Being "sociocultural" in early childhood education practice in Aotearoa

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Introduction

Since 1996, early childhood educators in Aotearoa have worked under the rubric of the first national early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996). *Te Whāriki* has been recognised for its sociocultural emphasis (Nuttall, 2003), which was markedly different from the prevailing Western early childhood discourse dominated by psychometric normative developmentalist thinking (Cannella, 1997). The writing of *Te Whāriki* involved a partnership between Helen May and Margaret Carr of the University of Waikato, and Tamati and Tilly Reedy, nominated by the National Te Kōhanga Reo Trust. This meant that Māori perspectives were integral in the development of the framework and content of the document.

Early childhood education academics Carr and May were influenced in their framing of *Te Whāriki* by a wide range of theorists, including Bruner and Vygotsky (Te One, 2003). They were aware of growing concern raised by indigenous and other scholars regarding the social, cultural and political implications of pedagogical approaches (see, for example, Bartolome, 1994; Darder, 1991). The uniqueness of *Te Whāriki* can be seen both in its philosophical nature, as well as in the grounding of its conceptual framework in the worldview of the indigenous Māori (Reedy, 2003).

The sociocultural stance of the document is boldly proclaimed in the following statement:

> This curriculum emphasises the critical role of socially and culturally mediated learning and of reciprocal and responsive relationships for children with people, places, and things. Children learn through collaboration with adults and peers, through guided participation and observation of others, as well as through individual exploration and reflection. (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 9)

The philosophical rather than technicist nature of the document can be seen in the explanation of the principle of kotahitanga (holistic development), whereby learning and development are to be facilitated through the provision of: opportunities for open-ended exploration and play; consistent, warm relationships that connect everything together; recognition of the spiritual dimension of children's lives in culturally, socially and individually appropriate ways; and recognition of "the significance and contribution of previous generations to the child's concept of self" (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 41). *Te Whāriki* is grounded in an "understanding of the links between culture, language, and learning" and is committed to "addressing the issues faced by children growing up in a society with more than one cultural heritage" (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 17). *Te Whāriki* can be seen to have a transformative agenda through its principle of whakamana—empowerment—which recognises the rights and dignity of children as individuals, and also emphasises that:

> Particular care should be given to bicultural issues in relation to empowerment. Adults working with children should understand and be willing to discuss bicultural issues, actively seek Māori contributions to decision making, and ensure that Māori children develop a strong sense of self-worth. (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 40)

Further social justice articulations are evident in the *Te Whāriki* strand of Contribution, which highlights that

learning opportunities be equitable, and that of Belonging, in which children are to have "opportunities to discuss and negotiate rights, fairness, and justice" (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 59). In these ways, the sociocultural nature of *Te Whāriki* implicitly recognises the political nature of societies and cultures and their inherent power dynamics, suggesting that children be empowered as agents of transformation in the service of social and cultural justice.

Te Whāriki, with its innovative sociocultural approach, obliged educators to operate from a positioning that differed from the prevailing "cultural deficit" educational theories and practice, which had reinforced educational failure for Māori by assigning blame rather than locating responsibility in the education system (Smith, 1999). Early childhood educators were generally very willing to respond to the many challenges posed by the new curriculum, yet less sure as to how they might do this (Cullen, 2003; Ritchie, 2002). Recent educational policy, as expressed in the Māori education strategy document, *Ka Hikitia—Managing for Success: The Māori Education Strategy 2008–2012* (Ministry of Education, 2009), now explicitly requires this shift in discourse away from deficit theorising, to one valuing Māori children's identities *as Māori*, and seeing this cultural validation as the foundation for and key to their educational achievement.

Fourteen years beyond the publication of *Te Whāriki*, it is perhaps timely to reflect on ways in which sociocultural theory can be understood and applied (Edwards, 2003) in the context of early childhood education settings in Aotearoa, and how this can be done in ways that are transformative in accordance with the social justice objectives implied by *Te Whāriki*.

