Chapter 4

The critical involvement of fathers

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He kōrero whakamārama

This chapter highlights one of the key findings of a three-year COI research project, carried out by the whānau of Te Kōpae Piripono Māori immersion early childhood centre, into its exploration of leadership and the critical importance of whānau development in ensuring successful educational experiences and fulfilled lives for Māori children and their families. For Te Kōpae Piripono, whānau development involves the learning and development of every member of its whānau, whether that be children, parents, teachers or management. Therefore, a key aspect of its kaupapa is the support and development of the whole whānau, not just the child enrolled.

Tātai Whakapapa

Ko Rangi, ko Papa
ka puta ko Rongo, ko Tānemahuta
tū ki te rangi e tū iho nei.
Whai muri iho ko Tangaroa,
ko Tūmatauenga, Haumiatiketike
Tāwhirimātea i rere ki te rangi, e hai
Tokona rā ko te rangi ki runga
ko Papa ki raro ka wehewehea
ka puta te whai a
ko te ao māramarama.
Ka takatū ko te ira tangata
i ngā arearetanga o Papa
horapa kau ana ki te matawhenua
ki te tuawhenua,
ki ngā motumotuhanga, e hai.
Koia rā tēnei e Rongo
whakairia ake ki runga
Hohou ko te rongo, ki runga, ki raro
ki te hunga tāngata,
ki ngā tamariki mokopuna.
Hui e! Hui e! Tāiki e!

(Nā Te Huirangi Waikerepuru tēnei karakia i tito, 1991)
This karakia, te Tatai Whakapapa (Waikerepuru, 1991), embodies the kaupapa of Te Kōpe Piripono Māori immersion early childhood centre. Te Tatai Whakapapa is essentially an affirmation of the kaupapa Māori paradigm that underpins and guides everything that we do at Te Kōpe Piripono.

Background of Te Kōpe Piripono

Te Kōpe Piripono is Taranaki’s only Māori immersion early childhood centre. It was set up in October 1994 by a diverse group of parents, educators and other prominent individuals in the community, all committed to the retention and enrichment of te reo Māori me ōna tikanga in Taranaki. Te Kōpe Piripono’s innovative practice is embodied in its name. The word kōpe is the Taranaki word for nest (in which learning and language are fostered). Piripono means an everlasting and genuine embrace.

Te Kōpe Piripono is set in old hospital grounds overlooking New Plymouth and a stunning expanse of ocean. Our tūpuna mountain, Rua Taranaki, stands behind us. Te Kōpe Piripono has a full-day licence and follows the primary school calendar, meaning we have a four-term year with corresponding holidays. We are licensed for 30 children and have a teaching team of seven full-time and part-time teachers. Six of these are qualified early childhood teachers and have teacher-registration status.

We rejoice in being Māori and believe that all the elements that proudly distinguish us as Māori and make Māori special and unique should again find expression in every facet of our lives. For us kaupapa Māori means 100 percent te reo Māori as the medium of teaching and learning. Te reo Māori is the mechanism by which we interpret and understand the world. Te reo Māori is the outward expression of our taha Māori, our mana Māori and our values and beliefs. We strongly connect with the indigenous concepts of te ao Māori (the ancient phenomenological world of Ranginui and Paparūānuku). Indigenous Māori concepts, karakia and spirituality are the essence of all our operations and practices.

The importance of whānau

An important aspect of our philosophy is the support and development of the whole whānau, not just the child enrolled. We believe whānau are an integral part of teaching and learning. It is incumbent on us to help Māori children and their families come to realise the important role they play in the positive development of their community. In particular, whānau need to understand that they become involved in kaupapa Māori early childhood education not just to “receive” an education; they come to participate fully and to actively contribute to the growth of the community. Kaupapa Māori early childhood education is not just about children’s preparation for school. It is about whānau, hapū and iwi development—the ecological context of children’s learning.

The role of whānau development

Whānau development at Te Kōpe Piripono is based on the premise that all members of the whānau, including the children and their families, are climbing a metaphoric poutama—a learning and development staircase—and that there is a shared commitment to, and responsibility for, the upward movement of the community on that poutama (Hond-Flavell, 2005). A planned and purposeful programme of development opportunities that is responsive to members’ needs and circumstances mediates the development of both individual whānau members and also the whānau as a whole.
Our approach to learning

Ko koe ki tēnā kiwai, ko au ki tēnei kiwai o te kete ....

