

# Learning from the wisdom of elders

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### Abstract

This chapter offers a series of provocations coming from a critical, place-based orientation, regarding the ways in which early childhood educators, might develop relationships with local Indigenous peoples, in order to strengthen the Indigenous understandings that they incorporate within their programs. Dialogical interaction with both Indigenous peoples and the local place itself, is seen as a source for interpreting ways of caring deeply for our planet, positioning we humans alongside local ecologies as ‘co-habitors’ of the earth. The chapter then provides examples from recent research to illustrate some of the ways these notions have been applied within early childhood care and education programs in Aotearoa New Zealand.

### Introduction

Attitudes and behaviours attached to the exploitation of the environment are associated with pervasive globalized discourses of Western colonialism, capitalism and profit-orientated consumption, all of which contribute to a distancing from engagement with particular places and their local ecologies. As the climate crisis deepens into an imminent emergency, educators can play a pivotal role in generating pedagogies of place (Penetito 2009: 196–197) that reflect a sense of localized place consciousness (Gruenewald 2003). Indigenous peoples of each locality have, over many years of living closely with the land and as cohabitants of that place, garnered specific, intimate understandings of their local ecologies, and the ways in which humans can respectfully and sustainably coexist within these places and ecologies (Rose 2002, 2005). Through working to build relationships with Indigenous colleagues and elders, non-Indigenous educators may gain considerable understanding and insight into practices that sustain local ecologies. This chapter draws on recent research in Aotearoa New Zealand (Ritchie *et al.* 2010) to illustrate ways in which educators have been learning from Indigenous sources and are applying this knowledge within their early childhood programs.

## Provocations

This chapter raises provocations for consideration by early childhood care and education practitioners and scholars. Prioritizing ‘care’ in our work acknowledges children’s emotional, spiritual and physical wellbeing as pre-conditions for learning. First, how might we transcend the distancing from experiences of the daily imperatives of natural cycles and ecologies that are generated through our technologized, industrialized, and predominantly urban life-styles? Secondly, how can we foster pedagogies which are specific and responsive to the particular localized ecologies in which we are situated? Third, how might we strengthen our relationships with local Indigenous children, families and elders, to the point that they become willing to share their histories, stories, and ecological/sustainability knowledge of that particular place? Lastly, how might we consider the potential of early childhood care and education programs informed by local Indigenous knowledges, to provide opportunities for restorative reconnection with the land, insects, birds, and other creatures, ‘nature’s’ cycles and seasons, fostering a sense of commitment to sustainable ways of knowing, being and doing?

### *From distance to interconnectedness*

Concern has been expressed regarding the increasing distance between children and natural, wild spaces, such as forest, bush, wetland, grasslands, streams, rivers and seashores (Davis 2010, Elliott 2010, Louv 2010). For Val Plumwood, the Western project of colonization has utilized hyper-separation as a justification for the exploitation of the ‘Other’, resulting in ‘othering’ of both Indigenous peoples and the environment. The hierarchical mode of understanding the world that positions (white, male) humans at the top of the evolutionary ‘tree’, has not only resulted in the colonization and disempowerment of both Indigenous people and the environment, but has led to a commensurate lessening of empathy and care for them (Plumwood 1999a, 1999b). This anthropocentric frame ‘distort[s] our sensitivity to and knowledge of nature, blocking humility, wonder and openness in approaching the more-than-human, and producing narrow types of understanding and classifications that reduce nature to raw materials for human projects’ (Plumwood 1999a: 196–197). The term ‘more-than-human’ is used to deliberately de-centre our anthropocentric worldview and reminds us of our sensory, storied entanglement within the inter-relational agency of other animals, plants, insects and the rest of the nonhuman world around us (Abram 1996).

While the majority of urban settlers may have become distanced from a sense of ‘kinship with nature’ (Rose 2005: 303), many rural settlers, such as farmers, have developed over generations, a deep connectivity with their lands expressing their own ‘language of kinship’ (Rose 2002: 313). Deborah Bird Rose describes this as ‘a language of emplacement: of keeping your body in the place, and putting your labour into the place, of learning to know the place, and of being available to the place’ (Rose 2002: 313). She suggests that over time lived closely on the land, settlers can begin to

acknowledge our connections with indigenous people: the same soil gets into our blood, the same waters quench our thirst, the sweat of us all resides in the ground. We and other living things are co-participants in earthly reciprocities of being, becoming, and dying.

