

In-depth engagement with tamariki & rangatahi Māori

A SERIES OF FOCUS GROUPS AND INTERVIEWS CREATED RICH STORIES FOR TAMA-TE-RĀ ARIKI ENGAGEMENT

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The Children's Commissioner promotes the participation of children and young people in decisions that affect them. When done well, it upholds their right to have a say and be heard, it advances the best interests of children and young people and produces better decision-making overall. We model best practice for engaging children and young people, as well as encouraging other organisations to do the same. Find more case studies on our website www.occ.org.nz

Introduction

The Office of the Children's Commissioner recognises that, as tangata whenua, it is vital the voices of tamariki and rangatahi Māori are heard at all levels of decision making and planning. This engagement came about because we wished to more fully reflect their voices in our advocacy. We wanted to learn about the lived experience of rangatahi and tamariki Māori, so we asked them.

The engagement was targeted to a diverse group of tamariki and rangatahi, many who would be unlikely to be heard without focused efforts to engage with them. Some of these tamariki and rangatahi are sometimes described by policy makers as difficult to reach. But we know if children and young people are given appropriate opportunities to communicate in ways they are comfortable with, they will clearly show their capacity to identify insights gained from their life experiences.

We used our strong relationships with schools and Māori community organisations so we could connect and engage with tamariki and rangatahi in places they usually go to. We undertook focus group sessions that were interactive and fun. We followed



About the Office of the Children's Commissioner

The 1.1 million children and young people under 18 make up 23% of New Zealand.

The Children's Commissioner Judge Andrew Becroft and his office advocate for their interests, ensure their rights are upheld, and help them have a say on matters that affect them.

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up the initial group meetings with more in-depth sessions with a smaller number of rangatahi.

This was not a one-off engagement. It took weeks of planning work with organisations, time to engage with all the groups of children and young people multiple times, and multiple sessions with the selected individual interviewees. Combined, these steps enabled rich stories and insights into the lived experience of tamariki and rangatahi to be heard that would not otherwise have been possible.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE GROUP

We engaged with 155 tamariki and rangatahi Māori. We wanted to gather ideas and experiences from tamariki and rangatahi Māori from all walks of life, especially those whose voices are least likely to be heard without targeted efforts to consult them.

The 155 tamariki and rangatahi had diverse lives. All the tamariki and rangatahi were aged 4 to 18 years old, identified as being Māori and had whakapapa connections to fifteen iwi. Some of the children and young people were involved in cultural activities and some were engaged and thriving in their education. However, others we spoke with were not in education, employment or training, or in any social or recreation activities in their communities. Many of the tamariki and rangatahi we met with were vulnerable to systematic risk factors outside of their control, such as economic, social, mental, cultural and physical factors.

Ethics

An ethics committee established at the start of the project had responsibility for providing project advice, monitoring the practice of facilitators, ensuring best practice in cultural competence and health and safety, and providing holistic supervision to the project leader. The ethics committee met at least once a month or whenever necessary to address ethical and cultural issues as they arose. Community participants were encouraged to raise any issues they felt were necessary with the committee. The committee was also the first point of contact if they were unhappy with any aspect of the facilitator’s work.

Community participants were provided with an information sheet and consent form, which they used to inform whānau and young people about the proposed engagements. We required informed consent from rangatahi over the age of 14 for

Tama-te-rā Ariki

This series of engagements was given the name Tama-te-rā Ariki to ground it in a strengths-based approach and recognise tamariki and rangatahi Māori as the experts in their lives:

Tama is derived from Tama-te-rā: the central sun, the divine spark. Ariki refers to the senior most status. Our children, our tamariki, are the greatest legacy our world has.



any video and audio recording and whānau consent for those younger than 14. We stipulated that all young people needed to participate voluntarily. An opt-out clause was included in the form for young people and whānau to indicate they did not want to be involved or did not give permission for pictures and video recordings to be taken. At the start of every session young people were reminded they could choose to opt-out at any time. All information gathered, such as consent forms and feedback, was kept secure and accessible only by the project team, the community organisation and the young persons themselves.

We were also in direct and frequent contact with kaumātua, community leaders and advisors on te ao Māori, or the Māori world view. We were dedicated to a no-surprises policy and this meant being transparent and honest with our journey. We carried this into our engagement with tamariki and rangatahi; they were respected as participants and leaders and provided with any information they felt they needed.