(You carry your handle and I'll carry my handle of our kete.)

This well-known Waikato whakatauki embodies the essence of our aspirations for children and whānau at Te Kōpae Piripono. The “handles” of the kete denote the idea of both individual and collective responsibility for, in our case, children’s learning and development. In order for two people to carry the kete effectively, there needs to be communication, co-operation, collective responsibility, consideration of the other person and commitment to the task. Then there is the kete itself and the significance of what it holds or promises to hold. For us, it is about learning, dialogue, interaction, ideas, perspectives, aroha, wairua, manaaki and whānau. Carrying the kete denotes a sense of journey and purpose. For us, it is a journey of learning—of whānau and of relationships. We embrace the concept of “ako” (Tamati, 2005), where children and adults are simultaneously on a journey of learning and discovery. “Ako” posits the teacher and the learner as equally powerful participants in the learning process. The concept of “ako” means viewing children as having mana and the ability to make their own decisions about their own learning. It also acknowledges adults’ own learning journeys.

Ngā Takohanga e Whā—The Four Responsibilities

| Te whai takohanga—Having responsibility |
| Having responsibility relates to having designated roles and positions of responsibility. |

| Te mouri takohanga—Being responsible |
| Being responsible refers to an individual’s attitude and actions. Being responsible is about being professional, acting ethically and appropriately, being honest, being positive and open to others and different perspectives. |

| Te kawe takohanga—Taking responsibility |
| Taking responsibility is about courage, risk taking, having a go, taking up the challenge and trying new things. |

| Te tuku takohanga—Sharing responsibility |
| Sharing responsibility is about sharing power, roles and positions. But more than this, it is about relationships. Sharing responsibility denotes an interaction and engagement with others, being able to listen to others’ points of view, acknowledging different perspectives and also asking for and providing assistance. |

Our COI journey

Our research project sought to explore, in depth, our whānau-development structure and our own conceptualisation of leadership at Te Kōpae Piripono. We view leadership in relation to four key responsibilities (Ngā Takohanga e Whā): having responsibility; being responsible; taking responsibility; and sharing responsibility.

Our view of leadership is that everyone involved in Te Kōpae Piripono, whatever the role (teacher, child, parent or other whānau member), is a leader. Individual leadership is about supporting and, at times, challenging each other to acknowledge and take up our individual and collective responsibilities for supporting our children’s and our own learning and development.
Using te Tātai Whakapapa (the structure and concepts of the original whānau of Ranginui and Papatūānuku) as our conceptual framework, we devised and then set about answering our research question:

Whakatupungia te pa harakeke, kia tupo whakaritorito.

(Nurture the essence of whānau, that it may flourish.)

How does whānau development at Te Kōpae Piripono foster leadership, across all levels, to enhance children's learning and development?

An unexpected journey

Our research question led us on an unexpected journey. As well as exploring more fully our concept of leadership, we discovered that fear and anxiety afflict us all—young and old—and are major impediments to our individual and collective development. The research data revealed emotional difficulties that we believe are generations old; the long-term consequences of families' lived experience of education and of hardships due to colonisation and the muru raupatū—the massive land confiscations of the 19th century. Many whānau hold a negative “default” view of education from the time when they experienced powerlessness in their relationships with teachers and educational institutions. Kaitiaki, parents and grandparents have all voiced the fear of “getting it wrong” or not being able to “get it right”. Yet learning can only occur if we are open to change. We found that fear is a significant barrier to whānau participation and involvement—particularly fathers’ involvement—in their children’s learning.

Working together to find new ways of “being” and “doing” means responding appropriately to the fears and anxieties that we hold. During the research, we found that we can implement all the research strategies and plans we create but, if we really want to help people to grow, we have to address that inner turmoil. We found that with perseverance, caring, empathy and support—persistent, positive action—individual and collective whānau were able to be open and honest with each other, to learn to trust and, in doing so, gain an inner peace. When whānau gain a sense of equilibrium, the dynamic transformative ripples are wide and far reaching for the whole whānau.

The critical involvement of fathers

This chapter focuses on one of the key findings of our research—the critical involvement of fathers. A recurring theme throughout our research has been that, for various reasons, fathers tend to be less involved than mothers. The absence of the male element has major implications for our whānau and for children's experience of whānau at Te Kōpae Piripono. We have explored a variety of reasons for this lack of involvement, including socioeconomic difficulties, work hours, external commitments, fear and patriarchal attitudes to early childhood education. This last point highlights the issue of gender roles—particularly attitudes to parenting roles, such as “Early childhood is women's work.” But it is fear, again, that appears to stand out as a key factor in the issue of fathers “missing in action”. We have observed various manifestations of poor self-esteem and low self-worth, often accompanied by a paralysing fear of getting involved or getting it wrong.

