Tēnā tatou e te whānau

Ko Pekehaua toku ingoa, he uri ahau no Te Arawa me Ngāti Whakaue. Ko taku tūranga he Kaitūhono, he Kaimahi Tautoko Whānau i te Whānau Aroha o Merivale.

Unfortunately, I am unable to attend our hui to share my whakaaro on whānau-led initiatives, but I felt our perspective was rich in the sense that other services may relate to what comes with addressing the challenges whānau face, and the challenges we may face as practitioners.

Here at Merivale Whānau Aroha, our journey within the Child Rich Communities Learning Cluster has led us to critically reflect on where power and decision-making sit in our everyday practice. Through my role as Kaitūhono within our kura and wider whānau support space, we have been intentionally working to move decision-making closer to whānau and mokopuna, not simply inviting participation, but actively sharing authority by upholding their tino rangatiratanga.

Our focus has centred on strengthening community networks, supporting whānau navigating identity and belonging, and walking alongside whānau experiencing crisis. Our mahi involves bridging gaps between services, advocating across systems, and ensuring whānau are not left to manage complex challenges alone. In moments of crisis, we strive to respond in ways that uphold mana, protect tamariki, and maintain relational trust with our whānau. A key aspect of our mahi is underpinned by a strength-based approach, which recognises whānau as kaitiaki of their own lives. Allowing opportunities that will highlight their strengths brings forth responsibility and direction to the kaupapa. It reminds everyone involved that we are hoa haere to whānau as we lead and guide, by working towards a place that ultimately aims for them to hold their own spaces.

A great theory that aligns with our commitment to practice is Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. In our space, we focus on identifying their most critical needs on the scale, such as housing and kai. Then we move on to secondary aspects such as relationships and financials. After the basic needs are met, we find that whānau journey to the space of tau (calmness). This is where they can de-escalate from a heightened survival mode to a space that is reflective, and where many learnings happen. This space is very tangible, and I recognise that whānau challenge even their own understandings during this time.

We are seeing that when whānau voice genuinely shapes decisions, engagement deepens and outcomes become more sustainable. Tamariki benefit when the adults around them operate in partnership. At the same time, this shift requires ongoing courage, balancing relational practice with compliance demands, navigating risk thresholds, and unlearning traditional service-led approaches. We are also required to

work in partnership with a system that has ultimately failed many whānau Māori. Therefore, the responsibility to reflect on power constructs and understand whānau worldviews is fundamental to ethical practice. We must find our position in a system we may not entirely agree with, but we should also allow those perspectives to challenge our practice and keep us striving to find a way that does work. We can't avoid whānau from engaging in the system, and we do rely on some services to an extent, but we can advocate, protect, and show whānau that there are people like us who believe in their success and want to tautoko them on their journey to mauri ora.

For us, moving decision-making closer to whānau is not just a practice change - it is a commitment to equity, mana-enhancing practice, and recognising whānau as kaitiaki in their own lives.

So, to those who may relate to what I have shared - I ask one pātai to you.

How is it that you navigate your commitment to social care and engaging with systems or services that enforce social control, and what position do you hold in that space?

Ngā mihi,

Pekehaua Amohau – Kaitūhono at Merivale Whānau Aroha Centre.