

Toku reo toku ohooho - my language my awakening

A personal reflection on equality and equity.

Lynn Rupe, 2013



Language cannot be separated out from culture and culture cannot be separated out from language. Could this statement ring more true than that the use of te reo Māori will encourage us to think about ngā tikanga Māori, therefore creating greater bicultural practice?. There is a whakataukī which says, “toku reo toku ohooho - my language my awakening” To me, this ancient wisdom has never been truer.

This article begins with some thoughts on bicultural practice, then moves to how language can inspire teachers to authenticate bi-cultural practice then...the article restarts but on a different path.

Observations from centre visits

Over the last 18 months, I have witnessed many different ways teachers have tried to incorporate bicultural practice into their childcare settings. The findings ERO documented in Success for Māori Children in Early Childhood Services (2010) stated “that most services were incorporating a degree of te reo Māori and including some practices consistent with tikanga Māori. However, it was obvious that incorporating Māori perspectives in planning, assessment and evaluation processes remains a challenge for many.”

What follows are some examples of what I have seen over my 18 months of visiting centres:

One centre focused on the language use because as the whakataukī states - “my language my awakening”. The desired outcome or awakening for this centre was a deeper understanding of a bicultural approach for everyone within the centre - teachers, children and parents. In this example a te reo Māori speaking teacher was going to use predominantly te reo Māori with children and teachers. This was an extremely courageous undertaking from her. It meant that te reo Māori would not be able to be conversational, as she was the only speaker of the language, but rather she would have to use context and body language to convey even the simplest of messages. In this setting the teacher quickly felt isolated and whakama/shy. For the supporting teachers in this centre some learnt new words and focussed on their pronunciation while others felt more self conscious about using the language for fear of getting it wrong.

Another childcare setting used a similar idea - having one person employed to be the te reo Māori speaking teacher. Unlike the first centre, there were other teachers

within the setting that could converse in te reo. However, even in this setting the te reo speaking teacher at times felt isolated. As she reflected on her position in the centre she said that “[I]t would be better to have been employed as a teacher that brought with her the taonga in her kete of the language rather than the teacher who spoke te reo”. Unfortunately this teacher left the centre but when she left an amazing thing happened - each of the other teachers took up the challenge and began to use the language more and more in conversations with the children. At present the teachers are speaking in te reo and the children fully understand but do not yet reply in te reo - a normal step in language acquisition. “Receptive language is the ability to listen and understand language. Expressive language is the ability to communicate with others using language. When children begin to talk, their receptive language skills are usually much more advanced than their expressive language skills. At about four years old, most children have a speaking vocabulary of about 2,300 words but a receptive language vocabulary of about 8,000 words. Receptive vocabulary plays a big part in listening comprehension, which is related to later literacy skills, and is necessary for understanding directions and for social contact.” Serve, University of North Carolina.

Other examples I have seen are centres that are using te reo Māori continually throughout their day. These settings have some fluent speakers and others who are still on their learning journey. These centres have a deep understanding of language and culture - they live and breath the culture and it would be hard to separate one from the other. During my visits to some of these

centres I have tried very hard to incorporate more of the te reo Māori that I know into conversation. At first I would apologize for my pronunciation, but the teachers reassured me that it was not that I was saying it wrong I just needed more practice. These teachers deeply understood that they, the children and families in their care and myself are on a continuous learning journey.

At a workshop titled ‘Te Oriori’ provided by ELP in Hamilton, Brenda Soutar and Miria Wapiti, who are from Mana Tamariki Kohanga Reo, shared some of their journey. Their journey was an evolving one that took time, dedicated teachers and the desire to bring about the best outcomes for children. The teachers throughout the process were on a learning journey and although this kohanga is full immersion there were still areas where they felt that the language use could be extended. Learning Story assessments at one point were being written in English then translated into te reo Māori. The teachers found though that there are somethings that can only be said in Māori. This was the catalyst for further Professional Learning for teachers in order for them to be able to write the Learning Stories in te reo Māori.

