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# KA ORA KĀINGA RUA: FINDING A HOME IN THE ACADEMY. A STUDY INTO THE EXPERIENCES OF FOUR MĀORI WOMEN IN THE ACADEMY

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**ABSTRACT** *The article is a brief summary of a larger project that studied the experiences of four Māori women in the academy. The project attempted to identify practices that limited and/or supported Māori women's participation within the academy. The project suggested five emerging themes that relate to these women's experiences: motivation to pursue and maintain tertiary study; the entry experiences of Māori women into the academy; being supported within the academy; women in the academy and the multiplicity of roles; and learning from the experiences of others.*

## INTRODUCTION

This research project was initially undertaken as part of the Masters course, Equity and Educational Leadership, at the School of Education, University of Waikato. It is intended that this research will be a pilot for a wider study in this area.

The project focussed on the experiences of four Māori women, two studying at post-graduate level and two at graduate level. The project attempted to identify practices which limited and/or supported Māori women's participation within the academy.

We had theorised from our own positions as Māori women, lecturers and students in the academy, that the information gathered would show that there were challenges for Māori entering the essentially Pakeha structured academy. We had also theorised that these women who had reached their respective levels in study would have worked out ways of succeeding.

Our literature review confirmed a serious lack of research about the experiences of Māori women in the academy and in leadership in general. This indicated to us a need to value, to celebrate, and to make visible the experiences and stories of Māori women, in order that their experiences might contribute to the development of other Māori women as leaders.

Our research question was "What can be learned from the experiences of four Māori women in the academy?" We were particularly keen to locate common factors from the sharing of these experiences.

## Theory, Methodology and Method

We worked within the broad framework of Kaupapa Māori research as we felt this would provide a culturally appropriate position that would support, validate and legitimate our work. Within this broad framework, we felt that a qualitative research approach was particularly useful in allowing us to develop grounded theory through mapping the feelings and thoughts of our participants. It was a flexible framework which enabled us to search for meaning rather than truth. Furthermore, we agreed with the notion of Māori women for Māori women as a means of achieving this goal. We agreed with Pihama's (1994) view that it is imperative that Māori women redraw the maps and reclaim "... Māori women's knowledge forms, ... Māori women's stories, which will aid us in the reconstruction of our own world views" (p.39).

We favoured a case study approach, as we believed that the women's stories would provide us with an in-depth understanding of their experiences. Biographical information within the case study approach, with its emphasis on metaphor, did indeed provide us with a thick, rich description of their experiences. From these we were able to make new discoveries and insights.

We utilised two key methods for gathering information, interviewing and hui. We selected interviewing as our primary method of information-gathering because we thought that it would help us best to answer our research question. We needed to hear their experiences. Interviewing appealed as an instrument that would be sensitive to the underlying meaning when gathering and interpreting data (Merriam, 1988). We were of the belief that interviewing would be appropriate for Māori because of the long history of oral traditions, and the idea of *kānohi ki te kānohi* (face-to-face) allowing the researcher the opportunity to establish a rapport and gather rich, detailed information from the participants.

We were mindful of the need to establish rapport with our participants and of the limited time available to complete the project so we selected participants who were already known to us. Secondly, we recognised that for Māori, hui is a culturally appropriate way of sharing information. It also fits within the paradigm of Kaupapa Māori research approaches which seek to locate research within the sense making processes of the research participants.

## Outcomes

Following the series of case studies and hui, five key themes emerged.

### 1. *Motivation to Pursue and Maintain Tertiary Study*

A variety of motivating factors were identified, including: a desire to improve their knowledge of *te reo Māori*; discontentment with the whole education system; the influence of role models; encouragement from others; and whanau influence.

As an example, Rahera found that when she moved on to graduate study the transition was made easier by the fact that she knew other women in the

course. Knowing others beforehand served to motivate and encourage her to pursue graduate study:

The deciding factor for me to start my masters, to even start the paper was the fact that I knew someone else who was doing it. I know I wouldn't have even started had it not been for two of my friends who were also starting with me. I didn't have the confidence.

Puti commented that:

My mother was in her last year of training . . . I knew at that stage that the only way I would get ahead was by going to University, because it was drummed into us, well me, because I did all right at school. It was drummed into me that if I wanted to get anywhere I'd have to go to University.

## 2. *The Entry Experiences of Māori Women into the Academy*

As the literature showed, Māori women can often find their early experiences into the academy isolating and intimidating (Fuli, 1995; Irwin, 1997). Our study highlighted the following barriers: language; age differences; moving away from home; cultural capital; lack of confidence and having to develop and establish new friendships.

When Puti was asked to reflect on her initial entry into the academy she replied:

[I was] really scared, I was scared I couldn't cut it in terms of the academic sort of things. I went into the Rumaki course - which is total immersion. I had no reo, no language whatsoever. So for the first nine months, I'd say a year really, I sat there and listened and didn't know what they were talking about. . . . That was hard, but it was also good in the fact that it was also a whanau atmosphere and there was a lot of support there. I felt the lecturers got to know you and that support wasn't in the mainstream. . . . Yes, but scared, scared of writing assignments, the language is different, and it was a totally different culture . . . but you get here to uni and you're by yourself, think for yourself and manage your time.