Theoretical considerations

The pedagogical approach outlined by *Te Whāriki* is subtle in its repositioning of the teacher as a facilitator of learning within the sociocultural context. Its philosophy of teaching recognises both the socially constructed nature of knowledge and the co-constructive process of ako (teaching/learning). Young children are viewed as potentially competently proactive in applying learning dispositions of inquiry and collaboration with the support of the people and cultural tools that are available to them (Cullen et al., 2009). Instead of seeing their role as one of transmitting to children

a predetermined package of knowledge and skills, educators apply the *Te Whāriki* principles (of *whakamana* [empowerment], *kotahitanga* [holistic development], *whānau tangata* [family and community] and *ngā hononga* [relationships]), which serve as a philosophical framework from which to "weave" a centre curriculum. This approach is grounded in the recognition of the centrality of relationships and culture as the primary milieu for children's interests and dispositions for learning, requiring educators to enact a disposition of respect for children and their families. In intercultural settings, co-constructed learning should value the meanings and practices of all cultures present (Cullen et al., 2009, p. 45), including those of the Tiriti o Waitangi partners, Māori and Pākehā.

There appears to have been little research into educators' understandings of the implications of a sociocultural curriculum for their practice. Suzy Edwards, writing of her research in an Australian context, considers that the "extent to which such ideas have been adopted and understood by early childhood educators at the level of practice remains unclear" (2006, p. 238). Edwards found that the teachers who participated in her study initially understood "sociocultural theory" to relate to conceptions of multiculturalism, and that they demonstrated confusion as to "what the term 'cultural' actually represented" (Edwards, 2006, p. 248). It is easy to focus on "other" ethnicities as having a "culture" while in the mainstream Western paradigm, cultural processes are not recognised as reflecting their (Western) "culture" because they are seen as merely "normal".

Barbara Jordan considers that a central process of sociocultural pedagogy is the interactive teacher–child dialogue that supports the development of children's dispositions for learning (Jordan, 2009). This requires a depth of intersubjectivity that can only be achieved through a meaningful engagement with the home cultures, language, values and beliefs of each child and their family at the interpersonal level of relationships. In this way, educators are able to identify, respond to and affirm the funds of knowledge of children's home cultures, enabling these to be applied as cultural resources within both their interpersonal and institutional (programmatic) teaching (González & Moll, 2002). Meanwhile, early childhood educators are simultaneously required to affirm and include the Māori language

and culture throughout the programme, its resources, routines and rituals within the wider institutional plane of analysis (Fleer, 2002). In the context of Aotearoa New Zealand, research regarding day-to-day implementation of the aspirations of *Te Whāriki* in terms of Te Tiriti o Waitangi commitments has indicated that this tiriti-based practice requires a great deal of commitment and awareness on the part of educators (Ritchie, 2001, 2002, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c, 2005b, 2008; Ritchie & Rau, 2006, 2008, 2010).

Education is sited within the wider sociopolitical context, which continues to problematise and stigmatise Māori individually and collectively, based in an ignorance of the ongoing intergenerational impacts of colonisation. Assumptions of cultural "normality" and the consequent "othering" and problematising of those whose home cultures are not Western are unlikely to be addressed unless we are provided with opportunities and expectations for understanding the wider social, historical and political contexts for our work (González, 2004). What is required on the part of educators is a disposition of receptivity towards culture(s). Culture(s) can thus be viewed as a source of ongoing enquiry, and teachers can apply their understandings from children's home communities' funds of knowledge "in proactive and life-affirming ways, not just as a source of differences that are compared to mainstream practices" (González, 2005, p. 44).

Pedagogical pathways "should always be chosen and examined with judicious care" (Edwards, 2003, p. 263). The inclusion of specific reflective questions for each *Te Whāriki* goal demands this active, ongoing process of critique (Ritchie, 2005a). The sociocultural theorising of Barbara Rogoff suggests that we need to reflect deeply about the nature of the various learning interactions occurring on "three planes of analysis", which involve "personal, interpersonal, and community processes" (1995, p. 139).

In the next section, I use some examples from our recent research[1] (Ritchie & Rau, 2006, 2008) to explore the possibilities for applying the sociocultural dimensions of *Te Whāriki*. First, I provide some examples from the Whakawhanaungatanga study (Ritchie & Rau, 2006) where educators reflect on their commitment to awareness of the centrality of culture and to affirmation of children as

> ... their sociocultural understandings had been enhanced through their teacher-education programmes, and that through this initial commitment to delivering culturally responsive practice they later sought ongoing professional learning ...

cultural beings. Second, I use examples from the Puāwaitanga study (Ritchie & Rau, 2008) to demonstrate teachers' views of themselves as cultural advocates, proactively assuming responsibility for generating culturally inclusive programmes.

