

Looking beyond the absence of ‘love’ in Te Whāriki

Tēnā koutou katoa,

My name is Kayla Charteris. As a Master’s in Education student at the University of Waikato I am currently working on a dissertation. My research is an exploratory case study involving five kaiako at a bilingual early childhood centre. All participants identify as Māori and are a mix of male and female kaiako who are either qualified or currently in-training. I have a strong connection to the town where the centre is located and have a long-lasting relationship with many of the kaiako for whom I used to work with.

Using an interpretive paradigm and respecting Kaupapa Māori Methodologies throughout the research process, to date I have collected the perspectives of kaiako on how they define the concept of ‘aroha’ and how it is visible within their centre. I have also sought to understand how aroha impacts on kaiako, tamariki, and whānau, as perceived by the kaiako I have interviewed. I am using grounded theory to analyse my data as my intentions are to reiterate what kaiako have told me; to represent my findings in ways that respect their lived experiences. Findings from my research will not be universally applicable, as definitions are influenced by people, place, and time. By delving into the korero collected from my whānau of interest (Powick, 2003) I will address the following question: How might better understandings of the multifaceted complex term ‘aroha’ support kaiako to get past the absence of ‘love’ in *Te Whāriki*?

The creation of *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2017) embodies traditional Māori perspectives on child rearing which may not be as prominent today as practices and tikanga may have been watered down through colonisation, assimilation, urbanisation, and the likes. *Te Whāriki* holds true to the teachings of old and preserves the belief that “the mokopuna is special” (Te Koingo & Reedy, 2019, p. 39). It is a theoretical framework described by Te Koingo and Reedy as a “whāriki woven by loving hands that can cross cultures with respect, that can weave people and nations together” (p. 39). The revised addition of *Te Whāriki* has been further embedded with Māori beliefs and values (Rameka & Soutar, 2019) which includes “showing respect; and aroha, having love and compassion” (Reedy & Reedy, 2013, as cited in Rameka & Soutar, 2019, p. 47).

When we look for the word love within the pages of *Te Whāriki* it can be found once, in the statement: “infants are learning to trust and that they are worthy of love” (MoE, 2017, p. 13). However, when you search for the word aroha you are given seven results. The first time that the word aroha appears is under the section discussing dispositions for learning. The *Te Whāriki* authors reference *Te Whatu Pōkeka: Kaupapa Māori Assessment for Learning* (MoE, 2009) stating that it highlights “rangatiratanga, whakatoi, manaakitanga and aroha as learning dispositions that are valued in te ao Māori.” The word aroha is also used three times as a learning outcome under the Contribution strand; “Using a range of strategies and skills to play and learn with others: te ngākau aroha” (pp. 24, 37, 55), and is used twice in relation to children’s relationship with Papatūānuku. Lastly the word aroha is found in the glossary of Māori words, and is defined as “love, compassion, empathy, affection” (MoE, 2017, p. 66).

At first I thought it was interesting that the word love was used only once throughout the entire document; after all, it is a curriculum for our youngest children. The early years, as proven through research and neuroscience, is the most crucial time of all in a human being’s life. It is in the first few years of existence that development occurs within our brains and bodies that sets us up for the rest of our lives. Surely, given the plethora of research that is presently available the MoE would acknowledge the crucial role that love has to play.

Participants, method and methodology

To gain participants for my study I attended a staff hui (meeting) at the centre where my research would take place. I gave information on the nature and purpose of my study and left it open for kaiako to decide for themselves if they wanted to participate. Five kaiako gave consent to participate; four female, one male, and had all been born and raised in the small town where their centre is located. The kaiako are either related to one another or grew up attending the same marae.

My research sought to capture human experience (Silverman, 2017) hence, a qualitative approach was chosen. I anticipated that each of the five kaiako would have their own perspective of how aroha was defined and portrayed so an interpretivist paradigm was used.