## 3. *Being Supported Within the Academy*

All of the participants mentioned that they were able to find strength and support in their fellow Māori students. Two of the participants identified the whanau and rumaki programmes as examples of structures that provided them with support. Both the whanau and rumaki programmes provide a "culturally safe" environment for the students where concepts such as manaaki, tiaki, tautoko and awhi are encouraged, acknowledged and utilised.

All the participants at some point had found themselves gravitating towards or seeking out other Māori students to work with or even just sit with in classes. Mahia summed this up nicely by saying:

I think in terms of feeling at home, I think the fact that we Māori cluster. We all gravitate to one another, this is us. It's certainly always been a help. Because I've never ever felt at home if I'm working in isolation, if I'm the only Māori in any context, I get out of that situation fast. I tend to need the support of my peers.

Participants were asked to consider the ways the academy could better cater for them as Māori women and make them feel at home. Suggestions given included: provide forums for Māori students to share their experiences with other students; have a whanau day where whanau could come in and spend time in classes and looking around to gain some appreciation of what their whanau members were experiencing and to be able to identify with the academy; reinstate the use of the cultural hour as a way of bringing Māori students together; establish networks or forums for discussion and the sharing of experiences.

One of the participants commented that, "... it would be cool to get together with other Māori women and share how they're going".

#### 4. *Women in the Academy: a Multiplicity of Roles*

The literature indicated that Māori women, and women in general, often have a multitude of roles and responsibilities (Fuli, 1995; Irwin, 1997; Wisker, 1996). It was evident in this study that all of the participants had numerous commitments and responsibilities over and above their study. They had, however, enlisted the support of whanau and friends to support and help them on their journey through the academy.

The evidence from the participants in this study clearly supports what Norman and Mutu-Griggs stated:

Most Māori academic women are heavily involved in voluntary community work such as tribal marae, tribal runanga, management committees of Māori Incorporations, Trust Boards, Government-appointed advisory bodies, kohanga reo, Māori access programmes, aside from family and many other committees (cited in Pihama & Ka'ai, 1990, p.12).

Mahia remarked that:

I'm in a process of struggle at the moment. I think it is difficult, the demands of family life ... a big part of my huarahi or my pathway through the academy is the support I've enlisted from my wider whanau.

## 5. *Learning from the Experience of Others*

As Wisker (1996) points out, women who have already gained experience in the academy need to recognise how they can act as role models and mentors, and provide support and nurture other women in the academy.

This study showed that there was some support and role modelling taking place but this was often *ad hoc* and informal. There was a clear message to formalise networks and systems to enable students to share their experiences and learn from that sharing. One participant commented:

One thing that would have been quite good is to have some kind of network, a group, because I've actually found that I generally get support from other Māori women that are studying as well. But that's something that, it's not anything that's been put in to place by the academy, it's something informal that I guess has been initiated by me or by other students. It would be good perhaps to have some kind of a network set up where Māori women could come together perhaps, talk about their issues, their experiences. I go to Puti all the time and ask her for feedback or her advice, because she's someone that's been there and done that and is a bit further down the track than me.

We asked our participants what advice they might give to new students at various stages of their time in the academy. Some of the advice given by the participants included: having a talk to somebody right at the beginning about the whole programme; being clear about the programme and what it entails; looking for support from others; sharing ideas and resources; persevering because to succeed; getting to know the systems; getting to know where to go to get help and who to talk to in the academy; not being afraid to ask questions or ask for help; trying not to compromise cultural beliefs and values; be self disciplined and meet deadlines; find supervisors who are supportive; study to develop the whole person academically, and socially; and not producing undue pressure by over-striving.

Collectively, the themes highlighted a multiplicity of factors that affected the women's ability to "be at home" in the academy. The data analysis revealed a variety of factors that motivated them to pursue their studies. In addition, our own findings are consistent with outer findings, mainly that many Māori women have found their entry experiences isolating and intimidating. Finding strength and support in fellow students was considered helpful and added to the women's ability to cope with studies and other responsibilities. These insights, along with the women's suggestions of ways that others might be supported, has provided some clear direction for future action.

### **Where To From Here?**

We have been encouraged by the participants to disseminate the findings of this study through publication and presentation. We welcome this suggestion as we see this as a way of giving voice to their experiences which may provide



a model for others. We also hope that we can work with the women from this study and others to establish formal structures and support systems for Māori women within our own academy. We intend to expand this initial study into wider studies of Māori in educational leadership

**Ehara taku toa i te toa takitahi  
Engari he toa takitini.**

## GLOSSARY OF TERMS

*whanau programme:* a pre-service programme offered in our local academy that is open to those who have an interest or some knowledge of te reo Māori and wish to develop this. It targets those students who have an interest in teaching in partial immersion classrooms.

*rumaki programme:* a pre-service programme offered in our local academy that is open to those who have a high level of proficiency in te reo Māori and who could teach in partial; or total immersion settings.

*cultural hour:* an hour per week that is set aside in the academy where students can attend cultural programmes of their choice, for example kapa haka, tramping, music.

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