The absence of the male element at Te Kōpae Piripono is a major threat to the kaupapa and the very fabric of the whānau of Te Kōpae Piripono. Indeed, this gender imbalance is an issue that has ramifications for Māori society as a whole. The drive to engage fathers at Te Kōpae Piripono is a work in progress. However, the mere act of focusing in on the area of father involvement, and prioritising open and honest
dialogue in a variety of ways, has already noticeably increased the presence of fathers. In an effort to make Te Kōpae Piripono "father friendly", father involvement has been given purpose and meaning. Te Kōpae Piripono has striven to find ways fathers can be supported to overcome barriers. Te Kōpae Piripono acknowledges the responsibility of the whānau to embrace fathers' strengths, interests and practical skills, and to promote the crucial role that fathers have in their children's learning and development.

**Our perception of the father's role**

The basis of our understandings of the world is the creation stories, represented for our purposes by Te Tātai Whakapapa. The stories are figurative explanations of evolutionary processes and historical events. They are important to Māori because much of our institutionalised behaviour, customs and attitudes found sanction in the stories. The creation story tells of the numerous phases of Te Kore and then of Te Pō. At Te Pō Tiwhatiwha we become aware of Rangi and Papa embraced tightly as one—one unified forebear of humankind, the male and the female united. The union was all at once loving, secure, and yet stifling, and within the embrace the male offspring were nurtured by both parents. This was the original whānau. Both mother and father feature equally in this template for family. The complementarity of the male-female and mother-father roles was a characteristic of pre-European communal society (Makereti, 1938/1986; Metge, 1995). Community responsibilities were assigned based on a person's birth, individual skills and abilities. Children belonged to the wider whānau and child rearing was highly valued, and shared by both sexes, as circumstances allowed, within the community. Therefore, a child had many father figures and male role models, in addition to its birth father, all making some contribution to the raising of that child.

The processes of colonisation by a foreign power dismantled Māori social structures and imposed a value system that scorned child rearing and housekeeping as lowly work for women (Harawira, 1995). In the present day, a kaupapa Māori approach to early childhood education implies a return to the way of our ancestors, and a whānau orientation. It assumes that both the male and female elements of the whānau are present and active. Both mother and father (whaene and matua) are expected to participate in equivalent and complementary ways. At Te Kōpae Piripono, it is a basic premise that children will be cared for in a community that comprises all the elements of an extended family, of which fathers are an important part. However, few families enter Te Kōpae Piripono with their Māori worldview intact. Few have lived experience of a traditionally based Māori value system. The parents and caregivers of children entering Te Kōpae Piripono are products of a Western, European-derived society.

The modern-day ideal "family" is constructed in the style of the "Victorian" family of the 1800s, which regained ascendancy in the postwar period to the 1960s and continues to dominate into the 21st century (McCann, 1999). Within that cultural and social framework, the father's role within the family is as provider and authoritarian figure, while the mother is the child-rearer, the nurturer of both the children and father (Silverstein & Auerbach, 1999, cited in Howard, 2003). So it is unlikely that the immediate frame of reference of Te Kōpae Piripono parents includes males and fathers directly involved with their children in early childhood education. As one father reflects:

I didn’t think [my being here] impacted on [my children] at the time—it was all too foreign to me. My upbringing was so different, my parents were authoritative, I never questioned the way things were. I started clicking on to that further
down the track. I didn’t think I needed to be hands-on with the kids—man the provider and woman the nurturer, sort of thing. (Parent interview, 8 August 2007)

Since it was established in 1994, Te Kōpae Piripono has noted an increasing disparity in female and male participation in the centre. As strong male characters of the foundation whānau have moved on, they have tended not to be replaced by men who are ready and able to be active with their children in this early childhood education environment. The absence of fathers is a deficiency that has serious implications for the whānau of Te Kōpae Piripono and for the children, some of whom may not have the opportunity to have a complete experience of whānau elsewhere. It is important to have fathers stepping in as role models and father substitutes for those children who do not have a father figure in their personal lives. The very foundation of Te Kōpae Piripono is threatened if the equilibrium of gender role, inherent in te Tātai Whakapapa, is not restored to the whānau. Furthermore, if Te Kōpae Piripono is mirroring a national trend, failing to find strategies that can reverse the trend of missing fathers has broader implications for Māori society.