(Rose 2002: 322)

Rose proposes a restorative process of ‘dialogical interpenetration’ (Rose 2002: 322), a restorative, decolonizing conversation between people and their places. Instead of perpetuating a stance of historical amnesia and denial regarding the impact of our Western civilizations on both Indigenous peoples and the environment, we need to engage in a transformative shift to a positioning that acknowledges our intimate, physical, emotional and spiritual relationship within both our immediate and wider spheres. This alternative view requires sensitivity toward our ecosystems which allows us to be invited by ‘nature’ into reciprocal interaction within our ecological systems, as is practised by Indigenous peoples. Intrinsic to this process is feeling and demonstrating respect for the more-than-human realm (Abram 1996, Plumwood 1999a), which requires us to both acknowledge, confront and transform our anthropocentrism (Russell 2008, as cited in Kahn and Humes 2009: 186).

## Critical pedagogies of place

Critical pedagogies of place acknowledge histories of Indigenous and environmental colonization (Greenwood 2008, Greenwood *et al.* 2009, Gruenewald 2003). David Gruenewald has highlighted for us the challenge of adopting pedagogical approaches that enable scholars/educators/students/children to unlearn much of what we have learnt from dominant culture and schooling practices, in order that we become receptive towards, and committed to, alternative, ‘socially just and ecologically sustainable ways of being in the world’ (Gruenewald 2003: 9). This involves a process of decolonizing our thinking and behaviours, while ‘recovering and renewing traditional, non-commodified cultural patterns’ (p. 9).

Critical pedagogies of place are historically, culturally, and ecologically specific, recognizing the ‘uniqueness of cultural and geographical experience, [and] the varied interactions between mindscape, cultural group, and landscape’ (Greenwood 2008: 339). These understandings regarding ‘the particularities of places’ need to be accessed via the knowledges and ethics of ‘the people who know them best’, that is, local Indigenous peoples (Greenwood 2008: 339). Such an approach is intersectional, inviting educators with a sociocultural background to widen their considerations to include responsiveness to the environment, while similarly encouraging those with an environmental education focus to reflect more on issues of colonization and Indigeneity. Greenwood/Gruenewald highlight the importance of critical place-based pedagogies in providing a countering approach to the current narrowing of curriculum through the imposition of neo-liberal education policy priorities (Greenwood 2008, Gruenewald 2003).

According to Māori education scholar Wally Penetito (2009), place-based education is inherent within both historical and contemporary models of Māori education. Penetito views place-based education as a corrective to the distancing syndrome critiqued above. Penetito points out that for Indigenous peoples, a sense of place is a fundamental human need, and that Indigenous peoples see themselves as ‘co-habitators’ with and within their environments. For Māori, pedagogies need to be underpinned with a consciousness of spiritual interconnectedness, or *wairua* (Penetito 2009: 20).

### **Indigenous wisdoms**

Indigenous people have traditionally been responsive, resilient, and intra-active within their environments, and are well-positioned to continue their role as guardians (in Māori, *kaitiaki*) of their locales (Kanawa 2010). Māori scholar Mason Durie explains an Indigenous view of the relationality and unity of humans and their environment:

Relationships between people and the natural environment, between tangible and intangible dimensions, between organic and inorganic material, and between past and future constitute the foundations upon which indigenous populations understand the world. An energy flow that spirals outwards connects the multiple threads so that even very small objects become part of a wider context that gives them shape and meaning.

(Durie 2010: 239)

This close relationship with the land is expressed through traditional practices involving stories and songs, food-gathering and healing. Language and knowledge systems reflect a deep respect for and intimate connection with the land, rivers, mountains, seas, wetlands and forests. Everything has its own *mauri* or life force – this includes both living and inanimate objects such as mountains and rocks, and spiritual rituals are important to protect and maintain the spiritual balance, recognizing the existence of *wairuatanga* (spiritual interconnectedness). People are obligated to care for others (*manaakitanga*) and to be guardians of their environment (*kaitiakitanga*). The *whakatauki* (a Māori proverb) ‘*Kakari kaihiku, kia haere kai upoko*’ can be translated as ‘Unity comes with a fair sharing of resources’ (Halba *et al.* 2011: 69).

