

He taonga te reo: Honouring te reo me ona tikanga¹, the Māori language and culture, within early childhood education in Aotearoa².

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Abstract

This paper considers data from recent research which illustrates the ways in which tamariki (children), whānau (families) and educators are integrating the use of the Māori language within their everyday educational interactions, as mandated by the bilingual New Zealand early childhood curriculum, Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 1996). Languages reflect cultures, expressing our deeper meanings and representations. Inscribed within verbal and non-verbal languages are our ways of being, knowing and doing (Martin, 2008). 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?” (2001, p. 5). What follows is an exploration of strategies by which Māori ways of being, knowing and doing are being enacted through the medium of te reo in early childhood centres.

Introduction

Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 1996), the first bicultural education curriculum in Aotearoa, reaffirmed a commitment already widely acknowledged across the early childhood education sector in this country, to Te Tiriti o Waitangi³, and the validation and inclusion of te reo me ōna tikanga⁴ as an integrated component of early childhood education programmes. Te Whāriki contains strong clear statements of expectations for educators in terms of enacting te reo Māori within their teaching:

New Zealand is the home of Māori language and culture: curriculum in early childhood settings should promote te reo and ngā tikanga Māori, making them visible and affirming their value for children from all cultural backgrounds. Adults working with children should demonstrate an understanding of the different iwi and the meaning of whānau and whanaungatanga⁵ (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 42)

The juxtaposition of the promotion of te reo and tikanga alongside whānau and whanaungatanga is insightful. Previous research had identified that as early childhood

¹ Te reo is the Māori language, tikanga are Māori beliefs, values and cultural practices.

² Aotearoa is a Māori name for New Zealand.

³ Te Tiriti o Waitangi/The Treaty of Waitangi, signed in 1840 between Māori chiefs and the British Crown, promised protections to Māori of their lands and taonga – everything of value to Māori, which includes their languages, beliefs, values and traditions.

⁴ Te reo is the Māori language and tikanga are Māori cultural practices. This phrase, literally, “the language and its cultural practices” demonstrates how intrinsically the language and culture are linked.

⁵ Iwi are tribes, whānau are families, and whanaungatanga is the building of relationships.

educators generate an environment reflective and inclusive of Māori values such as whanaungatanga, Māori families are more comfortable and become more involved within that early childhood setting (Ritchie, 2002).

Te reo Māori has been severely jeopardised by the processes of colonisation. As Mere Skerrett has written:

Māori ways of speaking were also colonised through the subjugation of te reo Māori, to be replaced by English. This, at times violent, process of colonisation caused a disruption in the intergenerational transmission of Māori language, Māori knowledge and, as a consequence, disrupted Māori lives and Māori societies. (2007, p. 7)

Whānau Māori have consistently stated their preference that their children learn their language and culture within education contexts (AGB/McNair, 1992; M. Durie, 2001; Else, 1997; Te Puni Kōkiri/Ministry of Māori Development, 1998) in affirmation of their identity as Māori, since “Te reo Māori serves as the medium through which symbolic and cultural components are properly united and Māoriness most appropriately expressed” (A. Durie, 1997, p. 152). Young children learn languages comparatively easily. Early childhood centres are a logical site for young children to have opportunities to learn te reo Māori, in naturalistic experiential ways, consistent with both early childhood and second language learning pedagogies (Cummins, 2001; Ritchie, 1994). This will only occur if we are able to provide them with a linguistically rich environment and authentic language models. It is reasonable that Māori parents might expect that their children will not acquire poor pronunciation of their own language from their educational experiences.

