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Responding to Homelessness in Aotearoa New Zealand



Te Hā Tangata: A Human Library on Homelessness*

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'This experience has taught me a lot. It's taught me that my story is worthwhile telling, and the effect of my story on people would be a good one. That's what I want. I want it to be a story that people will say, 'well, let's do this and listen to his story and be inspired.' Because some people, in my situation, they die. They don't come out of it. Institutionalisation is a real thing and some people can't get over it. I'm just one of the lucky ones that has been able to overcome it and try out a new life. I think that's the message I would like to send out to the world through Te Hā Tangata, yeah. You know, move on: keep moving on is the message.'

– Robert, Te Hā Tangata Taonga

'So many words have been published and spoken about homelessness, but it is so great for once to be able to listen. We don't have that opportunity often enough.'

– Human Library Visitor, Te Hā Tangata

This article offers one case study of the role of community in providing responses to homelessness in Aotearoa. In a unique 'human library' event, Te Pūroha Compassion Soup Kitchen, Kahungunu Whānau Services, Te Whakamura Ai Te Ahi and Massey University, with funding and support from the New Zealand National Commission for UNESCO, worked with people experiencing housing deprivation to deliver Te Hā Tangata – The Breath of the People.

The project recognised that our homeless community is often talked about – but not listened to. Our Taonga (New Zealanders who have experienced homelessness) were supported through a four month process of workshops and activities to develop their personal narrative and share it with their whānau, the public, and policy makers through kanohi ki

te kanohi (face to face) storytelling, written narratives, video or audio. This represented a shift towards acknowledging that those who live without housing are the experts on homelessness, and offered an opportunity for them to share their stories to redress some of the misconceptions and assumptions about people living with homelessness. This article summarises the key aims and processes of the project, and assesses achievements and limitations.

The Human Library is an international movement that aims to challenge prejudice and discrimination by creating relationships and connections. It was initiated in Copenhagen in 2000 by a youth non-government organisation called Stop the Violence as a way for people who had experienced violence to bear witness and share first hand its effects on them. The concept has since spread around the world, with refugees, people living with different ability, non-binary or transgender people, and many more, agreeing to share their experiences. The events use storytelling and the idea of a

library to facilitate respectful conversations between people. Just as in a real library, a visitor to the human library can choose a book from a range of titles. The difference is that the books are people, and reading is a conversation.

Te Hā Tangata, arising from the initial vision of Jo Taite, Kahungunu Whānau Services CE, applied this concept to starting a conversation about homelessness in Wellington, with people who have experienced homelessness. Te Hā Tangata translates to the breath of the people. When we hongi we press noses and exchange hā, the breath of life. The hongi is a physical act of unity. Te Hā Tangata also draws from whakapapa. It is whakapapa that connects us to everything around us. Through whakapapa and the stories of where we come from we are able to relate to each other and the world around us.

In Te Hā Tangata, early on we acknowledged the storytellers as Taonga or treasures. We were fortunate to be gifted this and other Te Reo Māori concepts for the project to be



Public koha – Wellington City Library

Photo by Amber Allott



Taonga – Bruce

Photo by Amber Allott

used in this way, from Kahungunu Whānau Services. This gave us a language to express important values that were meaningful to the Taonga. The Taonga were treasured as keepers of knowledge, in the same way books hold knowledge. The term Koha (gift/offering) was the name given to the library events. Three Koha provided opportunities for different audiences to listen to the voices of people who have experienced homelessness: one for guests and whānau whom the Taonga invited; one for the wider Wellington community at a central public location (the Wellington City Library); and one for politicians, policy makers, and government officials administering homelessness strategies, to try to reach those who could make a direct difference.

The core aims of Te Hā Tangata were grounded in the values of Te Ao Māori:

- Whakawhanaungatanga: establishing relationships, relating well to others
- Rangatiratanga: self-determination, authority and empowerment for the Taonga: rangatiratanga being the most important outcome
- Manaakitanga: the process of showing respect, generosity and care for others, and
- Mātauranga: knowledge, wisdom, and understanding.

The project officially began with a full pōwhiri, although months of work had already gone into inviting people living with housing deprivation to participate (through the networks of Te Pūroha Compassion Soup Kitchen

and Te Whakamura Ai Te Ahi). Planning a curriculum for storytelling workshops, building organisational relationships, and getting event logistics, health and safety and ethics procedures underway, the pōwhiri was a crucial moment of whakawhanaungatanga and manaakitanga.

Taonga, staff from all the partner organisations, and Massey University students from the service-learning course, 'Creativity in the Community', who would be supporting the Taonga on their journey, met together, set out the kaupapa (purpose) for the project, and shared kai. Even on that first day, mātauranga began. One of the students recorded in their journal:

'Today we had the pōwhiri and welcoming ceremony to invite the Community Partners into Massey. In all honesty, I feel very out of my comfort zone and apprehensive about the project, but also excited as I have no examples from my life remotely similar to the journey we are about to embark on [...] The pōwhiri today made me forget about all the apprehension. It was in my opinion a really beautiful ceremony in which at the end I felt far more connected than anticipated.'

