Researching Tiriti based practice
A teacher’s journey

By Ramila Sadikeen and Jenny Ritchie

Since 1996, early childhood educators in Aotearoa have been working with the strongly bicultural curriculum Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 1996). This document is founded in Te Tiriti o Waitangi's validation of Māori people, their language and culture. Whilst it is recognised that this is challenging for early childhood teachers who lack facility in the Māori language and culture, many teachers have worked hard to transform their practice to reflect Te Tiriti-based obligations. This paper reports on a study by one such kindergarten head teacher, Ramila Sadikeen, who focussed on exploring Te Whāriki principles of Ngā Hononga and Whānau Tangata.

Introduction

Over the past eight years, Te Kura Mokopuna o Brooklands (Brooklands Kindergarten) in New Plymouth has been on a journey of discovering what is involved in transforming a state-funded kindergarten to embrace a foundation of kaupapa Māori (Māori educational philosophy). Through Ramila’s leadership, and support of colleagues, kaumatua, and whānau, this commitment to a kaupapa Māori philosophy has been nurtured, guiding daily enactment within centre operations and consolidating a strengthening of relationships with whānau Māori.

For Ramila, who has Sri Lankan Malay ancestry and over 25 years of kindergarten teaching experience, a disposition of enquiry and a strong commitment to social justice underpin her approach. Teasing the conscience of her pedagogical perspective as a practitioner have been questions such as:

• How can we claim inclusion if we exclude the place of our whānau Māori?
• How might we embrace all other cultures that are a part of the diverse composition that makes up our communities?

Adopting a critical lens through which to view her kindergarten's practice, Ramila has been able to identify significant signposts and milestones along what she describes as 'our journey'. During this journey she has examined aspects of culture, inclusion and equity. Following the work of Jenny Ritchie (2002) and Cheryl Rau and Jenny Ritchie (2006), Ramila began to lead her centre to embrace a 'whanauntinga approach', adopting particular Māori concepts such as awhinatanga and aroha (reciprocal obligation to care) to guide their practice in daily interactions with whānau as a way of addressing the inequities of cultural in/exclusion.

Building and sustaining relationships within the centre community has been an ongoing commitment. It has required leadership qualities that could withstand the test of time. It has tested the unwavering vision to see a philosophy consolidate while managing aspects of an ethical, moral conscience that has tapped on the discomforting, sensitive and challenging nature of cultural issues and their underlying power effects. Yet for Ramila and her colleagues, the rewards of embracing a philosophy based on whanauntinganga can be seen in meaningful relationships based on mutual respect and reciprocity.

Relationships with kaumatua have been significant in enabling the teachers at Te Kura Mokopuna o Brooklands, who are all of Pākehā/Tauiwi ancestry, to increase their sense of ease when enacting Te Ao Māori constructs, and have been instrumental in consolidating whanauntinganga. Te Whāriki considers that:

There should be a commitment to, and opportunities for, a Māori contribution to the programme. Adults working in the early childhood education setting should recognise the significance of whakapapa, understand and respect the process of working as a whānau, and demonstrate respect for Māori elders. (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 64)

The regular involvement of, and guidance from the centre kaumatua, has served as a bridge to enact Te Tiriti-based commitments, alongside the the expectations contained within Te Whāriki. This kaumatua presence has been pivotal in consolidating the ongoing relationships of Māori-Pākehā partnership within the centre. Brooklands' journey demonstrates how a commitment to Te Tiriti o Waitangi may be transmitted into practice that gives "all children an opportunity to develop knowledge and understanding of the cultural heritages of both partners to Tiriti o Waitangi" (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 9).

Integral also to the Brooklands' journey has been a commitment to ongoing research within the centre, which
Kaumātua Albie Martin welcoming tamariki and whānau. Powhiri and poroporoaki are rituals integral to Brooklands Kindergarten and part of their embracing of whanaungatanga.

has progressed the implementation of whanaungatanga. Alongside her involvement as a co-researcher within the Teaching and Learning Research Initiative (TLRI) project Te PuawaiTanga – partnerships with tamariki and whānau in bicultural early childhood care and education (Ritchie & Rau, 2008), Ramila undertook her own research project. She chose to focus on Te Whāriki principles Ngā Hononga and Whānau Tangata as a springboard for strengthening understandings and enactment of the bicultural content of the curriculum.