Using an exploratory case study approach (Basil, 2010) I set out to discover the notion of aroha as perceived by the kaiako working within the same ECEC centre. Working within an interpretivist paradigm ensured that I had fully understood the korero of the kaiako; their definitions, examples, and attitudes so that I could genuinely and respectfully represent their voices in my research. I chose this paradigm to guide my research as I intended to explore the multiple perspectives of the kaiako (Lambert, 2012), and bring together their constructs as individuals (Atkins & Wallace, 2012). This approach is appropriate to the objective of my research which is to delve into the 'how' and 'why' of the phenomenon of aroha.

In using the interpretivist paradigm, the way in which I collected and analysed data was an iterative process based in the realms of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2008). I feel that due to the nature of aroha as a phenomenon, grounded theory ensured that authenticity was given to the data; a respect which is also deeply meaningful for research which aligns with the Māori kaupapa that I used while conducting my research. I felt that the combination of an interpretivist paradigm coupled with grounded theory would allow me to produce a piece of research which is not only enlightening to the reader, but also respectful and true to the people who participated in the research.

I used kanohi- ki- te- kanohi (face-to-face) semi-structured interviews to collect data as it provided me with the opportunity to gain an understanding of the socially constructed reality of aroha as perceived by them (Basil, 2010). I felt that being able to hear their tone of voice and see their body language would aid in the construction of my understanding of the phenomenon.

After completing the initial analysis of the data I had collected from my whānau of interest (Powick, 2003) I have gained an understanding as to why the word aroha might be used as opposed to love, even though the MoE includes love in their definition of aroha.

Findings

So how did the kaiako I interviewed define aroha? Here are a few excerpts of what kaiako had to say (please note, the kaiako chose their own pseudonyms):

Aroha for me is not a word. You show it in your body language, and it comes from the heart. (Whaea T.H)

It comes in many shapes and forms, and the way people present themselves. (Matua Hari)

It's got more than one value, aroha. It's a way of showing a person how you would take care of their child, if we're talking of an ECE setting. (Whaea Shadanae)

I would probably say love, but then explain that aroha, even though it has connotations of love, it's a lot more deeper and broader than just love. (Whaea Casey)

It became apparent that culture had an influence on the data which I received, and in addition, how the confines of a singular case study produced a shared understanding of aroha as a phenomenon. This was exemplified in the following statement given by Whaea Casey:

the way that we view aroha is similar and so it's difficult for us to really define it because it's something that we have lived with all of our lives.... It's just something that we do naturally without thinking too much about it because that's the way we have been raised.

The kaiako included other facets of Māori tikanga in their conversations with me, including manaakitanga, kotahitanga, and kaitiakitanga. It is noteworthy that kaiako used the term awahi a total of 17 times across the five interviews. Matua Hari defined awahi when he said, "aroha and awahi, so that's to love and care for each other." It seems from a Westernised perspective that care can be likened to love and can also be deemed as a visible act of love. Therefore, it is unsurprising that kaiako made frequent mention of awahi, as exemplified below:

That's how I feel it is visible in centre, is yeah, caring for a child who might need your awahi or help. (Whaea Shadanae)

In the mornings, if our tamariki are crying we are going to go over there and awahi them. And that's how it would be visible here. (Whaea T.H)

Any awahi that we give to the tamariki, it's for the whānau too. (Whaea Casey)

Aroha is a phenomenon which is innately Māori. It is intrinsically woven into the fabric of Māori existence and permeates all of the dimensions and concepts in te ao Māori. Aroha is something which is given and received, but for Reedy (1979) it is "an overworked and misunderstood concept" as the "misuse of this word is a result of our lack of responsibility to teach the rule of reciprocity on which aroha flourishes" (as cited in Te Koingo & Reedy, 2019, p. 29). My whānau of interest provided hope that times have changed since 1979, and that within their centre aroha flourishes between kaiako and the tamariki, extending out to include whānau. The reciprocal nature of aroha was highlighted by the beautiful example provided by Whaea Casey:

And so, these sorts of, pushing, and reiterating our kaupapa, and consistently every day, it shows. For example, our boy that just went to school today, he went for a school visit. When he got to his school visit another one of our boys who turned five in ... after lockdown anyway. This boy, who is five years-old, he met the four-year-old at the office at the school, took his hand, and took him into the class, and stayed by him all day. So that made the four-year-old feel really good about being at school and not want to leave. And you know, those sorts of lessons stay with the children, you know, about taking care of each other because we're whānau".

