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Background

Raumanga is a suburb of Whangārei in the province of Northland, New Zealand. Northland is New Zealand's most impoverished province (Connelly et al., 2019) and has a significant concentration of Indigenous Māori and a growing renaissance of Māori-led governance and enterprise.

The name Raumanga means many branches, and refers to the dozens of streams and springs in this fertile valley. Lower Raumanga was once a vital swamp and river basin famous amongst local Māori as a food basket and place of recreation much favoured by children (Vallance, 1956).

Contemporary Raumanga is home to about 3300 residents. The most common ethnicity (60%) is Māori, and almost 20% of residents speak te reo Māori, the Indigenous language. The suburb is poor and has relatively low home ownership. Nearly 50% of houses do not have access to broadband internet despite being very close to a significant city. Fifty-one percent of people describe themselves as having no religion and 28.5% are regular smokers, as opposed to 16.4% in the greater Whangārei area (Stats NZ, 2018).

The suburb is young and poor, with a median personal income of $22,200 as opposed to $51,844 nationally. Unemployment is high at 10.9%, 16.2% for Māori and higher amongst men than women (Stats NZ, 2018), and it is the second most impoverished suburb in Whangārei. As a suburb with a large number of rental properties, many of which are owned by investors from out of town, Raumanga has a constant churn of residents and is sometimes a staging post for families escaping the large cities and moving back to rural Northland. This transience has been described in a local community meeting

as one of the principal barriers to developing a unified community able to identify, articulate and meet its own needs.

The Raumanga Community Group, sometimes known as the Raumanga Community Committee, has met regularly for more than a year and is currently undergoing incorporation as the Raumanga Community Roopu (group, committee or association). This practice note from the field is an attempt to record and understand the importance of story in the development of identity and to situate a small, local case study within a broader debate about the nature of community development.

The importance of story

Pūrākau, or storytelling, is an ancient form not just of transmitting ideas but of creating shared meaning and thus identity. Contemporary scholars have examined whether pūrākau can be employed both as a research method and as a tool for decolonisation (Lee, 2009).

Various academic disciplines have discovered or are rediscovering the importance of pūrākau in creating meaning. Storytelling is increasingly recognised internationally as a research method beyond those countries where it has been evident as such for all time. In the South Pacific, Melanesian storytelling is an established discipline in both education and news, and academic endeavour seeks not only to preserve existing stories but to use these to analyse and understand the culture (Sanga et al., 2018; Uvovo, 2019). Contemporary academic theory applies storytelling technique and finds it useful, particularly in the mapping of intangible cultural assets (Jeannotte, 2016). Writers in the discipline of community planning exhort planners to use and understand local stories as legitimate research tools that might facilitate local problem-solving (Sandercock, 2003; van Hulst, 2012).

The nearby Whangārei suburb of Onerahi has developed a new cultural treasure in the hugely popular work *True Tales of Onerahi*, gathered and written by Agnes Hermans. Onerahi is a much more established suburb then Raumanga, with some families having resided there for many generations. The stories have become a critical method of preserving and bringing to life family memories, and are used extensively in education and community development.

Stories about 'place' have a central role in community development and the establishment of identity (Shevellar, 2011). Place identity enables individuals and families to negotiate collective action in the absence of a genealogical whakapapa. Shared identity of place creates bonds that enable collaboration, and that are relied on increasingly in disaster response and preparing services. One Australian study found that the stronger bond of identity felt in rural communities was replicated in areas where there was a common threat of fire. In both cases, the importance of storytelling to establish and build identity contributes to an ability to co-operate and collaborate and muster resources to keep families safe in the face of a fire threat (Prior & Eriksen, 2013).

When working in Sāmoa, I learned a delightful saying from Sāmoan

scholars:

> Ua ta'u mai e Pālagi i a i tatou, o le lalolagi e faū i atoma [atoms], ae tatou Sāmoa e lē valelea-matou [tagata-Sāmoa] e te iloa o le lalolagi e tele tala.

> The white man has told us that the world is made of atoms, but we Sāmoans, we are not silly, we know the world is made of stories.

This reminds me of the importance of stories, and that storytelling is part of our culture and cultural identity. In community development the stories of the community are an important part of the its identity, and thus are a mechanism for members to identify with the community (Dixon, 1995).