Research questions

The research questions that Ramila adopted were:

- In what ways are practitioners equipped with skills and knowledge to implement the curriculum in accordance to the requirements of the revised statement of desirable objectives and practices to reflect the unique perspective of Te Whāriki as a bicultural document?

- What is tino rangatiratanga? What is the teacher’s role as an early childhood educator in support of tino rangatiratanga in consideration of the treaty?

The questions and this research built on findings of Ritchie (2002) that strengthening provision of bicultural aspirations of the early childhood curriculum within ECE settings is a central professional responsibility for educators and that a key strategy for achieving this is to build relationships with the whānau Maori of children in their setting.

Methodology

This project utilised a qualitative, narrative methodology as a vehicle to gather and understand thoughts, actions and processes of participants involved in the centre environment. As narrative researchers we view our research as a landscape where our attention is turned to how we are engaged in living, telling, retelling, and reliving our lives within particular social and cultural plotlines (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Clandinin & Huber, 2002). Narratives were a meaningful way of seeking the stories of the various participants, in order to create a shared story about Tiriti-based practice grounded in honouring of the Te Whāriki principles of Ngā Hononga - and Whānau Tangata - (Ministry of Education, 1996). Narrative processes are consistent also with current credit-based early childhood assessment (Carr, 2001), and with oral story-telling as knowledge transmission in Māori and other indigenous cultures.

Narratives were gathered from two whānau Māori, eight Pakehā teachers, five whānau Pakehā, two Māori elders, and two members of the wider community of Taranaki. These narratives uncovered personal thoughts and expert commentary on life and learning in connection to their sense of belonging in our centre. This has been an enlightening process. Parents, extended family and elders were asked how they saw te reo (Māori language) and nga tikanga Māori (Māori rituals) being promoted and affirmed in the kindergarten. The children were asked about how it
Tamariki perform during the end of year concert, which celebrates all of the kindergarten cultures coming together as whānau. This concert forms part of the annual festive occasion, at which kaumātua and invited guests share a hāngi, honouring values inherent to our land and tangata whenua.

feels to belong to the Brooklands' whānau in an attempt to make links to their understanding of whanaungatanga. Participants' understandings of Te Tiriti o Waitangi generated further questions about what they thought of one's own culture and heritage and how this impacts on inclusion and equitable opportunities for all within the centre.

Transcribing the narratives provided Ramila with the opportunity to reflect on messages and meanings underlying the feelings expressed. Through this time-consuming process emerged understandings of Te Whiiriki, Te Tiriti, rangatiratanga, tikanga, reo, and whanaungatanga, as well as celebrations and barriers. Engagement with these diverse narratives identified tensions between contradictory, complimentary, positive, encouraging, and progressive perspectives held, as well as ascertaining the participants' understandings of the wider implications and intersections of culture, power, relationships, family and community. Most importantly, the process of transcribing stimulated Ramila to further explore academic literature, generating signposts which indicated that the research was proceeding effectively.

**Findings**

This paper reflects only a brief overview and sample of the data that Ramila gathered and delivered in her full report submitted to NZEI in 2007. Several key findings are evident however. Firstly, the narrative data reinforces the importance of relationships signified through welcoming, spiritual connection and dialogue. Reinforced also is the capacity for early childhood programmes to provide bridging links to enable communities to generate shared understandings of history and identity. Thirdly, the centrality of educators in leading this process of re-normalising Māori enactment within early childhood education in Aotearoa is evident. Acknowledging the historical context whereby Māori have had their beliefs and practices marginalised, their culture submerged within the general mix of 'ethnic minorities', teachers such as Ramila and her colleagues are embedding Māori ways of being and doing within their programme as normal, everyday early childhood pedagogy.