Over the next four months, Taonga and students embodied whakawhanaungatanga, working side by side to learn about storytelling, research creative methods, write and share poems, play theatre games, and get to know each other. When the

time came for the Koha, they sat down together, side by side, as partners, with the students offering their physical presence as support while the Taonga undertook the incredibly courageous act of sharing their lives with people.

Rangatiratanga was enacted in the choices given to Taonga: to participate or not, to come and go from particular workshops or activities, to tell their story themselves face to face, or to write it and have a student read it, or to be videoed or audio recorded, or to do some combination of these. All of the participants – Taonga and students – discussed consent, privacy, autonomy, confidentiality, developed shared guidelines, and signed consent forms for any materials that were to be publicly shared, such as at the Koha or on the Te Hā Tangata Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/tehatangata/> where the videos and audio can still be found. While not normally part of a human library, the videos were important in offering participation options to the Taonga and in broadening the reach of mātauranga. In their first three months, the videos were watched 5,700 times on the Te Hā Tangata Facebook page – not including the much wider audience who saw them at the Koha and redistributed via news websites and television coverage.

The extent to which the project achieved manaakitanga and mātauranga can be seen in the formal evaluation of the three Koha. There were 73 responses to evaluation surveys made available at the exits. Respondents were asked two questions: 'After hearing the stories you have heard today, have your views on people living with homelessness changed?'; and 'If your perspective on homelessness has changed, does this make you want to change the perspectives of others?'

Of the 73 respondents, 87 per cent (64 people) answered the first question. The mean (on a Likert scale of one to five where one was strongly disagree and five was strongly agree) was 4.25. Of the 73 respondents, 90 per cent (66 people) answered the second question. The mean was 4.53.



Taonga – Verne

Photo by Amber Allott

In other words, people overwhelmingly agreed they had been changed, and even more strongly agreed that they now wanted to change the views of others.

Of the 73 respondents, 82 per cent (60 people) wrote qualitative comments on the survey. All comments were transcribed and then coded into interpretive themes.

By far the strongest theme was simply gratitude – for the events, to the Taonga for sharing their stories, and for the work behind the scenes. Many of the visitors to the Koha adopted the project's values-based terminology such as 'Taonga'. For example:

'Lovely. Thank you to all the Taonga sharing their journey,'

'The whole world should be here listening,'

'Thank you for facilitating this wonderful sharing of stories from our Taonga,'

'Highly important subject that needs this kind of positive attention in order for change to be made. Thank you,'

and

'Really powerful, thank you for giving homeless people a voice.'

Many of the other comments related directly to values such as

whakawhanaungatanga and matauranga. For example, a number commented on the particular value of listening *kanohi ki te kanohi*:

'I really appreciated the chance to meet and talk with people about their experiences,'

'This format is great – I've always found cameras and videos unhelpful for the privacy of homeless people. ... I have to be with the person and connect,'

'He was so happy that I came today not just watched a video. The connection/presence was important.'

Another strong theme referred to the compassion engendered by the stories:

'It was incredibly moving to hear the stories. It has made me see them as human beings with experiences, emotions and feelings,'

'The biggest thing I take away is to change people's mindset and treat them as human beings – smile and acknowledge them – not judge'

and

'Thank you for reminding me of what is important. Such a humbling experience and so very privileged to hear the stories. I am even more determined to go back to where I work and tell them we have to do more.'

There were challenges throughout the project. These included recruiting and retaining Taonga through the incredibly confronting journey of revisiting often painful stories; meshing very different worlds (students with the privilege of attending university, and people still living with loss, grief and deprivation) but the values from Te Ao Māori provided effective bridges. Also challenging were the logistics of delivering three ambitious events, with multiple participants and elements (we underestimated public interest and had to queue public attendees and keep to time limits as we had so many people wanting to interact with the Taonga); and balancing the need to amplify the project's outreach via the media with the inevitable reduction of its value, meaning and complexity in soundbites that seldom did it justice.

Another challenge came after the Koha had finished and the funds were expended, and that was not to just walk away from the project as a 'one off': it would not have embodied the project values simply to stop the relationships. The patterns of engagement established in Te Hā Tangata have led to an ongoing formal programme of meaningful activities, including creative writing sessions and fishing trips, offered through Te Pūroaha Compassion Soup Kitchen. Work is also ongoing on a book and documentary film of the project.

But as the words of Shannon, one of the Taonga, capture, we believe all the challenges were worth it:

'I'm doing this to help others. I'm doing this so you all know what we go through. It's not just the physical side, ay. There's emotion. Deep emotion, a lot of it ... I'm not being sorry for myself. I just want you to know, I experienced this ... We can't talk about this to everybody. This is an opportunity for me to open your ears, and the doorways for others. It's not for myself. It's giving someone tools to go and do something about this ... I am so, so proud to help. You are helping to open those doors, for others to see for themselves, you know, we deserve rights. We all do.'

* Compiled by Elspeth Tilley from Te Hā Tangata team resources including words by Naomi Taylor, Karen Holland, and Sophie Goulter.