The male role in modern society

In general, roles and responsibilities within the family unit are changing. Increasing numbers of fathers are more active in their children’s lives today, as attitudes to the role of men within the family and with children (and to women outside the family and with no children) have changed. While there are still large pockets of resistance, society is progressively more accepting of people’s right to interpret for themselves roles within the family. Communities are now quite used to male caregivers of children, with shared or solo responsibility for all aspects of their children’s development and wellbeing.

This social change has occurred in response to changing economic and social contexts, and has also been encouraged by a burgeoning body of research, which attests to the incredible importance of the role and involvement of fathers in the lives of their children. Pruett (2007) argues the significant impact that the positive and active involvement of fathers can have on their children’s development:

- Young children who have actively involved fathers are more likely to explore the world around them with vigour and interest. They tend to be more curious and less hesitant or fearful, especially in the face of novel or unusual stimuli. They also are less impulsive and have more self-control in unfamiliar social situations.

- The combination of a father’s more active play initiation and his somewhat less immediate support in the face of frustration seems to promote adaptive and problem-solving competencies in a child.

- By the time they start school, children with hands-on dads are better able to wait their turn for the teacher’s attention.

Researchers in the 1950s studied a group of five-year-olds, focusing on their feelings of sympathy and compassion for other people. In a follow-up study 30 years later, they found that, as adults, the strongest predictor of empathic concern for others was a high level of paternal care they received as children (Pruett, 2007).

Discoveries in neuroscience have shown infant attachment to fathers is equally as important for the cognitive development of the child as is attachment to mothers (Fletcher, 2003, p. 126). Fathers, as well as mothers, are central to the development of a child’s identity, sense of self and perception of self, in relation to others and the world. McCann (1999) showed how a father’s emotional and physical disconnection from his family can negatively impact on his children by placing “boys and girls at an elevated risk of emotional, educational, and developmental problems” (p. 67).
Although relevant early childhood literature is now likely to refer to “parents” and “caregivers” as the childcarers and nurturers, McMahon (2003, p. 111) found that men are still out in the workforce, “providing” for their families, and women are the primary homekeepers. McMahon argues that fathers may help more at home but tend to act as helpers, not sharing equally in the workload and responsibilities of family life.

Outside of the home, Fletcher (2003, p. 125) argues, fathers are rarely involved in infant and child services. Mothers are the first point of contact and are usually the primary caregiver, so when services say “family” or “parent”, the message appears to be aimed at mothers. Not only are mothers the main users of services, often it is other mothers who are the providers of those services. In essence, the early childhood sector is virtually monopolised by women, while child rearing is still mainly a woman’s preserve.

Turbiville, Umbarger and Guthrie (2000) list the following four key barriers to fathers’ participation and involvement: a) work commitments; b) the different interactional styles of men and women; c) perceived power differences between men and women; and d) traditional perceptions of male and female roles. While work commitments are an easily identifiable barrier, the differences in interactional styles and traditional perceptions of the male and female roles may not be immediately recognised as a barrier within the early childhood context.

Te Kōpaire Piripono fathers were invited to recall the way they had felt when they first entered the “women’s domain” of Te Kōpaire Piripono. Almost universally, the men said they had felt out of their depth in relation to early childhood education matters. Some became aware of how little they knew about their own children. One father had been attracted to Te Kōpaire Piripono by another male, who was actively involved at Te Kōpaire. The male role model and companion, in a female-dominated organisation, were powerful. The member’s partner stated, “There needs to be more men involved. Males will attract males” (Parent interview, 1 August 2007).

Several members had felt aggrieved that their work hours prevented a greater involvement in their children’s lives/education, although the idea of greater involvement did not occur to all the fathers, some of whom had not considered it the man’s role to be involved with their children in early childhood education. One father, now ensconced in the whānau, believes that response reflected how he was located at the time of enrolment; that is, he had been conditioned by his upbringing to see the man as the breadwinner, not the child nurturer. He expressed some embarrassment about the attitude he held at the time of entry to what he perceived as a women and children zone. He was used to being in control, and to men being in control. This father has been involved in Te Kōpaire Piripono for some years now. Staying rather than withdrawing required that he adopt new ways of being and doing. The kaupapa of Te Kōpaire Piripono, his aspirations for his children and the insistence of his wife kept him from running away (Parent interview, 8 August 2007).