Previous Research

In 1999 as part of my doctoral research (Ritchie, 2002), I observed 13 different early childhood settings in the Waikato area (Ritchie, 1999). I noted that in most of the settings there was at least one staff member who attempted to use some Māori language. This was a stronger use of te reo than Pam Cubey observed in eight Wellington early childhood centres in 1992, when she reported that virtually no Māori language was heard (Cubey, 1992). During my observations, the most frequent usage of te reo Māori were ‘commands’, such as: “*Haere mai ki te kai; E tu tamariki; E noho; Haere mai ki te whāriki; Horoi o ringaringa*”⁶. There were also instances of counting and naming colours in te reo Māori. Several staff repeatedly inserted single Māori nouns within some of their regular English sentences, for example, “Do you want some fruit? Some *panana*

⁶ *Haere mai ki te kai* – come and eat

E tu tamariki – stand up children

E noho – sit down

Haere mai ki te whāriki – come to the mat

Horoi o ringaringa – wash your hands

panana – banana

āporo – apple

taringa – ear(s)

waha – mouth

or some *āporo*? Turn on your *taringa*, zip up your *waha*”. During my visits, eight of the 13 centres sang at least one song in te reo Māori, usually at structured mat-times, which were compulsory for all children. These teachers identified confidence and competence as barriers, because, as one teacher explained, “you feel like a real twit when it comes out wrong”.

I was concerned that the available te reo Māori resources appeared to be under-utilised and that the range of language use was restricted to simple commands, the use of colour names and counting in Māori. This indicated reliance on a limited range of vocabulary, with little knowledge of Māori grammar. Teachers expressed their need for support and encouragement to broaden their ‘comfort zone’ beyond single words, to using complete and more complex phrases that represent linguistically authentic Māori structures. I suggested that teachers consider widening the range of formats in which they used Māori phrases.

Recent data

Whilst 6.58% of registered early childhood teachers are Māori (Ministry of Education, 2007), only 1.6% of New Zealanders of European ancestry speak Māori (Ministry of Social Development, 2007). Early childhood teachers’ use of te reo may seem encouraging in that 75% of Pākehā early childhood teachers said that they use some Māori whilst teaching, yet 70% of these teachers reported themselves as speaking Māori “not very well” (Harkess, 2004, p. 12).

In 2006 we reported on a two-year study⁷ with a range of participants, which included early childhood educators, an Iwi Education Initiative⁸, teacher educators, specialist educators and professional learning providers, co-exploring strategies for supporting the involvement of whānau Māori within early childhood settings other than Kōhanga Reo⁹ (Ritchie & Rau, 2006). Using narrative (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Schulz, Schroeder, & Brody, 1997) and Kaupapa Māori (Bishop, 2005; Smith, 1999, 2005) research methodologies, we explored early childhood educators’ strategies for encouraging the participation of whānau Māori within early childhood education settings, and ways for implementing understandings of commitments derived from Te Tiriti o Waitangi as expressed in the bicultural early childhood curriculum, Te Whāriki, through the delivery of Tiriti-based programmes¹⁰.

Participants in this study were those who were strongly committed to implementing Tiriti-based practice. Pedagogical enactment described in this study was consistent with

⁷ This project was funded through the Teaching Learning Research Initiative, a fund provided by the New Zealand Ministry of Education, and administered by NZCER.

⁸ We gratefully acknowledge the support and contribution of Kōkiri Tuwaretoa Education Initiative to the Whakawhanaungatanga study.

⁹ Kohanga Reo are Māori-medium educational settings where young children are immersed in the Māori language and culture in a whānau-based context.

¹⁰ The term Tiriti-based practice is derived from a commitment to Te Tiriti o Waitangi, the treaty signed in 1840 by Māori chiefs and the British Crown, that legitimated the presence of immigrants, initially from Britain, alongside the tangata whenua, Māori, the indigenous people of this land.

a view of Māori language and cultural practices as being holistically and simultaneously performed. This enactment includes daily welcoming and spiritual rituals in te reo, and is inclusive of waiata¹¹. This climate generated a sense of welcoming and safety for Māori families, which resulted in their increasing involvement in centre reo and tikanga implementation. An educator demonstrated how this whānau participation was integral within their early childhood centre programming: “In partnership with whānau we introduce new waiata each term, and tikanga experiences, such as, hāngi, pōwhiri, harakeke, [and] legends of the whānau, hapū¹², and iwi attending the service.”