The important theme connecting each of these centres is the acknowledgement that the teachers are continually striving to gain a better understanding about creating best outcomes for all children. Each of these setting reflect on their practice and make improvements. These are all highly reflective teachers not content with not knowing what to do when faced with language, culture and identity but rather

have sought out ways that they can continually move in their thinking.

In the study Ngā Taonga Whakaako: Bicultural Competence In Early Childhood Education (2011) one of the recommendations was that teachers consider themselves on a journey of bicultural development rather than “biculturalism which implies a state to be reached.”

Some of the more common ideas by teachers demonstrating their intent to think biculturally are to have environments that use Māori designs, or have piupiu and cloaks sitting in the dress ups. They remind children not to sit on the table, use only the commands in te reo or collect pepeha to sit within portfolios. While there is nothing wrong with doing this these actions may be only scratching the surface of bicultural practice. Individually, each of these actions could actually open the door for deeper thinking for teachers. As teachers recognise limits in their knowledge regarding these issues, and see this as an opportunity to learn they will start to research and genuinely want to understand. For instance, a pepeha is used to introduce yourself and yet we often have this information sitting within portfolios not actually fulfilling the purpose that Māori had intended it to be used for. But if we think beyond the surface we can create wonderful sites of connections between children, teachers and whānau with the important information contained within these pepeha.

Why are all these teachers intent on further bicultural development?

Let us take a step back to get a broader view of the importance of language, culture and identity for early childhood teachers and consider the phrase “**all children should be treated the same**”. It requires us to think deeply, maybe even more deeply than we have thought before, because it is about subjects we sometimes wish to keep under the rug. To move forward in education, however, we have to lift up the rug, give it a good shake, sweep underneath it so that we have a place to stand on that is clear of all the old stuff that has covertly kept the floor dirty.

The common thread for many of the centres mentioned above is that the teachers realized that language is an important part of bicultural practice. This idea is something that Bialystok & Hakuta (1994, pg.161) write about in their book *In Other Words*

“Mostly we learn second languages to gain access, through verbal interactions, to cultural dealings with people who lay claim to that language. As we shall argue, to learn a second language is to equip ourselves with a powerful tool to construct new culture.”

Language is the gatekeeper into culture as the whakataukī says - toku reo toku ohoooho - my language my awakening or ko te reo te taikura o te whakaaro mārama - language is the key to understanding.

ERO's report on *Partnership with Whānau Māori in Early Childhood Services* (2012, p. 20) states that

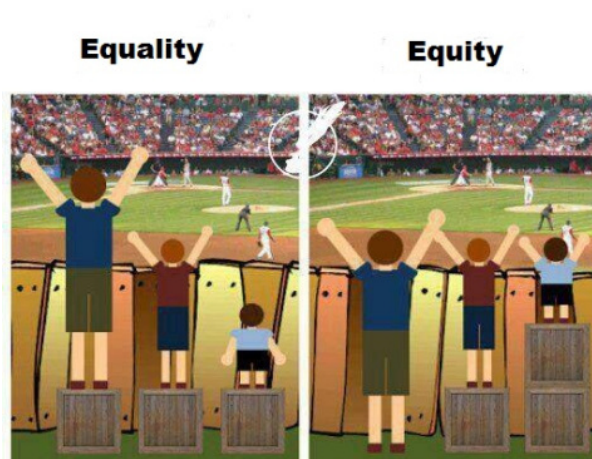
“[T]here is a lack of understanding in early childhood education about the nature and importance of culturally responsive partnerships with Māori.

ERO found that educators were yet to move beyond good relationships with Māori and ‘Pākehā’ ways of engaging with whānau. ECE educators were limited in their ability to develop genuine partnerships and often deferred to the view that *‘all children should be treated the same’*. While claiming to be concerned with high quality education, this position fails to acknowledge the importance of the culture brought by Māori children.