Developing a common identity

Whilst there are some long-standing families of residents in Raumanga, there is also a significant transient population. The Raumanga Community Roopu identified this transience as a barrier to development of a common identity. We did not, however, immediately seek to resolve this by building identity using pūrākau or other methods. Perhaps this is because the use of storytelling has become lost and seems almost mystical in a contemporary setting with emphasis on plans and measurable objectives.

As a fledgling roopu, we were finding our feet, getting to know each other, and establishing shared values and purposes. The development of values and purposes was led, however gently, by the Whangārei District Council's community development team, and while this was identity building, it took place in a somewhat mechanistic and prescribed manner. The process was initiated with the announcement that the Council had available $100,000 to be spent in community-led development. While the prospect of significant funding in a poor community might be treated with excitement and joy, experienced community development practitioners rightly regard it with great suspicion. When organisations are young and unseasoned, the kind of trust that is required amongst membership is seldom present or robust enough to handle the destabilising effect of a large grant.

Community or community-led?

Community-led development is the latest iteration of engagement between councils and communities. It is, in my view, a far weaker and depoliticised method than its antecedents in community development. The principal differences between the two methods are described in different ways by the adherents to both. The community development primer originally written by Ewen Derrick and updated by David Haigh in the late 1990s contains a chapter explaining community-led development (Bijoux et al., 2015). In this chapter, the authors describe community-led development as an approach born out of a new collaborative approach:

> The essence of CLD is working together in place to create and achieve locally owned visions and goals. Rather than being a model or service, CLD is a place-based planning and development approach. From learning in, and with, a number of community-led initiatives in Aotearoa, five core principles of CLD practice have been discerned: 1. Shared local visions drive action and change; 2. Utilising existing strengths and assets; 3. Many people, groups and sectors working together; 4. Building diverse and collaborative local leadership; 5. Adaptive planning and action informed by outcomes. (p. 139)

Some adherents believe the fundamental difference between community development and community-led development is that the latter posits power firmly with the community whereas traditional community development might be directed or driven by the local authority.

From another perspective, indeed that enjoyed by the Aotearoa Community Development Association (ACDA) and the International Association for Community Development (IACD), the difference is far more concerned with analysis, social justice and rights. The agreed international definition for community development, which was affirmed at the 2017 Dublin conference, the 65th anniversary of the organisation, states:

> Community development is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes participative democracy, sustainable development, rights, economic opportunity, equality and social justice, through the organisation, education and empowerment of people within their communities, whether these be of locality, identity or interest, in urban and rural settings. (IACD, 2018, p. 8)

The champions of community-led development point to the risk of community development being imposed on a community, and most experienced practitioners will know of examples of this in practice. Externally imposed development is most likely when there are asymmetries of power amongst the partners. For instance, if the state or local government partners with the community and does not have the requisite training or skill at community engagement to exercise careful community development practice, which understands the asymmetries of power and works effectively to balance these.

A far more significant risk, in my view, is the loss of a focus on human rights and social justice, because it is these essential values that prevent community development from being itself an oppressive process. Under community-led development, there is no theoretical restraint to the exercise of practice that would privilege the powerful and further alienate the powerless.

For the moment, however, community-led development appears to be unhindered in its political ascendency. The promise of collaboration, and a distancing from a more activist community development that challenges power, has proven too appetising for central and local government. The Department of Internal Affairs, once the champion of community development in Aotearoa New Zealand, is now totally hostage to community-led development. Internal Affairs funds programmes in which the department selects the community, largely identifies the leaders and determines the resource allocation – all under the banner of community-led development.

Community priorities

Meanwhile, back at a local level, I was apprehensive about how the announcement of a large sum of council money might impact on the Raumanga group. I was also keenly interested in how the group might develop some priorities around this.

At the next meeting, there was a great deal of talk about the need for infrastructure in the community. Members argued for a swimming pool and a gymnasium. There is already a swimming pool in the community, and it is owned by the Ministry of Education, who choose to leave it empty so that residents are not able to use it and thus no risk occurs. Also, there is a gymnasium that is part of NorthTec, the local polytech, and at the time of our early discussions was also mothballed. As the meeting progressed, participants began to understand that $100,000 would not build a lot of infrastructure, and even if it did there would not be any money left to maintain that infrastructure.