Commitment to cultural affirmation of each child as a cultural being

Operating at the community "plane of analysis" (Rogoff, 1995, p. 139), teacher education and professional development providers have a key responsibility to instil within their graduates and participants a strong ability to deliver the sociocultural early childhood curriculum *Te Whāriki*. Co-researchers in the Whakawhanaungatanga study explored the extent to which this has occurred. In the following example, Karina, a senior Māori early childhood educator, shared some reflections:

> We have *Te Whāriki*—it's a curriculum steeped in sociocultural theory. The teachers in my experience when it came in—you know, when people were toying with the draft, and as *Te Whāriki* was coming in and being implemented—my [colleagues] and I reflected on this a lot and have given a lot of thought to it, and the thing that at the time seemed to be missing to me, was the grounding, the teaching, the new understanding, the knowledge for teachers about the theory base, the ideology in sociocultural theory. And people didn't, in my opinion and my experience, learn about that well. So what I think happened in a lot of instances was people were applying their prior knowledge, which wasn't sociocultural theory, to a curriculum, so what happened was more of the same. (Karina, Whakawhanaungatanga)

Other educators in our studies reported that their sociocultural understandings had been enhanced through their teacher-education programmes, and that through this initial commitment to delivering culturally responsive practice they later sought ongoing professional learning opportunities. Daisy, a Pākehā kindergarten teacher, described how she began her ongoing engagement with culture(s), through a teacher-education programme that enhanced her bicultural awareness:

> I knew very little so I had to go out and seek it. It probably really started when I went to university and within the training that I did we had some bicultural components and I just found it really amazing and realised the importance—not just for Māori people, but for everybody of Aotearoa New Zealand—to know about Māori culture, to value it, to respect it, to live it. But, essentially for Māori people, I felt as teachers we needed to make that commitment and I had to make a commitment to it and to provide that for the tamariki so that they felt a sense of well-being and belonging and their whānau when they did come into the centre that I'd be working at. So it's been really, really important to me. (Daisy, Whakawhanaungatanga)

Participants in our studies stressed the importance of institutional-level expectations and support, such as centre management arranging professional learning opportunities or supporting educators to attend other offerings. Anne, an experienced Pākehā head teacher, valued the many professional learning avenues that had been available to her and colleagues through Ministry of Education, Kindergarten Association and New Zealand Educational Institute (NZEI) provision:

> Two workshops I attended brought me back to the realisation that kōwhaiwhai patterns, Māori legends etc., while being important, are not as important as relationships. From the moment any family comes through the gate, the relationship is starting to be built. This is why I am not in agreement with nonteaching staff making the first contact and making these first contacts in the office. It is not very welcoming to have a form thrust into your hand and being told to fill it in. It can be very intimidating. So now I spend time beginning to build that relationship, talking with the family in a quiet, friendly, natural way, listening, making connections, and not doing too much talking myself. I've become more relaxed and have less guilt about my lack of knowledge. I need to be secure in my own culture and values while appreciating and valuing those of others. (Anne, Whakawhanaungatanga)

Anne also recognised her own cultural self-knowledge—that is, the personal (both intrapersonal and interpersonal) planes of analysis—as being a crucial factor in the co-construction equation.

Another Pākehā educator, who worked in an early childhood education and care centre, viewed respect for culture(s) as a key component of her understandings and practice:

> It's quite a hard one, it's working towards understanding people for who they and with their cultures, there are two cultures—well there's more than two cultures now in New Zealand—just that understanding that these are people and they have beliefs and patterns and rituals and ways of doing things and to try to understand. You can never fully, because I'm not Māori, but to understand and be aware and—what's the word?—to try and work within it too, be respectful, I guess is that word. (Ariel, Whakawhanaungatanga)

Anahera, another senior Māori educator, related the experience of a Pākehā early childhood teacher whose cultural sensitivity was such that she recognised the importance of supporting shy Māori families in their first encounters with primary school as they began to transition their children out of the early childhood setting:

> The other day I heard that an early childhood education service, a teacher, had taken a group of whakamā [shy] whānau to school for the first time and introduced them to the teacher and the principal and sat there with the whānau and it was out of work time. Had sat there at half past four, five o'clock, had introduced them to the principal, set it all up for the whānau, had said to the principal, 'This is a very shy whānau, and I need to come with them. Will you awhi them?' And that was huge to me. That almost means the work has been done, because if early childhood teachers can get that commitment to our whānau, and we know how huge that is! (Anahera, Whakawhanaungatanga)

This proactive approach is in line with the expectations of *Ka Hikitia—Managing for Success: The Māori Education Strategy 2008–2012* (Ministry of Education, 2009), which emphasises the importance of fostering smooth transitions for tamariki between early childhood education and schools. These examples are indicative of ways in which co-researchers in the studies were able to analyse their practice, demonstrating their sociocultural awareness in the co-constructed research conversations that served as a key source of data.