Only genuine partnership can give full effect to the curriculum. Partnership between whānau Māori and educators in early childhood services enhances what it means to be Māori and to succeed as Māori. The partnership principle of *Te Tiriti o Waitangi* is evident in *Te Whāriki* which encourages early childhood services to:

...include Māori people, places, and artefacts and opportunities to learn and use the Māori language through social interaction.”

I thought that the following picture I found on a social media site was a great place to start reflecting on education being fair for everyone by treating everyone the same. At the beginning of my thinking about bicultural practice, I really liked how this picture could be used to challenge people’s and my own thinking about creating

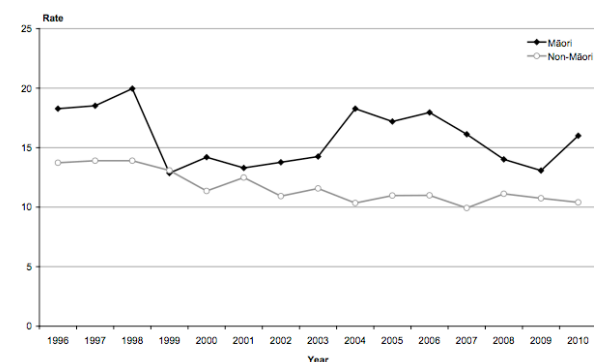


practice that is fair for everyone. While this picture goes a long way toward getting our teaching thoughts around why treating all children the same may not have the same outcomes for all children, I now think that this picture is slightly flawed. I wonder what the third picture could look like. Here is the challenge to you the reader and explorer. Can you think of another picture that may need to be added to these two?

No words are needed to consider equity and equality, the picture tells it all, but what about disparity? Other words for disparity are ‘inequality’ and ‘difference’. If what we are doing now for Māori is equitable then the outcomes should be similar. There should be no disparity. However, this is not the case socially or within education as Bishop et al (2009) discuss from a secondary school perspective.

Now let us consider another picture (a graph over the page) for which I make no apologies for looking at the negative, this is where we need to do a bit of shaking the rug.

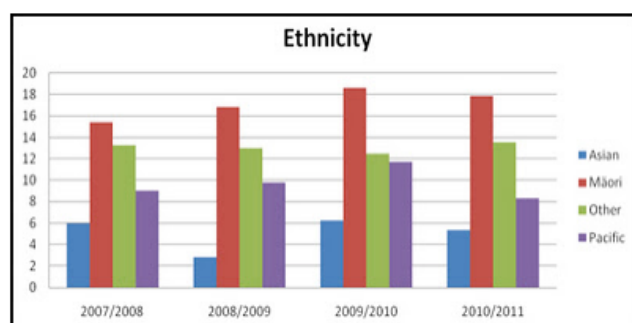
Figure 10: Suicide age-standardised death rates, Māori and non-Māori, 1996–2010



Source: New Zealand Mortality Collection

Note: The rate shown is the age-standardised rate per 100,000 population, standardised to the WHO standard world population.

This graph represents the number of suicides by ethnicity.



Obviously there is disparity or inequality between non-Māori and Māori - Māori are over represented in the suicide figures. For us as teachers these figures are very important because we have the time, the space and the opportunity to make a difference in early childhood to the outcomes for Māori well into their future and therefore the future of all New Zealanders.

Sir Peter Gluckman and Professor Harlene Hayne's report for the Government *Early Intervention Vital For Helping NZ's Troubled Young* says

"The second overarching theme of the report is that social investment in New Zealand should take more account of

the growing evidence that **prevention and intervention strategies applied early in life are more effective[...]**" (Gluckman & Hayne, 2011. My emphasis.)

At a workshop I attended called "Brain Development" in March 2013 through REAP, Whakatane the speaker said, "If you really want to change the world early childhood is the place to do it."

I know that it is an enormous leap from early childhood to suicide figures and changing the world. But what if we changed the world one child at a time? Let us start to think deeply about the way we view the world through our socially constructed ideas of the world.

Challenging the single story

I recently listened to a TED talk by Chimamanda Adichie, a Nigerian author. She spoke about the single story that people have concerning their perception of other cultures.

