
Thinking Otherwise:

'Bicultural' hybridities in early childhood education in Aotearoa/New Zealand



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Abstract

As we become more overtly aware of the embedded historical memories (O'Loughlin, 2001) that underpin our conscious theorising, our reflections cause us to re-consider long-held assumptions, re-minding ourselves of our complicities and non-complicities and our potential to re-shape our own subjectivities in relation to deepening insights and openness to alternate ways of being, knowing, and doing. We come to scrutinise our comfort with positions of privilege previously unconsciously validated through our perpetuation of Western knowledges and tools (Cannella & Viruru, 2004). Thus begins an ongoing process of reflexive change which is embodied, enacted and spiritually underpinned, rather than operating at a cosmetic programmatic level. This intra-personal re-consideration of demeanour, disposition and direction, is integral to generating possibilities for deepening the provision of symbolic worlds being validated and accessed by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous children within our educational settings.

Introduction

In illuminating the complexities of culture and imperialism, Edward Said wrote of the importance of adopting a lens that seeks connection, since 'cultural forms are hybrid, mixed, impure, and the time has come in cultural analysis to reconnect ... analysis with reality', recognising that cultures are 'humanly made structures of both authority and participation, benevolent in what they include, incorporate, and validate, less benevolent in what they exclude and demote' (Said, 1993, p. 15). Far from being unitary, essentialised and monolithic entities, cultures are viewed as hybrid, containing contradictory experiences, foreign elements, alterities and domains. For Said, all cultures contain 'an aspiration to sovereignty, to sway, to dominance' (p. 15).

The late Michael King, a highly respected cultural historian of Aotearoa, in writing of the human impact on our ecosystem here, wondered if exercising some 'inherent selfishness, hubristic sense of superiority and unrivalled capacity for manipulation' renders humanity 'an inevitably alien and malevolent ingredient' of exploitation of the environment. The same question applies to the impact of colonisation on Indigenous inhabitants, displaced and exploited as part of the colonialistic project of reproducing 'neo-Europes' (King, 2003, pp. 24-25). This societal level impulse to dominate, supposedly an evolutionary hangover of 'survival of the fittest' (Smith, 1999, p. 62), is seen at the individual level, whereby 'Appropriation, integration, and assimilation are constitutive and thus necessary elements of the realization of human individuality' (Peperzak, 1993, p. 23). For educators mindful of a social justice imperative to reverse the ongoing onslaught of colonisation, a central focus must be to work with and beyond these controlling hegemonic forces.

Decolonisation

Decolonisation has been proposed as a social justice project for addressing the injustices of our colonial past, and is the responsibility of non-Indigenous as well as Indigenous educators (Culpitt, 1994; Davis, 2004; Elvidge, 1987; hooks, 1994; Kaomea, 2003; Mohanty, 1994; Ritchie, 2002; Smith, 1999; Waters, 2003). The decolonisation project is recognised as 'a long-term process involving the bureaucratic, cultural, linguistic and psychological divesting of colonial power' (Smith, 1999, p. 98).

Early childhood education is a site of cultural transmission, within which regimes of truths, including discourses of racism and colonisation, are inadvertently perpetuated (Cannella, 1997, 1999, 2000). As educators, we are powerfully positioned to choose the truths that we privilege and exercise, influencing the subjectivities accessible to the children with whom we work. Children are themselves agentic, filtering from amongst the multiple offerings of family, community, media, and early childhood centre cultures those subjectivities that they choose to emulate. This intrinsic choicefulness also implies for both educators and children the possibility of disrupting regimes of truth and their incumbent inequities (Mac Naughton, 2005, p. 39). Commitment to the project of decolonisation requires first an acknowledgement of the colonialistic legacy of the past, and second, a re-visioning of what a post-colonial era might mean for our work in education, and within the broader societies in which we live and work. It also means seeking tools to generate understandings of the insidious impact that is the legacy of the colonial era, and strategies to develop new pathways beyond these limitations (Kaomea, 2003, 2004). Our colonised thinking is insidious however. Mac Naughton challenges us to 'tackle our will to truth within the very regimes of truth that govern us' (Mac Naughton, 2005, p. 44). As academics and educators,

we can contribute to the wider project of decolonisation through our thinking, writing, and talking, in order to generate spaces in which we can collaborate, critique, and challenge ourselves, our colleagues, and our students in our collective endeavour towards decolonisation of the institutions that surround our tamariki/mokopuna/children.