The tumu observed that some fathers did not know how to be at Te Kōpaire Piripono because they had so little involvement in their children’s education. Some were unsure how they should interact with their own children, much less with other children. Notwithstanding the reo Māori barrier—which for some fathers prompted feelings of anxiety—one father had felt uncomfortable in hui, because, at the time, they were mostly attended by females:

I’ve found the hui pretty daunting. That’s me. In recent times I didn’t know if they were general meetings or one for wahine, me being the only guy there. (Parent interview, 13 November 2006)

Because the early childhood education sector is predominantly female oriented, the different
interactional style of men may be misconstrued as apathy or arrogance. Turbiville et al. (2000) argue there is a misconception that fathers' lack of involvement means they are less interested in their children's education: "We simply cannot dismiss fathers as uninterested until we examine our efforts to understand their priorities and interests" (p. 79). Cunningham (1994) contends that the teachers of young children have a responsibility to take into account how they interact and work with fathers. The New Zealand Weekend Herald (Collins, 2007) reported Auckland University of Technology psychotherapist Warwick Pudney as saying, "Plunket and Playcentre have been serving women for a long time. There is a lack of consciousness about how it might be for a man going along there ... They say any man is welcome but don't notice what sort of magazines [they] have in the waiting room or the posters on the wall." According to Pudney, agencies expect men to join in and behave like women. His advice to centres: "If you want to get men involved, don't try to chat to them. Call them in and ask them to do a job—this is the way men engage in things" (p. A11).

The Engaging Fathers Project of the Family Action Centre, University of Newcastle (Fletcher, 2003) is a project designed to improve children's wellbeing by involving fathers in their lives. The protagonists of the project found that the way childcare centres relate to fathers is strongly defining of fathers' involvement. One of the mistakes made by centres has been to ask fathers to be involved in the same way as mothers, ignoring gender differences and a distinct father role. When these well-intentioned efforts fail, says Fletcher, the father is then castigated for lack of interest or unwillingness to give up power. A far more effective approach would be for the centre to take responsibility for "co-constructing" the father's role to fully encompass the care of children. The key is to develop specific ways that fathers can be involved, contributing in their children's interests, within the everyday activities of the centre. The Engaging Fathers Project found fathers are more inclined to become involved with their children in services such as Te Köpae Piripono, when three conditions are met:

1. It is clear to the father that the activity will benefit their child.
2. The point of the father doing the activity, as opposed to anyone else, is evident.
3. Expectations of fathers are able to be readily understood by them.

The tumu felt these were commonsense conditions of engagement that ensure members have all the information to make informed decisions, are treated with respect and know they are valued and needed. If the participation of fathers at Te Köpae Piripono was to increase and be sustained over time, not only did the centre need to be father friendly, it had to become a father magnet, with males attracting males to the whānau and to the "kaupapa", normalising the role of fully involved father.

A "hands-off" father role was all one father knew. It was like a "bombshell" when he observed several fathers actively participating with the children in Te Köpae Piripono and sharing equally in the parenting of their own children. He was hugely influenced by his observations of these fathers and the conversations he had with them (often during working bees at the centre) about their ways of being and doing. In time, he made significant changes to his own attitudes and approach to parenting and family. The father reflected on his time at Te Köpae Piripono and advocated for male-only, father-only opportunities for men to come together (now that working bees were fewer) to talk things through and to share understandings, in appropriate ways (Parent interview, 8 August 2007).

The conceptual framework, te Tātai Whakapapa, clearly emphasises the complementarity of gender roles within the family unit and signals that individual differences are
to be valued and embraced. Perhaps, in the political and economic climate of recent years, Te Köpae Piripono had been distracted from its determination to function authentically as a whānau Māori, embracing and respecting all elements, male and female. The kaitiaki team discussed at length the issues surrounding fathers “missing in action”. The data impelled kaitiaki to reflect further on the very nature of their relationships with fathers within the whānau. The questions asked were: Do we really know our fathers? How can we say we know children if we do not really know both their parents? The group elected to maintain an open dialogue with fathers, as has been done effectively with mothers, to determine how they can be involved and what their participation could and should look like. The group determined to critically analyse the messages sent to fathers about fathers’ roles and male involvement in the centre. The group decided to find ways to appropriately acknowledge the importance of the father role at Te Köpae Piripono and the contributions fathers make to their children’s wellbeing, and to the whānau.

