative. Explanations were given about some elements of the story, which helped to give me an understanding and connection to the Puketapu hapū. Paintings of maps of our local area helped me to see that in fact many awa flank our School and that our School is situated between the beach and the Marae.

A key turning point in my research happened during this visit to the Marae. I had conducted informal interviews with my group of ākonga, and I was feeling like I belonged in this research. New connections with ākonga had been developed and I was in the middle of analysing the data from kaiako.

The marae visit prompted me to think reflectively about my childhood. As a child I went to a predominantly Pākehā school. I can remember learning Māori stick games and waiata and feeling that these were part of my culture. I didn't see myself as a Pākehā girl and neither did I see the games and waiata as tokenism. At the time, I saw it as fun and as part of who I was. I was talking to one of my ākonga about how I was having trouble remembering some of the words to a song and the rākau game, and the reply I received was confronting:

*“Why would you remember this? You are white, you went to a white school”*

This very timely question led me into a new path of inquiry. It brought up the question

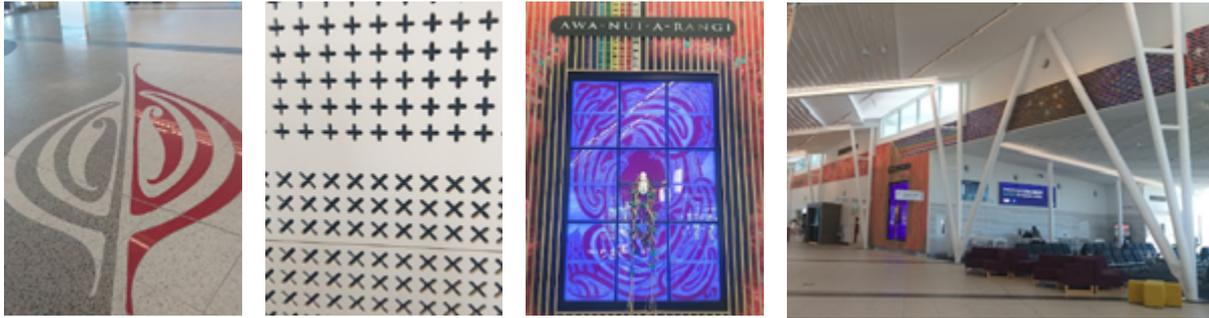
Do you really belong if other people don't see you as belonging?

Does it matter if other people don't think you belong?

Looking at the diverse nature of my research group, and thinking about the different ethnicities within our school, I started reflecting on how others might feel in a similar situation to this. I could see that this type of question might arise for many ākonga at the School, especially those not born and bred in the area.

This question prompted my personal thoughts around belonging and my place within the school.





## Place based learning from the airport.

Another bonus for my research was visiting our local airport with a group of ākonga. Taranaki airport has just undergone a huge renovation.

The New Plymouth airport was built on Puketapu land that was confiscated from them. The new design by Beca Group was completed in 2020. Beca worked in conjunction with the Puketapu hapū, to ensure that the cultural narrative of the land and the hapū was honoured. The design of the building celebrates the story and is clearly evident throughout the airport.

One of the design features that I like is the wall panels and glass markings that show “+” and “x” symbols. They symbolise the joining and connecting of people.

As I was walking around the building, I could see our ākonga making the links to our narrative. There was a strong sense of pride from us all, especially when the engineer introduced us to his colleagues as Puketapu School, the School named after the Puketapu hapū. We all felt some honour and pride to be thought of like that.

It was a moment of *whanaungatanga*.

It is about relationships, kinship and a sense of family connection. It is created through shared experiences and working together and provides people with a sense of belonging. It comes with rights and obligations, which serve to strengthen each member of that whānau or group. Where manaakitanga directs greater attention to the responsibility to care and nurture, whanaungatanga represents relationships with those who are considered whānau. This includes people who may not be connected through direct whakapapa lineages but who feel like kin because of their shared experiences (Ware. (2009; Ware and Walsh-Tapiata, 2010 cited in Ara Taiohi, no date).



## Did this create identity?

When I started this journey I knew that I had limited knowledge of our cultural narrative, what it meant. I also realised how little I knew about te ao Māori and local tikanga. That has started me on a personal journey and, as a result of this research, I am beginning to shape a new narrative for myself, and create my own sense of belonging both for myself and my family. I acknowledge that I am developing a much deeper understanding and know I still have much more to learn. It is an exciting journey.

While the work of the research project was friendly and brought unity to the group, I felt that we could start to dig deeper to make the work more meaningful. I started to look into the concept of mātauranga Māori and how we might be able to incorporate Puketapu School's Cultural Narrative through a Māori lens. It would create in depth opportunities for ākonga, kaiako and whānau to explore the narrative and links to the Māori world on a micro level and within our community.

During the research, I was able to draw from other resources to help my thinking and understanding, such as Te Whariki online, Te Tuia and The Land of Voyages.

By taking a much deeper look at our story of Rakeiora, through the mindmapping with the ākonga and visiting Muru Raupatu, and then weaving this into our curriculum, we can learn and embrace mātauranga Māori throughout the whole year.

The next part of my research is looking at the impact of mātauranga Māori, and using te ao Māori principles, and thinking about how we can weave this into our school terms and overall curriculum work.



## Moving forward

One idea we are considering is breaking the year into 4 themes all based around mātauranga Māori and our Cultural Narrative.

- **Ko Puketapu Matou** – links to The Land of Voyagers and Rakaeora. This has links into the new NZ Aotearoa histories curriculum
- **Te Ao Mārama / The natural world** – links to the beginning stories of Ranginui, the sky father, and Papatūānuku, the earth mother, and to our cultural narrative through learning about food sustainability, kaitiakitanga, and looking after our land.
- **Auaha / Innovation** – links to stories around Maui being an innovator, cultural narrative links to Rakaeora’s waka trip and how innovation has helped us to be kaitiakitanga.
- **Te Toi / The Arts** – expressing our stories and cultural narrative links.

Through these themes, we can explore innovative place-based learning opportunities for our Kura, in the hope that it will create deeper understanding and meaningful work for ākongā and kaiako alike.

## My recommendations

From this research I can see that creating connections and whanaungatanga should be front and foremost for all schools. My experience highlighted some key messages:

- Learning about and understanding where we are and where we have come from will lead to a united and meaningful context for learning.
- Meeting with my research group has highlighted the importance of building relationships with ākongā.
- Valuing and ‘seeing’ ākongā will help to nurture a sense of belonging within a place.
- Building understanding and unity among ākongā starts with the kaiako in the classroom.
- As a whole school, the cultural narrative of the kura can be recognised and taught through rich learning experiences and well-planned curriculum based around it.
- Don’t forget to celebrate. Celebrate the stories, celebrate the history and embrace learning this story to move forward into the future.

As we move into 2022 we are looking to develop stronger links with whānau, hapū and the iwi of Puketapu, and this will start with inviting these valued members of our greater school community into our school grounds for kai, waiata and kapa haka. We are going to do this, both within my class and as a whole school, through the weaving of stories and well considered and developed lessons and term themes.

I will look to work with kaiako throughout our school to see how they would like to celebrate together, and to try and find ways to weave our narrative one class at a time.

And we will always have kai!

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