In this endeavour, we are mindful of the pervasive influence of historical/ongoing contextualisation of children's available subjectivities, of the ways that these influences are embedded in overt and covert curriculum implementation, inscribed in our verbal and non-verbal languages, our ways of being, knowing and doing. Jeanette Rhedding-Jones has inquired in her Norwegian multicultural context as to 'What kinds of constructions are the monocultural professionals creating for cross-cultural meetings and mergings?' (Rhedding-Jones, 2001, p. 5). As educators, we wield immeasurable power to create or close off possibilities for children to access wider symbolic realms and possibilities. Glenda Mac Naughton implores us to apply post-structural strategies of reflective activism, such as seeking multiple meanings that challenge governance of truths and associated regimes, and overlaying dominant truths with previously marginalised meanings (Mac Naughton, 2005, p. 47). Critiquing the discourses that surround children, at both institutional and interpersonal levels, provides powerful insights that can serve us in our attempts to illuminate decolonised trajectories.

A starting place is to problematise our assumptions, our routines, our prescriptive practices, to free ourselves from uncritiqued railroading of our relationships and relating into predetermined categories of adult and child; teacher and student; teacher and parent; us and them; myself and other. Emmanuel Levinas theorises our relationship with the mystery of the Other as embodying the intrigue of the unattainable. He writes that:

The relationship with the other is not an idyllic and harmonious relationship of communion, or a sympathy through which we put ourselves in the others place; we recognise the other as resembling us, but exterior to us; the relationship with the other is a relationship with a Mystery. (Levinas, 1987, p. 75)

For Levinas, the relationship with the Other represents a sacred journeying of embodied respect, involving a thinking

otherwise, an inversion which requires relinquishment of the satisfaction of maintaining control. This 'remains a relationship to the other as other, and not a reduction of the other to the same. It is transcendence' (Levinas, 1987, p. 115).

Peter McLaren has asked us to reflect upon 'Who has the power to exercise meaning, to create the grid from which Otherness is defined, to create the identifications that invite closures on meanings, on interpretations and traditions?' (McLaren, 1995, p. 213). As we tiptoe into complex hybrid cultural terrains our motivation needs to be ethically guided and constrained:

As educators we need to be exceedingly cautious about our attempts to speak for others, questioning how our discourses ... position us as authoritative and empowered speakers in ways that unwittingly constitute a reinscription of the discourse of colonization, of patriarchy, of racism, of conquest. (McLaren, 1995, p. 224)

In moving beyond dichotomised positions of 'white' and 'other', into these 'third spaces' (Bhabha, 1994; Gonzalez-Mena, 2001; S. May, 1999; McLaren, 1995; Meredith, 1998; Penetito, 1998), educators from the dominant culture need to be mindful of dilemmas of cultural essentialism and appropriation (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997; MacNaughton, 1998; S. May, 1999; Ritchie, 2003; Said, 1993).

Context for research project

In this article I explore these matters from the perspective of early childhood education in Aotearoa/New Zealand. It is now ten years since our first national early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki*, was promulgated as our first 'bicultural' curriculum (Ministry of Education, 1996), validating the centrality of positioning of the Indigenous people, their languages and cultural meanings and representations alongside that of the dominant Western culture. Increasingly, early childhood centres are reflecting inclusion to varying degrees of Māori language and cultural practices. *Te Whāriki*, however, is a non-prescriptive, flexible, guideline-style of curriculum, which allows each early childhood centre to "'weave" its own curriculum pattern' (H. May, 2001, p. 246). Demographic realities impede the delivery of the potential of *Te Whāriki* to deliver authentic representation of Māori cultural meanings since the majority (93.1 per cent) of early childhood teachers working in services other than Kōhanga Reo (Māori philosophy and

language whānau-based centres) are not Māori (Ministry of Education, 2004), do not speak Māori, nor do they have an in-depth understanding of Māori culture and values. A recent survey found that only 1 per cent of non-Māori early childhood teachers use the Māori language more than 30 per cent of their teaching time (Harkess, 2004). Although 75 per cent of Pākehā early childhood teachers use some Māori whilst teaching, 70 per cent of these teachers described themselves as speaking Māori 'not very well' (Harkess, 2004). This situation lends some credence to the concern that 'the reclamation of indigenous formations is fundamentally impossible due to [colonial/imperial] interpellation' (O'Loughlin & Johnson, 2006).

This article contends, however, that the expectation within *Te Whāriki* for validation of the Indigenous culture is being honoured in the intent of many committed Māori and non-Māori early childhood educators. Voices from recent research (Rau & Ritchie, 2005; Ritchie & Rau, 2006) will be employed to illuminate some of the pathways that educators are taking on this journey.

Voices from Whakawhanaungatanga Project

The following narratives are taken from co-researchers in a recent project, *Whakawhanaungatanga: Partnerships in bicultural development in early childhood care and education* (Ritchie & Rau, 2006), funded by the Teaching Learning Research Initiative (TLRI), administered by the New Zealand Council for Educational Research. We thank both the TLRI and our co-researcher colleagues for the privilege of having been involved in this study.