Other Māori co-researchers within the Whakawhanaungatanga research project also identified aspects of Te Ao Māori¹³ that they would like to see reflected within early childhood education and care settings. They considered it important that Māori parents and whānau sense a match between their values and those of educational settings. They valued a sense of whanaungatanga generated and enacted within the early childhood centre, whereby tamariki and whānau, kuia and kaumātua, and other whānau members such as “Aunties” (Martin, 2007) participated as a collective, learning and teaching alongside the teachers and children, educators sharing responsibility and demonstrating willingness to identify and support the needs of all members of that collective. In this vision, te reo Māori is modelled and integrated throughout the programme, with support for adults to increase their own facility with the language alongside their children, and there is ongoing everyday enactment of tikanga such as: rituals of welcoming and farewell; sharing of kai¹⁴; a value of inclusiveness; reference to Te Ao Wairua¹⁵ and ngā Atua¹⁶, and annual celebrations such as Matariki.¹⁷

Children, in this view are exposed to te reo as part of the daily enactment of Māori beliefs, values and practices. Co-researchers in this project demonstrated a commitment to integrating te reo and tikanga within their centre practice, in ways that were meaningful and contextual for children and families. Working with natural materials, such as harakeke (flax), provided a source of learning of traditional knowledge, involving the planting and care of the flax bushes, weaving of rourou¹⁸, children observing alongside adults, connected to the land and its spiritual significance, as Ana, a Playcentre kaiako, described:

So even though we had those harakeke within our centre boundary, in our lawn, we knew that the pā harakeke¹⁹ of that harakeke that we had, came

¹¹ Waiata are songs.

¹² Hāngi are feasts cooked in earth ovens, pōwhiri are greeting ceremonies, harakeke is flax, and hapū are sub-tribes

¹³ Te Ao Māori is the Māori world.

¹⁴ Kai is food

¹⁵ Te Ao Wairua is the spiritual dimension.

¹⁶ Ngā Atua are supernatural beings, or gods.

¹⁷ Matariki is the constellation whose arrival announces the Māori New Year.

¹⁸ Rourou are flax food baskets.

¹⁹ Pā harakeke are flax bushes, often planted as a source of flax for weaving and rongoa (medicinal remedies), and also refers metaphorically to the nurturing by the wider family of the offspring, the younger shoots.

from a bigger picture. And all the natural resources on our little wagon inside, in the area of where they go and make pictures and glue things and make structures out of the driftwood and put their shells and tie their shells on and harakeke, they might have been just in the rourou baskets, but we knew and the tamariki knew they come from this bigger picture out there in the whenua²⁰, because they had gone to get them. So we brought our big world reality and our spiritual world reality into the bounds of that centre.

Pania, a Māori kindergarten teacher, spoke of her bilingual approach as being like a whāriki,²¹

...where you get two strands and you build them together to make your little kete²² or your whāriki of learning. And [implementing a bilingual approach] is a way that I can facilitate my programme that is non-threatening. It's an option for the child – and the parent – whether they would like to do it, but it's also another teaching technique and a resource and a learning strategy.

Daisy, a Pākehā kindergarten teacher, actively researched aspects of tikanga that she was interested in integrating into her teaching:

I wrote a story and what I wanted to do was encompass the tikanga aspects on collecting kai moana²³. I wanted it to be something Pākehā could grasp, something simple, that was really clear and conveying the tikanga aspects because it's not just about going down to the beach and picking up a few pipis²⁴, its deeper than that, there's a lot of kaupapa²⁵ behind it. How did I know about all the tikanga?—I've never gone out collecting kai moana in my life? Research, kōrero²⁶ with others more knowledgeable. As far as getting it to children it needs to be simple and straight-forward. The pipi story is focused on Tangaroa,²⁷ the protocols around that. The tamariki seem to enjoy it, but in order to deepen their understanding, and extend the story, I set up the pipi hunt in the sandpit. So the story was a visual and a listening experience, whereas the pipi hunt was a tactile experience, so that then I think I would have managed to tap into every child's way of learning.