There is an expectation of reciprocity in the existence of a ‘mutual entanglement of benefits’ (Rose 2005: 299). An example provided by Rose is that of Australian Indigenous people leaving behind some precious fruit on trees for other creatures to eat. Rose was told by one of her Indigenous teachers: ‘It’s not waste ... this food is for everyone’ (p. 297). Another of Rose’s teachers, April Bright, explained the importance of ‘listening to country’ in order to be guided in the practice of ‘firestick burning’:

The country tells you when and where to burn. To carry out this task you must know your country. You wouldn't, you just would not attempt to burn someone else's country. One of the reasons for burning is saving country. If we don't burn our country every year, we are not looking after our country.

(Rose 2002: 78–82)

Such an Indigenous worldview is not hierarchical with people positioned as the dominant, authoritarian species. Instead, it is one of entangled, interdependent relationships, whereby Indigenous practices are aimed towards 'sustaining life through the twin processes of life for itself and life for others' (Rose 2005: 297) in an ongoing recursive cycle of regenerating the environment. This is underpinned by recognition that 'Care of country means caring for others as well as self' (Rose 2005: 300) and requires a deep, responsive hearing, reading, recognition, and participation within the cyclical patterns and codes of intra-action of local ecosystems.

Twenty years ago Paula Gunn Allen of the Laguna Pueblo and Sioux North American Indigenous peoples, wrote that:

If American society judiciously modelled the traditions of the various Native Nations, the place of women in society would be central, the distribution of goods and power would be egalitarian, the elderly would be respected, honoured and protected as a primary social and cultural resource, the ideals of physical beauty would be considerably enlarged ... the destruction of the biota, the life sphere, and the natural resources of the planet would be curtailed, and the spiritual nature of human and nonhuman life would become a primary organizing force of human society.

(Allen 1992: 211, as cited in Cannella and Manuelito, 2008: 52)

In order to confront and remedy the challenges facing our planet from anthropogenic climate change, the repositioning of Western notions of relationality as being in relation with the Earth can be modelled on the wisdom of Indigenous peoples garnered over many centuries (Kincheloe and Steinberg 2008). It is vital, however, that such change be led by Indigenous people, and conducted within their traditional spiritual practices, supported by non-Indigenous allies, rather than appropriated by well-meaning Westerners (Korteweg and Russell 2013).

In the following section, examples are provided from three recent research projects conducted with early childhood care and education communities located in Aotearoa New Zealand. All participating teachers had a strong commitment to cultural sustainability, in relation to the local Indigenous (Māori) cultures. In the following examples, from 'mainstream' early childhood care and education settings, teachers were conscious of working with local Indigenous people and knowledges, proactively using these to inform the sustainability practices of these centres' curriculum.

## Examples from recent research

In all three of our studies, we utilized emergent, narrative, responsive qualitative methodologies, informed by kaupapa Māori values, and with an overt commitment to counter-colonial consciousness (Bishop 2005, Denzin Lincoln and Smith 2008, Otterstad 2007, Ritchie and Rau 2012, Smith 1999/2006). Prior to and during our three recent two-year studies (Ritchie *et al.*, 2010, Ritchie and Rau 2006, Ritchie and Rau 2008) funded by the New Zealand Teaching and Learning Research Initiative, my colleague Cheryl Rau and I had, and have, sustained longstanding relationships with Māori elders, in particular, with our *kuia* (female elder), Rahera Barrett-Douglas, and our kaumatua (male elder) Huata Holmes. Their wisdom and support was a source of strength and guidance for our work, and for that of our co-researcher teachers. The research in all three projects was grounded in the New Zealand early childhood curriculum: *Tē Whāriki. He whāriki mātauranga mō ngā mokopuna o Aotearoa: Early childhood curriculum* (New Zealand Ministry of Education 1996). This curriculum recognizes as foundational *Tē Tiriti o Waitangi*, the 1840 treaty in which Māori chiefs allowed British settlement in exchange for protection of their self-determination, lands, villages and resources. *Tē Whāriki* has been acclaimed internationally, commended for being progressive, non-prescriptive, inclusive (both of infants and toddlers and of (bi)cultural specificities), and for its focus on learning processes (Hedges 2013).