Dana's story

Having worked in specialist education for many years, Dana faced challenges when she found herself working alongside a Māori colleague to deliver a Ministry of Education document, 'Much More than Words' to Kōhanga Reo:

I was asked to unpack 'Much More Than Words' with Kōhanga Reo in the area that I worked in. So I felt a little uncomfortable about suddenly being thrown in to unpack this document which was developed by Pākehā, for Pākehā, and I was to go in as a white Pākehā woman and unpack it. So I spoke to my Supervisor and she said she would ask a Māori person if she would come with me. And I said, 'That's great' ...

and my Supervisor said, 'So, we've got all these Kōhanga Reo to do and it needs to be unpacked quite quickly'.

So Dana and her Māori colleague, Mereana arrived at the first Kōhanga Reo:

It was really nice, and we had a cup of tea, she took chocolate biscuits. We sat round and had cups of tea and chocolate biscuits, and then we came out and I said, 'Oh, we didn't talk about why we were there!' And she said, 'Oh no, we need to get to know them and they actually need to get to know you' and I said, 'Oh, okay.' Well this is the truth, we did this for weeks in this one Centre, and I'm thinking about the list and it's going to take us this long. And this is again coming from my monocultural perspective and also that agency constraint, that we've got all these centres and they've got to be serviced, there's got to be contracts. ... I talked about this to Mereana and she said, 'No, no, don't worry, it'll get done.' Well after about six weeks, to be honest, I was really getting quite frustrated thinking, 'My God, we need to at least be saying why we're there, but then it was so interesting watching Mereana work. Because something came up, she somehow got the conversation onto kids that were causing concern and they said they had this little guy, and they started talking and she said, 'Talk to us about this little guy.' And I just naturally said, 'Has his hearing been tested?' and they said, 'No'. And that's when Mereana – she just was so skilful, and I know I would have done it all wrong now, I mean, she taught me so much. It just flowed and almost was like they were saying, 'We need help with this.' And it came up, even though it was six weeks later, it was pertinent and it was relevant to that group of whānau. They were saying, 'We've got this child, we don't know what to do.' And Mereana just pulled out the document, "Much more than Words" and gave it to them, and she said, 'Look, why don't you just read this and then we're going to come back.' They said, 'That would be really good.' When I look back, I just was in awe of how skilfully she did it, because they actually wanted us to come back. Because somehow we had a context there and to be honest, we had a relationship, because when we walked in they said, 'You got the choccie biscuits?' and I mean it sounds silly, but there was that feeling of comfort which I would not have developed, if it had been the way I would have gone in and done it.

Dana learnt, through allowing her Māori colleague, Mereana, to take the lead in this Māori context, to respect a very different way of operating which was based in establishing connection

rather than delivering targeted outputs. Mereana elicited through her skill in relationship-building a reciprocal exchange with the whānau, very different from the top-down expert/client model that Dana had been trained to use.

Penny's story

Penny, a Pākehā Kindergarten Head Teacher, has for many years been open and receptive to learning about Māori ways of being, knowing and doing, trusting her intuition to focus on the needs of tamariki and whānau.

I have very, very kindly been taken into a Ngāti Porou family on the East Coast, they say I'm their Pākehā daughter, and I work on the marae there and I go to functions and I help with fundraising for whatever's happening. I go to tangi, go to the close family ones and just by watching and listening, I learn. I go with knowing I know nothing, or knowing I know very little, but I've been supported and helped and encouraged all the way. I don't ask lots of questions, I'd rather just watch and listen. I feel it's too pushy asking questions, I'd rather just quietly find out.

My biggest commitment to the Reo is that I've joined the Wananga o Aotearoa as a first year student with the Te Ara Reo programme and it's still very small steps, but it's something I'd like to keep going at. To me people are the most important things, not the material things around us. And if we are all kind and respectful to all people then everything else just falls into place. And for the kindergarten, I've always wanted it to be a place where people felt welcome and could be here regardless of who they were or how long they stayed or why their backgrounds were so complicated and miserable, it's not about judging people, just accepting people, it's an unconditional thing. And that's been gradually growing as I mature, that whole feeling of wanting just to be totally accepting of people has become very, very important to me.