In November 2005, Te Köpae Piripono held a wānanga whānau to provide a historical background and overview as to why Te Köpae Piripono exists. Prior to this, whānau did not appear to appreciate or understand the significance of the bigger picture. During this wānanga, two young fathers were able to share with the group:

Father #1
[I was] thinking [my daughter] would learn her reo and [I would] not have to be involved with it. And I’ve realised we have to do it together. And being non-Māori it’s very hard. Now, me and my partner are on the same level, but it’s taken nearly a year to do that. I can see it’s very important ... it’s important to know where you come from and you shouldn’t have to learn your language again, starting from scratch. It’s made me a better father for my daughter. I’m 100 percent supportive.

Father #2
I suppose I fall into the classic ... ‘There you go cuz’ [to cousin at Te Köpae Piripono]. It was explained to me how it was here, and I go, ‘Yeah, cool, cool, that will be good for my daughter. I’m doing a good thing, you know.’ And I’ve just sort of realised [in this wānanga] you let life sort of take over, because [my daughter] has been here four years now. I’ve done te reo, I’ve had lots of opportunities, but I’ve just never followed through. And the same for my wife, I haven’t been there for her as well. She’d give it a go too, but I’ve never held her up. I can honestly say [this wānanga] has changed my mindset. It’s like you’re seeing something else now, you know. I mean for me personally it’s a different picture than what I saw, before our wānanga. I don’t think it will be that hard. For me it’s been a big click ... I never realised, before yesterday, how big the picture is ... Me and my wife talked last night and we both realise this is what it’s all about ... it’s not about us, it’s not about our tight-knit whānau, it’s about being Māori and living Māori.

New strategies to support father involvement

New channels of communication within the whānau were opened. Never before had fathers and men been consulted, and specifically asked for their male point of view. Several fathers responded readily and openly with their thoughts and opinions. Without prompting, the men identified some of the very issues raised by Fletcher (2003), and proffered their ideas for solutions:

• Establish a fathers-only (men-only) group that would provide the opportunity for men to support men, to socialise and to address relevant issues. The men argued the value of male-only wānanga, to allow less-than-confident males to learn and develop away from what would otherwise be a female-dominated forum. It was felt this would enable men to “catch up” so they could contribute in the whānau and with the children on an equal footing, having found
their voice. This strategy was not intended to detract from women; rather it was an opportunity for men to deal with issues affecting them, in appropriate ways, so they can then step up and contribute.

- Co-opt men into the management structures of Te Kōpae Piripono, to serve as role models for children and other men and as male points of contact.
- Constantly reflect on how effectively Te Kōpae Piripono covers the male component of the male–female relationship within the whānau and amongst the children. This would involve an examination of the adequacy of equipment, activities, behaviour, language and imagery.
- Adopt specific strategies and formal supports for those who struggle with their role in Te Kōpae Piripono, including:
  - tailored parenting programmes and communication wānanga to assist men and women alike to learn new ways of doing and being
  - explicit communication
  - a father-friendly environment where there is a space in which fathers feel comfortable
  - flexible meeting hours
  - specific jobs for men to do when they get to the centre.

The whānau has prioritised the areas of communication and relationship building, foregrounding open and honest interactions that are responsive to members. The male response has been significant. Kaitiaki report a reversal of the earlier trend towards absentee fathers. With this new approach, participation in the centre has become more balanced in terms of gender, and this has brought vibrancy to the day-to-day operation. Participation overall, by all members, has also been boosted. One father described his realisation about the importance of his participation at Te Kōpae Piripono, for his children’s wellbeing and development: “When I am there the kids are proud. They are happy to have me there … everyone is. I am much more comfortable now” (Parent interview, 12 September 2007).