Through our relationship with a Southern Māori elder, Huata Holmes, we learnt of the way his dialect honours the specificities of different birds and trees which, for example, have different names at different cycles of the seasons. During our most recent study (Ritchie *et al.* 2010), Huata was able to share with the children of Richard Hudson Kindergarten in Dunedin, in the South Island of New Zealand, some Southern Māori versions of traditional cosmologies, legends and songs. These had significant appeal to the children, enabling them to feel a deep sense of connection to, and compassion for, Papatūānuku (the Earth Mother) and Ranginui (Sky Father) (Ellwood 2010, Ritchie 2011). Three examples from this study are now provided to illustrate ways in which teachers in ‘mainstream’ early childhood settings worked to open up spaces for Indigenous understandings within their early childhood programs.

### **Example 1: teachers’ proactivity in initiating relationships with local Indigenous people**

*Tē Whāriki*, the New Zealand early childhood curriculum, states under Strand Two, ‘Belonging’ that ‘Liaison with local tangata whenua [people of that land] and a respect for papatūānuku [Earth Mother] should be promoted’ (1996: 54). The teachers in our studies realized that it was their responsibility to initiate relationships with local *iwi* (tribes). The teachers at Meadowbank Kindergarten, located within the large urban metropolis of Auckland, in the North Island, for example, arranged participation – along with kindergarten children and families – in a tree-planting ritual honouring the Atua (spiritual guardian) Tāne Māhuta at the local

Orākei *marae* (Māori village meeting place). This was so successful that they intend making this an annual commitment (Ritchie *et al.* 2010).

### **Example 2: teachers seeking in-depth, local Indigenous knowledges**

The teachers involved in our study were sensitive to the need to consult with local *iwi* (tribes) in order to gain in-depth understandings, rather than to superficially appropriate Māori constructs. The Head Teacher of Galbraith Kindergarten in the small rural, predominantly Māori town of Ngāruawahia, a small township in the North Island, described their consultative approach:

Papatūānuku is another real strength [in our] philosophy. That at the moment is in draft and we're discussing it because what does the wider concept of Papatūānuku [mean]? We could say 'Mother Earth' but there's a wider concept to it and we need to work with all *whānau* [families] and with our local *iwi* about what does that mean to them?

(as cited in Ritchie *et al.* 2010: 19)

Teachers not only consulted Māori elders and Māori family members of children attending their centres; they also conducted their own research and wider reading by accessing material from public libraries and websites in order to become more familiar with Māori philosophies and practices. Teachers also checked the relevance of material that they had read with local Māori advisors, since they recognized the importance of regional specificities and tribal differences. As Māori scholar Hirini Mead states, 'There is always a need to refer to the *tikanga* [beliefs and practices] of the local people' (2003: 8).

### **Example 3: teachers applying Indigenous philosophies**

The teachers demonstrated the depth of their understanding of Māori philosophies by applying these approaches within their educational practice and to their work in the research project, as illustrated by this example from a teacher at Papamoa Kindergarten, near the city of Tauranga in New Zealand's North Island:

The research is about Māori ecological principles, how they're informing and enhancing a *kaupapa* [philosophy] of ecological sustainability ... The Māori worldview is holistic and cyclic, one in which every person is linked to every living thing and to the *Atua*, which is the Gods. Māori customary concepts are interconnected through our *whakapapa*, which is your genealogy that links to *te taha wairua*, which is your spiritual element, and *te taha kikokiko*, which is your intellect or your body and your whole spirit.

(as cited in Ritchie *et al.* 2010: 13)

Teachers also applied Māori philosophies and practices within the everyday routines and rituals of the early childhood care and education centre, as described in this example from Hawera Kindergarten, in a small rural North Island town:

Our little pot plants had finished flowering so we recycled them by transplanting succulents in the pots. First we had *karakia* [spiritual incantation] to acknowledge Tāne Mahuta, then broke off pieces of the succulent plants, sat them in the pots and watered them. The children carried river stones from the gravel pit and poured them into the planter boxes. We talked about gardening, looking after the plants, where the stones came from and experienced the *mauri* [life force] in the plants and stones. It was a good team effort. When we had finished, the children admired their work. When one works with Papatūānuku, one can find it relaxing and peaceful. It teaches patience and nurtures the soul.

(as cited in Ritchie *et al.* 2010: 33)

These examples provide a glimpse of ways in which teachers have consciously and respectfully incorporated Indigenous ways of being, knowing and doing within their daily programs.