This is one example of how the aroha given at this centre permeates and resounds within the tamariki so that they are able to share aroha with others.

In my research interviews I asked the kaiako if they felt that the aroha the children experienced whilst being at their centre had an impact on their well-being. This question prompted kaiako to say things such as:

The love we show our children, our tamariki, it makes them feel like they have a place... that sense of belonging and, you know it does foster their well-being, because of that sense of belonging. (Whaea Shadanae)

I feel like it [aroha] does have an impact on their wellbeing. It helps them to feel comfortable. It helps them to feel safe. (Whaea T. H)

Seeing them express their aroha to each other, knowing that they are able to do it for themselves, that's sort of good for their wairua – their wellbeing, and I feel like that's

always being shown here, with just them hugging each other. And you know they won't just do it to that one person, they'll do it to anybody that's feeling down. (Matua Hari)

Aroha is evidently a phenomenon which is not only intrinsic, but something which is innately embedded into all facets of Māori ways of doing and being. It could have been hypothesised that aroha may have come across as a subjective concept, yet findings revealed that the whanaungatanga which connected the participating kaiako together had a profound influence on the ways in which aroha was defined and portrayed.

Discussion

Traditionally, Māori viewed their child/ren as a valued member of the world “before conception, before birth, before time” (Te Koingo & Reedy, 2019, p. 28). Māori children were raised to believe that they possessed undisputed rights to their time and place, and “were left in no doubt that someone cared for them physically, mentally, spiritually” (Te Koingo & Reedy, 2019, p. 28). This statement gave me clarity regarding the importance of holistic models for well-being such as *Whare Tapa Whā* (Durie, 1998), which four walls symbolise the physical, emotional, spiritual, and whānau dimensions of holistic well-being. As *Te Whāriki* has been written to reposition Māori worldviews at the centre of discourse (Ritchie, 2003), it seems only natural that early childhood kaiako should be utilising pedagogy which promotes children's well-being and learning from a bicultural perspective.

The question may arise; can someone who is non-Māori show aroha, a phenomenon which is quintessential to Māori ways of doing and being? As a non-Māori, I do not think I can justly answer this question. I feel that *Te Whāriki* has been written in a way that promotes core ideologies of aroha which may guide kaiako/practitioners, Māori and non-Māori, to include aroha in their pedagogy. ‘Questions for reflection’ at the end of each strand encourage kaiako/practitioners to consider how they are engaging in culturally responsive pedagogy. The questions evoke reflection upon concepts which embody aroha, as illustrated by my whānau of interest, who found it easier to describe what aroha is and looks like by discussing concepts such as manaakitanga and awhi.

Conclusion

Despite the absence of the word love within the pages of *Te Whāriki*, this does not imply that aroha is absent too; aroha is at the core of every strand and principle. *Te Whāriki* was developed to guide kaiako/practitioners and it is the responsibility of teaching teams to unpack what the strands and principles look like within their context. It would be greatly beneficial for teaching teams to delve deeply into what meanings can be found within the te reo Māori used within the pages of *Te Whāriki*, as the te reo Māori is not a direct translation from the English word(s) placed in front of it. Through our research interviews, my whānau of interest taught me that aroha does not merely translate as love, it embodies all aspects of te ao Māori, the many dimensions and facets that encompass every individual as well as their whānau. Aroha relates to everything that we do as early childhood practitioners and should be at the heart of every local curriculum. What aroha looks like at your place can only be determined by you.

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