A kaitiaki reflected on another father fully involving himself at Te Kōpae Piripono:

And [the father] sat down and helped us do the face painting. Yeah, he said, ‘I want to be a part of this!’ And so he grabbed a pot of paint and he watched me and [another kaitiaki] and asked how to do this and how to do that; then, away he went. He just involved himself. He didn’t need us to involve him … He’s coming on board, you know; he’s coming to most of our outings now. (Kaitiaki reflection, 21 September 2007)

Because fathers require clear messages of expectation that they be involved with their children in the whānau, we have determined that meetings with families will not take place unless both parents are able to attend. This policy sends a clear message to fathers that they are valued and important. Regular meetings with fathers provide the opportunities to build warm and trusting relationships with them and their families. Compulsory attendance at whānau wānanga reduces barriers, expanding members’ comfort zones and building understanding. One such meeting provided the opportunity for one father to reflect on his role in improving relationships between family members at home:

What we might need to work on is our team work. Where we sort of fall short is … like you were saying, they always come to Dad. Dad’s always the lenient one and the cool [parent] that will do things for them. They, sort of, look at their Mum as being the taniwha. So I think I was just basking in all that glory and I didn’t want to change it. But seeing my mate fall down short on the other side … You’ve given us a lot to think about. (Parent interview, 12 April 2007)
**Sheldon’s story**

Sheldon’s story is an example of the role of fathers, fear and the power of positive action! Sheldon and his partner Kiriana have two daughters, Jade and Waimarino, who attend Te Kōpae Piripono. Kaitiaki observed that, when he brought his daughters every day, Sheldon seemed reluctant to engage in conversations with kaitiaki and avoided eye contact, rushing in and out before any meaningful contact (and relationship) could be made. In our conversations with Sheldon, we learnt that he had been brought up by his grandfather who spoke mainly Māori to him. However, his grandfather died when Sheldon was 11, and by his own admission Sheldon went “off the rails a bit” and “just forgot about everything”, until enrolling his daughters at Te Kōpae Piripono.

Below is a conversation one of our kaitiaki had with Sheldon:

**Sheldon:** It’s been scary bringing my girls here. I come here and I see the kids and they all kōrero Māori. When I bring the girls and they’re all in a circle on the whāriki I go, ‘Oh no! I’m sitting in the circle and it’s coming around and I’m going to get asked a question!’ I start sweating. It’s quite embarrassing and scary. It’s the not knowing that’s the issue, that I will not give the right answer.

**Kaitiaki:** But if you knew that even if you gave the wrong answer, that it was still ok, would that make it easier?

**Sheldon:** Yes! But for myself! I would prefer to be bang on.

**Kaitiaki:** But before we get to bang on, because there is always a learning time, how do we get on before we get to the bang on?

**Sheldon:** Yeah I know that I should be trying to attempt it, even if I do get it wrong, because I know that it reflects on my kids, if they see me. I know they don’t know it fully yet but if I’m talking it they won’t be afraid to learn and attempt to learn themselves.

**Kaitiaki:** So, how about when you are at Kōpae, how would you feel about doing the actual opposite of what you want to do, which is, you want to get out of the door fast? But the opposite of that is to actually stay? And for the first few times, you won’t be responding very much but just taking it in, so that you’re immersed just like your children. How would you feel about that?

**Sheldon:** Yes, I’ll do that! ... I’m just worried about it coming around the circle and not being able to respond!

**Kaitiaki:** But if you knew that you were not going to be put on the spot ... you’d be ok?

**Sheldon:** Not really! I’d feel stink because you’d be skipping me and going onto the next person!

**Kaitiaki:** But you’re not stupid. You would understand! Let’s just say we were on the whāriki and I started here and I went round the circle, you would have understood what you needed to say by the time I got to you?

**Sheldon:** Yep. I would. Because it’s for my kids! So you make sure if I’m sitting down, you start from there [points to where I am sitting], so by the time it comes around to me, I will be: ‘Oh yeah I know that!’ [laughter]. (Interview, 17 August 2006)

This conversation is a dynamic example of acknowledging the fear, but also making clear the expectation of what is required and our belief that Sheldon can do it. Sheldon shows that he is up for the challenge.

Five days after this kōrero, Sheldon, who is a talented musician, brought in one of three songs that he and his partner, Kiriana, had written for Te Kōpae Piripono. He showed the words to one song but asked for help with some of the Māori (taking responsibility). We agreed that we would collaborate to create this new
Kōpae song (sharing responsibility). Within a day, Sheldon was performing the song for the children at wā huihi.