In Aotearoa, many Māori have ongoing connections to ancestral marae. A recent survey reported that 69 per cent of Māori adults made at least one visit to a marae during a 12 month period whilst only 14 per cent of Pākehā had done so. Māori also made repeated visits whilst for those Pākehā who visited a marae, it was their only visit during the survey period (Statistics New Zealand. Tatauranga Aotearoa, 2003). Similarly, whilst colonisation has impacted on Māori to the point that only 42 per cent of adult Māori speak at least some te reo Maori, only 1.7 per cent of Pākehā are able to

converse in Māori (Ministry of Social Development, Te Manatu Whakahiato Ora, 2004). Penny's acceptance into serving as a worker on a whānau marae, and her efforts to learn te reo are therefore unusual for Pākehā. Through this openness to Other ways of being, knowing, and doing, Penny has gradually shifted her philosophy and practice:

I think kindergarten is such a Pākehā institution and very clinical compared to the Māori way of supporting each other and that's a barrier that I've been trying to break down for a long time. And I can remember the early philosophies were always about the child and the academic ability of the child, and there was absolutely nothing about the whole child, emphasis on the academic and nothing about the wider family. And it was just by being around families and observing them, and doing a bit of reading, but most of it has come from my observing other people, how important the family is for that child. And how the impact of the family is far greater than anything I will ever have, and if I don't get the family on board with me, nothing much is going to happen. And this is all families no matter what culture they come from.

The whole hui time we have in the mornings with the karakia only started because we had a kuia who came once, twice a week, and helped us with waiata, and she would start with a little karakia. And when she did that, I thought to myself, 'Why aren't we doing this on other days? Why do we only do it on the days she comes?' And so I've questioned my practices here, and one of my things was that I'm dead against early morning mat times, it impinges on children's precious, precious time and then you have one at the end. So my concession was that the morning mat time would be a Māori mat time. We had to start the day with karakia, it's really important and learn just a couple of simple waiata appropriate to children. And it's only just been in the last year that we've said, 'Well, we've started the morning with karakia [so why aren't we finishing the session with a karakia?]' and when I think of the logic of it, yes, it's that whole cycle. Everything in the Māori world has a beginning and an end that follows in a cycle and that's kind of where we went from. So it's been a gradual process questioning why we do things and then coming across some readings or Māori students coming. Just learning bits, more from them, as they question or want explanations, 'How do you do things?' or 'Why do you do things?' and having to explain and then thinking, 'Is that right? Should we be doing it a different way?' It's about learning from other people, being open to learn from other people.

In order to honour the spiritual needs of whānau, a karakia is made at the beginning and end of sessions. Penny has been willing to relinquish certain valued aspects of her kindergarten daily routine which had previously optimised children's time for choices and play by minimalising compulsory mat times.

Katerina's story

Katerina, a Māori teacher educator, explained her perceptions from the point of view of a shy Māori 'Mama' approaching an early childhood centre for the first time:

Well if you sit behind the desk, I'm not going to feel comfortable. If you're teaching my babies and you have the privilege of hanging out with my babies, I need you to get away from that desk and come out in front of the desk and sit down with me and just talk as two Mamas, or two women who are having a cup of tea, and like real cups of tea too! Not when you sit there and you know it's so stiff and formal that nobody wants to talk. It's all very polite and you walk away, and the whānau walk away feeling like they've got nothing out of it, no real connection. I need to connect with you. Because you are in that position of power, they're my babies, but you're the teacher – you need to connect with me because I see you with the power.

Katerina's analysis is consistent with the current theorising of Gunilla Dahlberg and colleagues (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999). Dahlberg (2000) considers that the art of really listening and hearing what the Other is saying to be central to what she describes as 'the ethics of encounter' (p. 23). So, for Katerina, the powerfully positioned Pākehā teacher has the responsibility to move out of her comfort zone in order to fully welcome Māori into the centre:

It's actually inviting the Other in, to be able to do that. So you put on your approachable, friendly – in a sense it's a mask – but after a while – at first it can be a mask, because you're not comfortable and you feel a little alien with it – but you're actually inviting the Other in and crossing those cultural divides in a sense.

Katerina is explicating a process for non-Māori educators that requires preparedness to risk an masking/unmasking process (Mama, 1995), an enacted embodiment of Other ways of being and doing, enabling transformative movement beyond the safety of comfort zones.

Conclusion

These three stories can be read as indicating the sensitivity of these colleagues to their recognition of Other discourses, and their willingness to open themselves to discursive positionings that differ from those offered within the safe and familiar domains of their previous social/cultural/historical/academic realms of experience. These educators are relinquishing, re-envisioning, shifting in response to their awareness of their eliciting opportunities to become cognisant of the needs of the Other. Through sharing such stories, talking, reflecting, challenging ourselves and each other, we may come to see more and more enactment within early childhood education that reflects this hybridisation, thereby offering learning opportunities far richer than previous monocultural curriculum. It is our hope that as we move into the second decade of enactment of *Te Whāriki*, more and more early childhood educators, led by teacher educators and professional learning facilitators, will demonstrate such willingness to reflect, risk and shift, contributing to a shared, collective, re-envisioning of early childhood practice in Aotearoa – one reflective of the hybridity of validation of indigeneity alongside the multiple perspectives of Pākehā and more recent immigrant cultures: thinking, and doing *Otherwise*.



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