Sharing personal stories can be daunting for anyone, especially tamariki and rangatahi when reflecting on or exploring sensitive areas of their lives. Keeping tamariki and rangatahi safe and supported was vital. By spending time as guests of the village that wrapped around them, and connecting with organisations in their world, we were confident the necessary support was available.

Scoping

The scoping phase deepened our understanding of te ao Māori; that it is large and diverse, with tamariki and rangatahi Māori who whakapapa to many lineages and find their turangawaewae in multiple environments. To hear the voice of young Māori it was vital we acknowledged that there is no single voice that represents all their experiences. To hear their voices, we needed to step into their spaces according to their tikanga. We spent time on whanaungatanga or building relationships during the early phase of the engagement and throughout.

We also recognised from the onset of this project that we needed to ensure the tamariki, rangatahi and their whānau, hapū and iwi were supported to lead the conversation. We strongly believe that tamariki and rangatahi are the experts in their own experiences, and that those who know them are best placed to guide how we engage.



Method

We wanted to hear a range of views and experiences, but we also wanted to hear detailed, rich stories. We undertook to design a process with the organisations already working with tamariki and rangatahi that would achieve this goal. This required relationship building with organisations.

RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

Relationships are a crucial part of any engagement. Although relationships continue to build throughout the engagements, we explicitly included this in the planning phase of this project, because we are a non-Māori organisation engaging with tamariki and rangatahi Māori. Firm relationships create a solid foundation for the rest of the engagement. And if something goes wrong during the process, the trust between the parties will make it easier to resolve.

To connect with tamariki and rangatahi, we worked in partnership with schools, marae, community organisations and cultural groups that had existing relationships with tamariki. Significant time was invested in building strong relationships with rangatira and kaitiaki of the young people. It involved visiting their spaces at times that were convenient for them, getting to know people for who they are as well as what they do, learning about the community and whānau that the rangatahi represented and appreciating their uniqueness. All of these things included drinking plenty of coffee and eating packets of biscuits, and sharing the responsibility of providing lunch.

By building relationships with respected leaders and mentors we were invited to enter the community as manuhiri or guests/visitors, and trusted to engage with their young people. Tamariki and rangatahi were then invited to participate in focus group sessions where our facilitator worked alongside a local mentor/teacher/youth worker.

Community participants were informed of the objectives of the focus group and engaged in the design of the project and content. We provided an information sheet clearly stating the topic and some of the key questions we wanted to ask the children and young people. Community partners were offered the opportunity to help facilitate sessions. The process for any children who needed additional support outside the engagements was also agreed at this stage.

We found that the community groups and whānau were dedicated to the kaupapa. This buy in meant they supported the tamariki and rangatahi to be engaged and productive. They expressed they felt treated as partners, and as a result they were



committed to owning the implementation and outcome. For tamariki in primary and pre-school we worked with the school to engage with whānau for consent. For rangatahi in high school we worked with community organisations/groups to engage whānau and invite young people to participate on a voluntary basis.

FOCUS GROUP ENGAGEMENT

We use the term *focus group* to describe our group engagements. However it is important to note that our group engagements use a range of engagement methods, including games, art, observation, and kōrero space to allow the young people to express themselves.

We asked our partners to recruit groups of eight to 18 young people for each focus group session. We were clear with our partners about how we hoped to engage with the young people and we provided information about the consent process at this stage. The partner organisations then nominated or invited young people they believed would be interested in participating. We held focus groups by age group (kohanga, 5-6yrs, 7-9yrs, 10-12yrs, 13-15yrs, 16-18yrs, and 18+) and met with each group at least twice.

We tailored our engagement approach to amplify the strengths of the young people with whom we were engaging, who all had unique stories to tell. The facilitator shared activity-based engagements for the young people to consider, and the young people then advised us which activities would work best and chose the food and venue from options proposed. This helped us get off to a good start; it helped ensure that each engagement was successful and productive as the those participating had ownership over the work.

We developed a set of prompts to use in the focus group activities so that valuable information was gained from all the focus groups.

Sessions ran for one to two hours with most of the time dedicated to play and informal chats. This was purposeful, based on the knowledge that the young people would contribute more if they were comfortable and relaxed.

We chose to hold focus group sessions for tamariki aged four to ten years old during school hours and in the school community. This meant there was an existing support network for the children. It also worked better for the children and families' schedules (alleviating matters such as tiredness and constraints around school pick-up time).