This fascinating set of events shows that kaitiaki persistence in fostering whānau relationships, especially with those who are visibly most uncomfortable, is critical in fostering leadership and a sense of whānau. It is about shifting people's thinking to be comfortable and open to the idea of acknowledging their self-worth and that they have much to offer and contribute to Te Kōpae Piripono and their children's learning (taking up the challenge of leadership). Working together with Sheldon provides a strong message that he and his whānau matter to us. Talking and saying the right words just does not cut it. Persistent positive action was the "glue" that helped cement our relationship. The ripples of Sheldon's learning have been dynamic. In a subsequent conversation with Sheldon and Kiriana (21 November 2006), this is what they said:

Kiriana: 'To me, a 'high' was Sheldon coming in yesterday and spending a lengthy amount of time with the tamariki. I thought that was awesome—him feeling comfortable to do so, breaking through that barrier.' What brought that on? Sheldon was asked. 'I felt more comfortable to come and do it. And I'm at home now. I'm just part of the furniture,' was his reply. Sheldon said the turning point for him was our persistence, our dogged determination to build a relationship with him. Rather than feeling judged, he felt encouraged and acknowledged. Kiriana added, 'I reckon it's the time that you guys have spent, to actually sit down to kōrero with us and to share our fears. It's the sharing the fear that takes it away.'

And the wider ripples of Sheldon's learning continue to occur. One of their daughters, Jade, was shy and cautious in forming friendships. Sheldon's transformation has been Jade's transformation, as shown in this learning story written about Jade in 2006:

Today Jade arrived early with Dad and her sister. With eyes glistening, Jade told me excitedly about her sister's birthday—all the whānau and friends who were there, the birthday hats, the food, the cake, the singing and the presents. Her face showed her excitement and enjoyment. Wow, what a magical moment! Jade has previously been a quiet girl who rarely conversed with adults or made eye contact. Yet, here she was initiating an animated kōrero, in te reo Māori, with smiles and direct eye contact! Since Jade's parents have seen themselves as valued and respected members of the whānau at Te Kōpae Piripono, Jade now sees herself in a similar way. (Learning story, 28 November 2006)

Summary

The absence of the male element in early childhood education is an international phenomenon, reflecting long-held attitudes to the role of fathers, and the economic realities of families' lives. For the whānau of kaupapa Māori education initiatives like Te Kōpae Piripono, the gender imbalance creates an unacceptable discrepancy within the whānau, a major threat to the kaupapa of those organisations, and to the Māori community as a whole. The drive to engage fathers at Te Kōpae Piripono is a work in progress. However, the (mere) act of focusing in on the area of father involvement and prioritising open and honest dialogue in a variety of ways has increased the presence of fathers at the centre. In an effort to make Te Kōpae Piripono father friendly, father involvement has been given purpose, emphasising physical action and concrete outcomes. Te Kōpae Piripono has striven to find ways fathers can be supported to overcome barriers and become enabled. As fathers derive personal reward from involvement in their children's learning, they can influence long-established patriarchal attitudes to gender roles in the community and foster change.

Through this process kaitiaki have become much more aware of gender differences, and understanding of the challenges faced by
fathers. Te Kōpae Piripono acknowledges the responsibility of the whānau to embrace fathers’ strengths, interests and practical skills, and to promote the essential role that fathers have in their children’s learning and development.

References

Glossary of Māori terms
ako concept of both to learn and to teach
aroha love; empathy
hapū subtribe
he kōrero whakamārama an explanation
hui meeting; gathering
iwi tribe
kaitiaki Te Kōpae Piripono teacher
karakia incantation
kaupapa philosophy; cause; character; conceptual framework
kaupapa Māori Māori paradigm; Māori conceptual framework
kete basket
kōrero to speak
mana integrity and esteem
mana Māori how you feel about yourself as Māori
manaaki support; to take care of; to care for; hospitality
matua father
muru raupatu large-scale 19th century land confiscations
Ngāmotu Māori name for area where the city of New Plymouth is located
Papa (Papatūānuku) Earth Mother
poutama learning and development staircase
Rangi (Ranginui) Sky Father

reo language
taha Māori Māori identity
tamariki children
ために monster
Taranaki one of the iwi of the west coast region of Taranaki; Mt Taranaki; the region of Taranaki
tātai whakapapa genealogical origin of Māori
te ao Māori the Māori world
Te Kore/Te Pō evolutionary phases of the creation of the universe
Te Pō Tiwhatiwha The Night of Flickering Light
te reco Māori the Māori language
te reco Māori me ōna tikanga the Māori language; its customs and traditions
tikanga protocols; rules; conventions
tumu Te Kōpae Piripono director
tūpuna ancestor
wāhine women
wāhui mat time
wairua spirit; soul; spirituality
wānanga seminar; learning opportunity; workshop
whaene mother
whakatauki proverb
whānau sociopolitical family groupings; family
whāriki mat