**Relationships**

The data reinforces our understandings of the centrality of relationships, enacted through an acute awareness of the importance of acknowledging each person entering into the centre environment. From this initial welcoming, opportunities can be pursued to build upon previous information shared as ongoing dialogue furthers opportunities for understandings of various cultural perspectives and shared meaning-making. Brooklands' whanaungatanga approach highlights welcoming and farewelling all whānau with a pōwhiri and poroporoaki, enacting Te Ao Māori rituals in a tangible and meaningful way. The Brooklands' community has begun to make links to Māori ways of being and knowing, where a sense of ease has increased with a growing level of comfort in knowing and appreciating the indigenous culture of Aotearoa. A whānau sense of belonging is thus enabled.

For Ramila, this sense of belonging transposes to enable cultural sensitivity, cultural identity and respect within the diverse cultural perspectives. She describes this process beginning 'with gentle openings of the heart and the mind to give and receive moments of examination of the unknown, the unfamiliar and the provocation of the soul. This openness enables a process of getting to know those
around us and with us, generating a cohesive coexistence in a true spirit of inclusion. Although we may be somewhat overwhelmed by the complexity of our increasingly culturally diverse communities, it is still up to us to find ways to enlighten our hearts, accessing paths that would enable us to know a more about cultural perspectives other than ours.

Bridging shared identities and histories

In addition to the ongoing welcoming, relationships with kaumatua, and everyday enactment of manaakitanga, the emphasis on spiritual connectedness enacted through regular practice of karakia provides Brooklands with a reservoir of cultural reference points to enrich meaningful learning with people, places and things. One such important landmark of the Taranaki rohe which is visited annually by Brooklands is their local marae.

Te Whäriki signals the importance of including “activities, stories, and events that have connections with Māori children’s lives are an essential and enriching part of the curriculum for all children in early childhood settings” (p. 41). It further emphasises that:

Māori and Tagata Pasifika children will be more likely to feel at home if they regularly see Māori and Tagata Pasifika adults in the early childhood setting. Liaison with local tangata whenua and a respect for papatuanuku should be promoted” (p. 54).

Accordingly, “Appropriate connections with iwi and hapū should be established, and staff should support tikanga Māori and the use of the Māori language” (p. 55).

During the collection of narrative data, Nana H shared her responses to having visited the local Parihaka marae on a kindergarten trip with her grandson. Nana H spoke of how the visit had generated in her a sense of belonging, “Over at Parihaka – oh we felt very important. I felt I belong here now with my grandson. It’s really nice!” This is even more salient when we discover that this was only her first visit to Parihaka:

I have never been to Parihaka before. The first thing is that it really surprised me to see how ordinary Parihaka was. I thought Parihaka being one of the well known tribes in New Zealand and with a name like Parihaka, they haven’t got the big fancy gates and it’s quite humbling and so all that greatness that was there is still there but they are not showing off. I was really amazed! I expected it to be almost like a showplace like Rotorua. Parihaka was like going back to reality. It’s like going back to a real place, it really shows what happened. They haven’t gone commercial. I could feel the history in Parihaka. It’s the real thing; Māori culture is such a saleable thing you know!”

Nana H distinguishes her associations with the commercial aspects of te Ao Māori, exemplified in the tourist packaging as seen in Rotorua, with the humility and sense of history she felt at Parihaka. She recognises the importance of making connections with the heritage of the land.

For Nana H, Brooklands is an appropriate educational setting for her grandson, who has Māori ancestry, yet she acknowledges that “there will be people who would not want to come here because of things Māori. There will be those who will miss out, they are not going to have a bigger experience in life, by not being part of a place like this.” Nana H alludes to the covert existence of hegemonic discourse that is unappreciative of te Ao Māori, and its potential to limit children’s and families’ access to wider views of culture, heritage, land and people.

For Nana H, the Parihaka visit becomes part of her own journey of discovery:

Tracing my family history, I have read more history about Māori culture. Being able to visit a place like Parihaka and being there with my grandson and seeing things Māori integrated in his life in a daily way at kindergarten means a lot for both of us, it is interesting and I know this whole generation will have to work it through for the better!