### **Final thoughts on possibilities for critical, place-based, Indigenous-informed pedagogies**

In addition to accessing the wisdom of Indigenous peoples, we are also fortunate to have many wise elders with backgrounds in Western science, who continue to share their wisdom with us. The world renowned Canadian environmental scientist David Suzuki wrote recently, that

As an elder, I am impelled by a sense of urgency that comes from the recognition that my generation has induced change and created problems that we bequeath to my children and grandchildren and all generations to come. That is not right, but I believe that it is not too late to take another path.

(Suzuki 2011: 3)

Suzuki quotes anthropologist Bernard Campbell, who recognizes – as do many Indigenous peoples – that both human and planetary survival clearly depends on the recognition of human interdependence within the web of our living planet:

There is no escape from our interdependence of with nature; we are woven into the closest relationship with the Earth, the sea, the air, the seasons, the animals and all the fruits of the Earth. What affects one affects us all – we are part of a greater whole – the body of the planet. We must respect, preserve and love its manifold expression if we hope to survive.

(Campbell, as cited in Suzuki 2011: 32–33)



Suzuki points out that recent science is now confirming the ‘ancient understanding’ that anthropogenic effects on the planet directly rebound to impact on us (p. 71). Professor Tim Flannery (2010), the Australian scientist, conservationist and climate change expert who was Chief Commissioner of the Australian Climate Commission, explains that, with advancing technology, humans have moved out of our historic co-evolutionary relationship within the natural world. He emphasizes that a return to a condition of cultural and biological ‘co-evolution’ ‘is critical to our hopes for sustainability’ (p. 68). Like Suzuki, Flannery sees the value in ancient practices of Indigenous peoples that have enabled, after admittedly some periods of trial and error, protection of natural ecosystems throughout the ages. He sees such knowledges as useful in that they demonstrate how people have learnt interactively, over time, to live sustainably, founded in a deep respect for other human beings and for nature. He points out that a lack of economic egalitarianism means that people in impoverished, marginalized situations are being forced into destroying wilderness, thus contributing further to the loss of biodiversity. Flannery advocates a conscious, deliberate process of ‘re-wilding’ of our planet, enabling its biodiversity to be re-established and to flourish, in recognition that ‘our fate and that of the Earth are inextricably interwoven’ (Flannery 2010: 276).

It is intended that the arguments and examples in this chapter demonstrate ways in which early childhood care and education programs, through a critical, place-based pedagogy informed by local Indigenous knowledges, can enable children and their families to access a philosophy and practice of caring for one another and our planet. Rather than directly being taught ‘about’ sustainability, which has the potential to alarm young children about the urgency and severity of climate disruption (Sobel 2007), children are supported to be receptive to understandings and daily practices which position them as *‘kaitiaki’*, as guardians, caregivers of the natural world. In this way, early childhood care and education services can become ‘communities of care’ (Sobel 2008: 18), that is, sites of respectful shared optimism and endeavour.

The central challenge for educators in this era of frightening climate disruption and depletion of wilderness and biodiversity is to recognize the need to address these challenging issues while, at the same time, recognizing that we are part of the Western technicist worldview that contributes to these issues. We all, then, need to take on the hard work of ‘un-learning’ our comfortable ways of practising education, through critical reflexivity that enables openness to alternative, Indigenous framings of ways of being, knowing and doing. An essential aspect of this change is re-learning our ‘place’ and helping young children make new meanings. Building relationships with local Indigenous advisors and drawing on materials and knowledges, particularly those pertaining to local Indigenous histories and traditions, are essential for such a process.

## Glossary

*Atua* – spiritual guardian/compartmental God  
*iwi* – tribe(s)  
*kaitiaki* – guardian  
*kaitiakitanga* – guardianship/stewardship of their environment  
*kaumatua* – elder, male elder  
*kaupapa* – philosophy  
*kuia* – female elder  
*manaakitanga* – a person who cares, generosity  
*marae* – village meeting place  
*mauri* – life force  
*Papatūānuku* – Earth Mother  
*Ranginui* – Sky Father  
*Tāne Māhuta* – *Atua* of the forests, birds and insects  
*te taha kikokiko* – physical aspects  
*te taha wairua* – spiritual dimension  
*tikanga* – beliefs and practices that are correct for Māori  
*wairuatanga* – spiritual interconnectedness  
*whakapapa* – genealogy  
*whakatauki* – proverb  
*whānau* – families, extended families

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