Chimamanda spoke about her experiences as a Nigerian women and the single story people had of what life must be like for her: a life of poverty, pity, hardship, and other points of difference. This was their story and perception of a Nigerian women's life, however was it a true perception?

What is the single story we still may have of Māori? The story that says: all Māori can sing, all Māori can play the guitar (by ear), they all know the song 10 Guitars, they all run on Māori time, they are all related somehow and they know where they all fit. These are just some lighter examples of the single story of Māori but there are others

less polite that are still resting on the rug that needs to be shaken.

Not too many years ago, I was getting a quote from a trades person who said to me, "I hope you don't mind but my builders are Māori. Is this ok? Because some people don't like having Māori in their houses." I replied, "Both my sons and my husband are Māori. We don't have a problem with Māori in our house," and walked away feeling like I was delivered a huge blow to the heart because this man actually was buying into some flawed single story of Māori. A story that says my sons, my husband, are not respected and valued.

Mihi Edwards provided another example (2002, pg.70)

"I didn't encourage my children to be Māori, I just let them coast along. We were accepted as people but felt we had to prove ourselves, to be twice as good to be equal. At times I wished I wasn't Māori. When any of my people did anything wrong, we Māori suffered the comments. I would hear people say, often blatantly, "What do you expect, he (or she) is Māori".

These examples are outcomes of the single story that has been told for generations past and it will take time to build a more accurate perspective of what the Māori multi-faceted story is. This is not be a story of difference rather a story of a culture rich in tradition, language, values and beliefs.

Williams, Broadley & Lawson Te-Aho (2012) wrote

"A close examination of the history of bicultural relations is necessary between Māori as tangata whenua and tauiwi and the subsequent impacts on the capacity to retain Māori language and customs (Cruz, 2009; Fishman, 1991; 1996; 2001; Irwin, 2003; Jackson, 2007; May, 2004; Metge, 2010; Moeke-Pickering, 2007; Rameka, 2003). Rau and Ritchie (2005) call for anti-colonial transformations so there is a revaluing of indigenous ways of knowing and being. Knowledge of history creates a rationale and justification for a revaluing process to occur."

A close examination of history is a great place to start our bicultural development journey. The whole notion of being a bicultural nation by the very title implies that there are two cultures. As teachers we need to acknowledge our own culture in order that we can see other. This according to Durie (1994 cited in Williams, Broadley & Lawson Te-Aho 2012) is how we as Pākehā need to start - by "unmasking their cultural identity."

Why language, culture and identity?

Understanding the significance of identity, language and culture for Māori children and their whānau is critical to develop practices that will support successful participation for them. Ritchie and Rau report that

"... if we are able to honour the cultural specificities that Māori children bring with them, this affirmation of their unique identities,

or 'being-ness' will nurture their **sense of belonging, providing both affirmation of their contributions** and support for their transitioning within and between educational settings. Reciprocal collaboration with tamariki and whānau Māori enacts our commitment to honouring the particularities of cultural differences, inviting us into a dialogue, in which we may find ourselves in a privileged position as we are entrusted with new and deeper understanding." (2012, pg. 5)

Michael Ungar suggests that having a sense of belonging is based on having an ethnic identity which "serves to shape the group's sense of who they are as a collective unit in a larger society." (2005, pg. 40). Ungar's work on resilience is used in suicide prevention programs such as Suicide Prevention which point out that several factors associated with resilience allow people to navigate their way through adversities.<http://www.suicideprevention.ca/about-suicide/resiliency-factors/> Two of these factors are: "cultural and/or spiritual identification and being culturally grounded by knowing where you come from, and being part of a cultural tradition that is expressed through daily activities."

Inclusion is about the rights of all children, families and adults to contribute, a place where "diversity is assumed, welcomed and viewed as a rich resource, rather than seen as a problem." (Gordon-Burns et al., 2012,). Early childhood therefore should be a place where everyone has a sense of belonging, where their views are valued and they are respected.