At the next meeting, there was a great deal of discussion about the possibility of a party. Parties are of course great ways of celebrating and pulling a community together; however, they are unlikely to be a popular use of ratepayers' funds. Moreover, there are a lot of parties already in Raumanga, and some of these degenerate into drunken brawls and occasions of family violence. The group considered the many risks associated with a party and were unable to resolve a clear way forward.

At the next meeting, we began to talk constructively about the importance of neighbourhood pride and the sense of place. A young Cook Island woman stopped the meeting and said: "What we actually need is the story. Nobody can have pride in a place which does not have a story that they identify with." I thought this was a hugely wise contribution to the discussions and we began to talk about the stories of Raumanga.

At the next meeting, we discussed in depth some of the stories that we knew and some of the keepers of stories amongst older long-term residents. The pre-European stories of the place were discussed, as were early farming ventures and the beginnings of the subdivision. As a group, we became quite excited to discover that there were stories about our place, and that these could form part of our community building in place making.

The event

At the following meeting, we began to discuss how to gather and share the stories, and settled on the idea of a picnic in the park, celebrating Raumanga and telling Raumanga stories. This would be a family occasion where residents could come together for some food, hear local music, watch our kids perform, have some games and sports, and, most importantly, hear Raumanga stories. A date was set for February, and organising began in earnest. What was quickly apparent was that members of the group were competent community organisers. In no time at all the team had assembled publicity, a programme

of events, a large barbecue, other groups who could provide food, performers and, most importantly, storytellers.

Food, of course, is terrifically important in community development. At every meeting, plates of food are brought by the group members to be shared and enjoyed. But preparing food on a large scale can be expensive and challenging. A treasured whakataukī in community development is the saying "The community sector marches on its stomach." This whakataukī is not derogatory, it does not mean that we are snakes, but simply that food is culturally valued and very central to gathering people together.

A small grant from ACDA and the generous volunteering of friends and family made feeding the multitude a possibility. An experienced community worker once told me that if you want to know how to feed a large group of people with a small amount of money, observe migrant communities. So drawing on family experience, we set out to make buckets of falafels, vegetable fritters with spicy sauces, and pancakes with cream and jam. With this, and the generous donation of a box of pita bread, and a fantastic Lions Club barbecue, we were all set. Feeding a large group of people can be done for as little as a couple of dollars a head when we make food from scratch. Chickpeas are one of the cheapest staples on the market and are the basis of great falafels. Interestingly, in a very working-class area with no Middle Eastern migrants, the falafels proved to be a huge hit. Competition between the Man Up sausage cooks and the falafel fryers was intense but good-humoured.

Photos: Matariki Roche

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The weather, however, was not kind. What began as an overcast morning with a little drizzle transformed itself in the middle of our event into an absolute thunderstorm. Kids thought this was terrific fun and created excellent opportunities for instant mudslides. Parents and the community committee were stoic and laughed the rain off good-humouredly. The tug-of-war was made all the more enjoyable by the inability to get any traction on the wet ground.

The performances were stunning. Act after act got up from the crowd to entertain us with their song and dance. The young people revelled in such a broad audience for the well-practised breakdances. And there were stories. Stories of the early days, of being one of the first houses in the district, and the sea of mud that lay between their house and the shops. Have you ever wondered about those old-style prams with their large, skinny wheels and boat-like shape? Apparently muddy tracks were no obstacle, and a pair of twins could be marched off to the store, and the twins and groceries marched back again, floating across the worst of the track. There were stories of home building and neighbours collaborating to put in driveways and paint houses. Stories of sporting and cultural achievements, of picnics past and picnics for the future.

Future plans

There were more community-building events in the following month, and the group was building a good momentum … Then came lockdown. The Covid-19 lockdown slowed things down, and after that a lot of time was devoted to forming a constitution and preparing to incorporate.

But now it is spring, and there are new shoots everywhere, the group has met at the NorthTec gymnasium and is planning a 'Keeping dads fit' programme. The NorthTec theatre is being eyed up for community shows, a community garden has been launched at the school, and there is talk of a community market in the NorthTec carpark. Reflecting on a year as a participant and observer in the group, I am very struck by the wisdom of beginning with the story. A good community memory captured in a story is like a common ancestor, our community can whakapapa to this, and our stories can be of achievements and aspirations, loved like an ancestor.

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