Early childhood education is uniquely positioned to provide a bridge to wider cultural horizons, extending these for both children and their wider families. This is significant, since people’s identities are shaped by their life experiences and the discourses that have enabled them to articulate their social and cultural positioning. Brooklands’ kaupapa of accessing significant places in their community creates openings for whānau/families to reframe their understandings of the legacy of our shared cultural histories.

Renormalising Māori enactment

Through their commitment to enactment of kaupapa Māori understandings, such as the concepts of whānaungatanga and manaakitanga, Ramila and her colleagues became aware of ways in which ‘normality’ is a construct defined by mainstream Pakehā, and the impacting dynamics of this power-culture paradigm. A key finding of this study emphasises mainstream Pakehā practitioners’ enactment of their potential to make a significant contribution towards progressing the transformative potential of Te Whäriki to generate practice that moves beyond colonised educational frames (Ritchie & Rau, 2008). Ramila’s colleague articulates her understanding of this enactment:

The important parts of the bicultural curriculum are the tikanga. We all need opportunities to be a part of rituals like powhiri and poroporoaki, taima whāriki and projects that bring the community together and to have karakia and waiata as part and parcel of all things that we do in the centre. The core component of the bicultural curriculum is the use of te reo and making links with the community and to have a kaumātua to give us overall support. And when we reflect these, the Māori families will come in and see it and feel comfortable and from there the relationships will start to grow and continue. For us it is great to see many Māori whānau empowered to take their Māoriness and to embrace and live it. It has been great to have whānau Māori take on doing the karanga and whaikorero and leading the way to visit the marae.
Key transformative elements that make meaning for practitioners in early childhood in a kaupapa Māori context are seen here in the enactment of tikanga Māori. Educators who are committed to enhancing their incorporation of Te Ao Māori have potentiality to engage and initiate Māori engagement in the education setting, which can be linked to tino rangatiratanga. The two research questions for Ramila’s study inquired as to teachers’ competence with regard to our bicultural curriculum, and in support of Māori aspirations for tino rangatiratanga. Ramila and her colleagues, through generating deeply respectful relationships with kaumātua and Māori families, are delivering educational practice that is consistent with Te Whāriki’s requirement that educators focus on “bicultural issues, [and] actively seek Māori contributions to decision making” (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 40). They are responding to Māori calls for their values and knowledges to be honoured and celebrated.

Conclusion

In this study, the transformative potential of Te Whāriki can be seen in validation of Māori and other cultural paradigms, repositioning these as central within an educational paradigm previously dominated by Western colonial assumptions of ‘universal normality’. The experience at Te Kura Mokopuna o Brooklands, as led and documented by Ramila, demonstrates this capacity for hearts open to a journey of learning and knowing. It also shows how involvement in research provides educators with deepened understandings of both their practice and their potential to transform it.

Key ingredients in the Brooklands’ journey are seen in the dedicated leadership and shared team commitment, the involvement of kaumātua with whom longstanding close relationships have been fostered and nurtured, the daily enactment of welcoming and other spiritual rituals of inclusion and celebration, and the fostering of connection to local iwi and heritage. This validation of the local Māori context can be seen to create bridges towards awakening appreciation and respect for the increasingly diverse and complex cultural heritages converging within our early childhood education communities.

References


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Glossary

Aroha: reciprocal obligation to care
Awhinatanga: loving support
Karanga: ritual calling
Kaupapa Māori: Māori educational philosophy
Manaakitanga: nurturing
Ngā Hononga: relationships
Powhiri: ritual welcome
Poroporoaki: ritual farewell and leave taking
Rangatiratanga: the right of political authority that enables Māori to exercise self-determination in relation to people and resources (see Jackson, 1992, p. 175; Skerrett, 2007).
Rohe: a geographical area
Tino: absolute
Taima whāriki: mat time
Tagata Pasifika: people of the Pacific
Te Ao Māori: the world of things Maori
Whai korero: ritual speechmaking
Whānau tangata: family and community
Whanaungatanga: sustenance of whānau relationships