Thinking back to the quote from Bailystok & Hakuta (1994), "Mostly we learn second languages to gain access, through verbal interactions, to cultural dealings"; if we make language a priority this will enable us to enter into culture. To work toward no disparity we need to reflect on our view of Māori and Pākehā culture. We as Pākehā have to make moves to understand more deeply Te Ao Māori. How do we do this? We go to those who know, for example talk to our whānau Māori, make connections to our local marae, or as a teaching team sign up to free of charge Te Ara Reo Māori classes at Te Wānanga o Aotearoa. This can be part of the bicultural development. Development often takes us beyond our comfort zone into unknown places. This is a wonderful place to be - on the precipice of new knowledge. We can humbly take the lead in our own journey to deeper understanding. Knowing that at this point we are not the experts therefore it would be pertinent to go to those that have the knowledge. Why do we expect Māori to come to us Pākehā to teach us about their language and world view, instead we could approach them as our first step of entering and acknowledging Te Ao Māori.

Ann Milne says

"[T]hat schools are 'white spaces' [...] just there as the background set of rules that dictate whose knowledge is important, what success looks like, what achievement matters, how the space is organised and who has the power." (2009, p.2)

Ann issues us with the challenge to actively plant seeds that enable culture to flourish in

our educational environments and to challenge concepts of who holds the power to define what success, knowledge and the world view looks like.

Final thoughts

Let us go back to the equity and equality picture. If the playing field was to represent education it would be presumptuous to think that we all have the same world view about what education looks like. If we were to only have these two pictures as our view of education we would continually see Māori in a deficit role: a homogenous group that needs assistance to be part of the present education system, always needing a box to stand on. Instead we should see Māori as experts, capable and competent in their own worldview where, I would assume, many tauiwi (all non-Māori people of NZ) would need the boxes in order to see the view over the fence. Bishop & Glynn (1998) aptly warn that

“If the image we hold for Maori children or indeed any children, or of interaction patterns, is one of deficits, then our principles and practices will reflect this, and we will thereby perpetuate the education crisis.”

This view is supported by iwi. Awanui Black, spokesperson for Nga Kaikokiri Matauranga stressed that

“There’s overwhelming evidence that Maori children who learn the language do better in life than those who don’t, not just academically but also financially and socially.” (DigitalMaori, 2013)

If we consider these words in light of the earlier quote from Bialystok & Hakuta we can start to see why learning the language of a culture will have a positive effect: language acquisition allows us to gain access to culture.

There are two parts of the resilience equation already, language, as this is part of cultural tradition and culture. Let us remember the importance of our position as early childhood teachers. Through the positive messages we give every child about themselves, their language, their culture and their view of themselves as a learner we can change the world one child at a time. We have the opportunity to build resilience in children so that they will be able to recognise and challenge the single story others might tell about them.

Remember this is a professional journey into bicultural development for you the teacher which in turn has wonderful outcomes for children. With any journey you need to take that first step from where you are standing now. This is not hard - take what you have as knowledge now and grow this. Look for resources such as *Tataiako* published by the New Zealand Teacher Council this has indicators of good practice for teachers working alongside Māori children. Find a copy of *Te Whatu Pokeka* put out by MoE this is a fabulous resource for gaining insight into a Māori world view. There will be many more resources out there to tap into but the biggest resource you have are your families whether these are Māori, Pacific Island or Pākehā, because they all bring with them culture and language.

As we reflect on our teaching practice we have the opportunity to build on our stories of culture by looking closely at language of each culture represented within our settings. But particularly when we are thinking about Māori culture rather than collecting pepeha let us look at the language of pepeha, rather than showing manaakitanga let us look at the language of manaakitanga. Find out what these words mean to Māori, deeply understand the ideals and concepts behind these or other Māori values. This means that we are not just touching the surface where the single story lies but rather going deep into the rich novel that has language, culture and identity woven within.