Daisy also involved whānau Māori of her centre in her planning, although she took primary responsibility for researching the reo and tikanga that was to be incorporated. Incorporating te reo and tikanga was more effective when educators were committed both individually and collectively to proactively integrating this within planning, teaching

²⁰ Whenua is land.

²¹ Whāriki are woven flax mats.

²² A kete is a woven flax basket.

²³ Kai moana are seafoods.

²⁴ Pipi are cockles.

²⁵ Kaupapa is philosophy.

²⁶ Kōrero is talking.

²⁷ Tangaroa is the Atua, supernatural being, or God, of the sea.

interactions, programme evaluation, and centre review. Many of the Pākehā co-researchers have worked hard over the years to increase their competence in te reo, and continue to do so, by taking courses. At Ariel's childcare centre, all the teachers had attended a reo course offered in their local community. Penny, a kindergarten head teacher who was also studying te reo, explained that as her own confidence grew, and supported by her co-teacher, the quality of te reo within the centre programme continued to strengthen, as "the reo is fed in gently and quietly".

Respondents from the Hei Ara Kōkiri Tuwaretoa Education Initiative data articulated aspirations for early childhood education services that envisioned all children as being supported to become biculturally and bilingually competent. The following example recognises the important role of early childhood services in offering quality models of te reo Māori:

To be fully bicultural and therefore bilingual all children in Aotearoa/NZ should have the opportunity to learn to be fluent in Māori and English and develop understanding of both cultures' world view. We need proficient Māori speaking teachers in all ECE learning environments. It is not enough to use Māori language in directives – information – acknowledgment contexts. We need to work towards providing environments where children can use the target language, be completely immersed in te reo Māori. We need to promote environments where the conscientization of language is constructed as normal to prevent dialogue being used by teachers to act on children. Teachers and children need to be using dialogue to work with each other – co-constructing. In order to reflect this, we need to provide environments rich in Māori language. We need proficient speaking Māori teachers! Regurgitating learnt phrases will not provide the opportunities for children to really conscientise their experiences, that is, thinking in Māori. Only a very high level of exposure in Māori will do that.

Honouring the indigenous language and culture of this country remains an ongoing challenge for educators, particularly given the legacy of colonialistic arrogance that has limited access for many people, both Māori and non-Maori. Kaupapa Māori models are providing inspirational pedagogical models that honour te reo me ōna tikanga (Skerrett, 2007). However, as the numbers of Māori children in education services other than kaupapa Māori remains high, the onus is on educators in these sectors to find strategies to provide Māori children and families with the language that is their birth-right and source of identity as affirmed by Article 30 of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of The Child* (1989), which requires that:

In those States in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities or persons of Indigenous origin exist, a child belonging to such a minority or who is Indigenous shall not be denied the right, in community with other members of his or her group, to enjoy his or her own culture, to profess and practise his or her own religion, or to use his or her own language.

Conclusion

Māori continue to seek education provision that respects and honours their identity, including the linguistic affirmation of authentic models of te reo Māori (Robertson, Gunn, Lanumata, & Pryor, 2007). As early childhood educators seek to deliver on the expectations outlined in the early childhood curriculum, Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 1996), there remain many challenges, not the least of which is the lack of linguistic competence in te reo Māori of the vast majority of teachers (Harkess, 2004). Our research indicates that educators who are dedicated to an ongoing journey of reflexive praxis founded in a commitment to social justice and the promise of Tiriti-based partnership are generating early childhood programmes which respectfully reflect the Māori language and culture, and this in turn encourages the participation of whānau Māori in these services.

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