Cultural advocacy—creating a centre culture of cultural respect and inclusion

In the Puāwaitanga study a key research focus was on exploring ways in which educators who were committed to a tiriti-based curriculum paradigm were enacting ways of being that were enabling of cross-cultural understandings and that embraced tamariki/children and whānau/families of ethnicities that were different from their own (Ritchie & Rau, 2008). Marion, a kindergarten head teacher, reflected on her commitment to cultural inclusion after interviewing a Pākehā mother for the study:

> An interesting comment that one of our Pākehā mothers through the interview was saying how wonderful and warm and welcoming and inclusive the place was, and she said, 'Tell me, is that because you are trying really strongly to deliver a bicultural programme here in this kindergarten, or is that because it's *you* guys?' And we found it interesting to stop and think—'Okay, now is this about our personalities? Is this *who we are*?' and after lots of discussion I was excited and kind of encouraged to be able to say to the team, 'Yes, there's an openness there and that openness people recognise as an embracing and that actually we want to know who you are, we want to share who you are and this is *who we are*.' Yes, it's kind of a dovetailing of a person who's growing and is open and is understanding and is inclusive, but it's also that person has embraced an understanding and is trying to represent that in a way that is visible not only on the walls, but is visible in life. Actually it's not about who I am, it's because *I'm committed* to delivering that, and so I will behave like this to do that and I will reflect like this to do that … what the spin-off has been in our team is that when we're looking at self-review on any aspect of the programme or the routines or the happenings or what's happening in the kindergarten and all aspects of it, it is now a question that's always asked: 'How will this impact on Māori? How will this impact on how we will deliver this? What will we need to say about that?' (Marion, Puāwaitanga)

Marion, like Anne in the previous study, demonstrates a depth of intrapersonal and interpersonal analysis of her role as a teacher in delivering the tiriti-based, sociocultural expectations of *Te Whāriki*.

An example of analysis of interpersonal dynamics, and the hidden power effects that circulate within these, was provided by Ramila, another kindergarten head teacher. She had been fascinated to observe a mat time led by three children, who when later questioned related that they had modelled their facilitation on Ramila's Pākehā teaching colleagues. Reflecting upon this, Ramila considered that:

> I think the Pākehā teachers have an enormous level of power to instil cultural sensitivity and cultural comfort in children—to this end, are the Pākehā teachers underestimating their ability to extend the cultural comfort in children? If so, are the bicultural elements reflected in the curriculum taken into consideration in terms of doing so …? The discussion further confirmed that seeking the 'otherness' is important and that there are many advantages and great deal of work to be done in terms of peeling the layers of discomfort and awareness of cultures and differences and the seeking of relative ease—that is making our input salient in the environment. This is a fascinating aspect of the journey of discovery about culture and our contribution toward the implementation of the bicultural curriculum. (Ramila, Puāwaitanga)

As an educator who is neither Māori nor Pākehā, Ramila is situated in a position that enables her to reflect deeply on issues pertaining to cultural power effects, and how these are often part of the "hidden" curriculum. A sociocultural awareness enables us to sensitise ourselves to these more subtle yet very powerful undercurrents within our programmes.

Pat, a kindergarten head teacher, and her colleague Whaea Pera, enact a philosophy of whanaungatanga at their centre, carefully explaining this to the members of the diverse cultural groups who attend:

> We get together and do karakia and hīmene, but we're always singing simple things, the same things because the flow of families is in and out and because we are ngā hau e whā, we come from the four winds, we actually just tread quietly and gently and don't scare our Pākehā families. But as a Pākehā, I can be a good role model for our Pākehā families and show them:

'It's not scary, it can be done, it's fabulous' and I say to them, 'Whanaungatanga is something that is universal. You don't have to be Māori to practise whanaungatanga.' It's just a fabulous concept. We can all be there for each other. I have the words of the songs and I say to the new parents, 'Would you like the words for those songs?' 'Yes please.' I've had philosophical discussions with our Somali fathers who say Allah is God, and I say 'Well, we're actually not talking to God, we're actually just thinking about this wonderful world around us. You can make it whatever God you like because when we do our karakia, "E tō mātou matua, i te rangi, whakamoemiti ana mātou ki a koe, mō tēnei rā", is how we start the day.' I say 'We're just saying hello to a higher power, we don't know what's out there.' 'But Allah is God.' I said, 'Let's just think about, these are little children, all we're doing is greeting the day', and they backtrack and it's okay, but it's been an interesting thing to actually handle that. But when they see how gently, kindly and respectfully we treat their children, that's what they come to us for. And we have Somali families come to us from one side of town, coming right across town because of the respect we show children and that's more important than trying to discuss and argue and be religious about what we do. I say we're doing spiritual things to help ourselves feel good.

The validation of Māori culture, and the care and openness with which Pat is able to engage the members of the many ethnic groups at her centre, demonstrate the possibility that through affirmation of Māori values, such as spirituality, space is made for recognition and inclusion of all cultures present.

In gathering data for the research project, Carolyn, a kindergarten teacher, interviewed Nana Sue, a grandmother who has volunteered at the kindergarten for several years. Carolyn asked her to share her first impressions of the centre. Nana Sue, who is Pākehā, expressed her awareness of the sense of cultural presence in the centre:

> Nana Sue: There was a family feel. It was professional, but family in the sense the children were embraced with freedom, they were listened to. That in itself is a bicultural thing. It is a blending even though now there is a renaissance of Māori, people are 'proud to be me', proud

to be Māori—the sense that this is their identity. If I was Māori I would be proud to be Māori. And the sense that coming in here people were able to feel that. I got the sense that it was a bicultural environment, the whole feel in the place.

> Carolyn: You have stayed—why?

> Nana Sue: Because I love everybody. I love the kids and the teachers and the environment. We are teaching children about themselves, we are learning, and open to learning, we are keen to come on board. We have children that come from different cultures and we celebrate that, with them, we are part of that, even though we are not that, we still celebrate they are taonga, every one is a little treasure, you're a treasure …

Later, Carolyn identified some learnings from her team's participation in the research project. Considering the range of data she and her colleagues had gathered, which included interviews by teachers of children and family members, recorded dialogue of mat time conversations, photographs and reflective teacher narratives, the team reflected on ways in which their practice made Māori culture visible, and the importance of involving families within their programme:

> We questioned ourselves on the integration of Māori culture into the curriculum—where was it visible? We found it was visible in the children, their relationships and [the children] identifying 'what is "Māori"?' naturally, integrating te reo, their understanding of concepts and tikanga. We were aware of not only approaching a bicultural programme superficially. It was for us about the feeling of the place, a sense of the place, more abstract than tangible. As teachers we needed to reflect on how to identify the aspects that become important to us (like families [being] present during the kindergarten session, sharing with us their aspirations for their tamariki, and truly feeling that this is their place, a shared partnership).
> (Carolyn, Puāwaitanga)

Final thoughts

The educators in these studies showed their awareness of the sociocultural nature of *Te Whāriki*. But more than this, they were

enacting "ways of being" that were sociocultural, in that they were reflecting deeply about the impact of their personal, interpersonal and pedagogical practice with regard to culture(s). Through their dispositions of commitment, passion, reflection, critique, willingness, openness and sensitivity, these teachers were implementing programmes that were steeped in cultural inclusiveness. This inclusiveness extended beyond token attempts to include Māori language to a much wider ahua, or way of being. This way of being genuinely enacted the *Te Whāriki* principles of *whakamana*—empowerment; *kotahitanga*—holism; *whānau tangata*—families and communities; and *ngā hononga*—relationships. Educators were very mindful of the power of their role as teachers in defining and determining the cultural nature of their centre programmes, and of how these dynamics operated at personal/interpersonal and institutional/community planes of analysis. Their engagement with notions of culture, and their receptiveness to the cultures of those present, was stimulated by their deep commitment to tiriti-based practice as required by *Te Whāriki*. Their intitial willingness to incorporate Māori ways of being, knowing and doing seemingly enabled this openness to extend to embrace the culture(s) of all those families attending their centres.

Note

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