References:

- Adichie, C. (2009). The Danger of a Single Story. Retrieved from: http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story.html.
- Bialystok, E. & Hakuta, K. (1994). *In Other Words: The Science and Psychology of Second-Language Acquisition*. New York: Basic Books.
- DigitalMaori. (2013). Make Maori Compulsory and NZ will Prosper. Retrieved from: <http://news.tangatawhenua.com/archives/20839>.
- ERO. (2012). *Partnership with Whānau Māori in Early Childhood Services*. Retrieved from: <http://www.ero.govt.nz/National-Reports/Partnership-with-Whanau-Maori-in-Early-Childhood-Services-Feb-2012>.
- ERO. (2010). *Success for Māori Children in Early Childhood Services*. Retrieved from: <http://www.ero.govt.nz/National-Reports/Success-for-Maori-Children-in-Early-Childhood-Services-May-2010>.
- Edwards, M. (2002). *Call of an Elder Karanga a te Kuia*. Wellington: Steel Roberts Ltd.
- Bishop, R., Berryman, M., Cavanagh, T. & Teddy, L., (2009). Te Kotahitanga: Addressing Educational Disparities Facing Māori Students in New Zealand. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 25, 734 - 742. Retrieved from: <http://tekotahitanga.tki.org.nz/Publications>.
- Bishop, R. & Glynn, T. (1998). *Culture Counts*. Palmerston North: Dunmore Press Ltd.
- Gordon-Burns, D., Gunn, A.C., Purdue, K. & Surtees, N. (Eds.) (2012). *Te Aotūroa Tātaki: Inclusive Early Childhood Education: Perspectives on Inclusion, Social Justice and Equity from Aotearoa New Zealand*. Wellington: NZCER Press.
- Gluckman, P. (2011, June 9). Early Intervention Vital for Helping NZ's Troubled Young. *The New Zealand Herald*. Retrieved from: http://www.waikato.ac.nz/__data/assets/pdf_file/0017/51632/APA_Referencing_6th_ed.pdf.
- Gluckman, P. & Hayne, H. (2011). *Improving the Transition. Reducing Social and Psychological Morbidity During Adolescence. A Report from the Prime Minister's Chief Advisor*. Retrieved from: <http://www.pmcsa.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/Improving-the-Transition-report.pdf>
- Milne, A. (2009). *Colouring in the White Spaces: Cultural Identity and Learning in School. A Research Report Prepared for the ASB/APPA Travelling Fellowship Trust Following a Study Tour in 2009*. Retrieved from: <http://myportfolio.school.nz/>

[artefact/file/download.php?
file=468863&view=92809.](http://www.elp.co.nz/artefact/file/download.php?file=468863&view=92809)

- Ministry of Health. 2012. Suicide Facts: Deaths and intentional self-harm hospitalisations 2010. Wellington: Ministry of Health.
<http://www.health.govt.nz/publication/suicide-facts-deaths-and-intentional-self-harm-hospitalisations-2010>
- Ritchie, J. & Rau, C. (2010). Poipoia te Tamaiti ki Tū Tangata: Identity, Belonging and Transitions. *The First Years: Ngā Tau Tuatahi. New Zealand Journal of Infant and Toddler Education*, 12(1), 16-22.
- Serve Centre. University North Carolina
<http://center.serve.org/ss/commreceptive.php>
- Suicide Prevention C.A
<http://www.suicideprevention.ca/about-suicide/resiliency-factors/>

Ungar, M. (Ed.) (2005) Handbook for Working with Children and Youth. Pathways to Resilience Across Cultures and Contexts. London: Sage.

Williams, M., Broadley, N. & Lawson Te-Aho, K. (2012) *Ngā taonga whakaako: Bicultural competence in early childhood education*. Ako Aotearoa National Centre for Tertiary Teaching Excellence : Wellington

Lynn Rupe is a facilitator at the Educational Leadership Project (Ltd), a provider of professional development for early childhood teachers in New Zealand.

If you want to use this article, please reference it as follows:

Rupe, L (2013). *Toku Reo, Toku Ohohoho: My Language, My Awakening*. Retrieved from: <http://www.elp.co.nz/articles.cfm>