Activity Based Engagements (ABEs)

ABE are activities such as games or art projects that are aimed at having the participants share their views and ideas as part of the activity



Focus group sessions for rangatahi aged 11 to 18 years old were facilitated after school hours in a community setting. This took place over two to three sessions of two to three hours (for each age group). Facilitators introduced the kaupapa and ran games which were linked to conversation themes. After every game the young people entered kōrero space to discuss the game and the theme.

All sessions included kai and some 'chill time' at the end to allow young people to approach the facilitator and discuss anything they wanted, or the facilitator would approach young people to ask them questions. This was an important time, as it allowed young people to talk in more depth.

INTERVIEW ENGAGEMENT

As we ran the focus groups, we realised there was even greater potential to capture the richness of the rangatahi stories by hearing from some participants individually. While not part of the initial engagement plan, we saw benefit of taking a flexible approach and undertaking in-depth interviews with a selection of the rangatahi from the focus groups to get greater detail.

Ideally, we would have liked to co-design the full process from the start. However, engagements need to have flexibility to adapt to the young people's wants and needs, as long as the engagement continues to maintain safe practice.

Once we decided to undertake interviews, the first step was to suggest some of the young people meet with us in groups of three to discuss what would be involved if they were to agree to be interviewed. Eventually twelve young people from the focus groups were interviewed in more depth. Most found it difficult to tell their stories, not because they didn't want to, but because it was the first time anyone had intentionally asked them to do this.

As a warm up, each rangatahi was asked to think about a movie character they could relate to. The character was a tool to help them tell their stories more safely. Whenever they got stuck, we were able to return to their chosen character and talk about the story, until they were able to share again. This process took place over three or four catch-ups to allow the rangatahi to tell their stories at their own pace. It was important to be careful the chosen movie character did not undermine the young people's kōrero. As well, we needed to make sure that we or report readers weren't ascribing a meaning to the decision to choose that character that went beyond what the young person had intended. Eventually, when we were confident that the young people's voices were strong enough to stand alone, we de-



emphasized the movie characters and ensured the voices were the heart of the report.

The interviews produced the deep, rich and informative content.

FEEDBACK

A detailed report was generated from each focus group session. This was provided to our community partners, and presented to the young people, who fed back on what we thought we had heard from them. We checked the stories from the interviews back with the rangatahi and they gave final approval of what they shared.

Our office has written a report about this engagement, which provides rich information on what the tamariki and rangatahi told us during the engagement, the insights we gained and the implications of these insights. This report is available on our website at:

<http://www.occ.org.nz/publications/reports/child-and-youth-voices-tama-te-ra-ariki>



Conclusion and lessons learned

Our engagement has provided valuable insights which other organisations can apply to their own work, with and for tamariki and rangatahi. Non-Māori organisations can successfully carry out engagements with tamariki and rangatahi Māori but to ensure the best outcomes and practice, the process requires ethical and cultural competence, sufficient time spent planning and building relationships, power-sharing and reporting back.

Some aspects, such as respectfully involving young people's family groups and communities, apply to all engagements, whether with tangata whenua, pākehā or tauwi groups. Other aspects are specific to Māori children. For instance, taking the time to learn from advisors on the Māori world view, kaumātua and community leaders is essential to the success of an engagement by a non-Māori organisation. It is important to make sure that advisors are knowledgeable about the local community in which the engagement will take place

WHAT LESSONS HAVE BEEN LEARNT FROM THIS ENGAGEMENT?

- 1) Recognise relationships as the foundation of the engagement.
- 2) Recognise your place as guests in the lives of young people and their communities, and the need to learn about their world before beginning an engagement.
- 3) Recognise that life experiences can vary considerably, even in groups that share the same statistical profiles.
- 4) Recognise that genuine and meaningful engagement with children and young people takes time; consider the value added by going back more than once to deepen the engagement.
- 5) Recognise that young people's time is valuable by feeding back on the engagement and providing a koha (such as vouchers).
- 6) Value activity-based engagement, as that enables children and young people to communicate their views in a range of ways that build on their strengths.

We began this targeted engagement with the goal of more fully reflecting the voices of these tamariki and rangatahi in our advocacy. As we say in our voices report on behalf of this group, we recognise that there is no one voice of Māori, but rather, there are diverse views, experiences and perspectives. The life experiences and perspectives of the 155 tamariki and rangatahi we spoke to varied considerably – each had their own story. While being Māori was a common element, how that impacts children's lives needs to be understood, not assumed.

The Children's Commissioner seeks the voices of children and young people through **Mai World: Child and Youth Voices**. More information: www.occ.org.nz/4youth/maiworld/