Jenny Ritchie and Cheryl Rau

Te Puawaitanga: Partnerships with tamariki and whānau in bicultural early childhood care and education: A summary

This project sought to document, explore, and theorise the experiences of a diverse range of voices of tamariki/children, whānau/families, and educators from early childhood centres where the programmes reflect the bicultural mandate contained within key regulatory and curriculum statements. These include the Ministry of Education's Desirable Objectives and Practices (DOPs) (Ministry of Education, 1996a) requirement 10c, whereby management and educators are required to implement policies, objectives, and practices that "reflect the unique place of Māori as tangata whenua and the principle of partnership inherent in Te Tiriti o Waitangi", and the national early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki*, which states that, "In early childhood settings, all children should be given the opportunity to develop knowledge and an understanding of the cultural heritages of both partners to Te Tiriti o Waitangi" (Ministry of Education, 1996b, p. 9).

Te Whāriki has been acknowledged as progressive in its sociocultural orientation (Nuttall, 2002, 2003) which emphasises the valuing of diverse identities (Grieshaber, Cannella, & Leavitt, 2001) and knowledges of a kaupapa based in the partnership signified in Te Tiriti o Waitangi (Ka'ai, Moorfield, Reilly, & Mosley, 2004). While early childhood educators are required to demonstrate that their programme delivery is consistent with *Te Whāriki*, there is evidence that many centres fall short in the depth to which they are able to deliver genuinely bicultural programmes (e.g., Education Review Office, 2004). This situation has implications for teacher educators and professional development providers (Cherrington & Wansbrough, 2007; Ritchie, 2002).

The late Te Arikinui Dame Te Atairangikaahu highlighted the need to listen to children (as cited in Kirkwood, 2001), this insight supported by "a growing body of research suggesting that the participation of children in genuine decision making in school and neighbourhood has many positive outcomes" (Prout, 2000, p. 312). Research that articulates tamariki and whānau voices has the potential to further extend educators' understandings and implementation of ways of enacting Māori values and beliefs, enabling them to enhance the effectiveness of their education programmes, through an increased capacity to initiate and sustain responsive, respectful relationships with children, parents, and whānau.
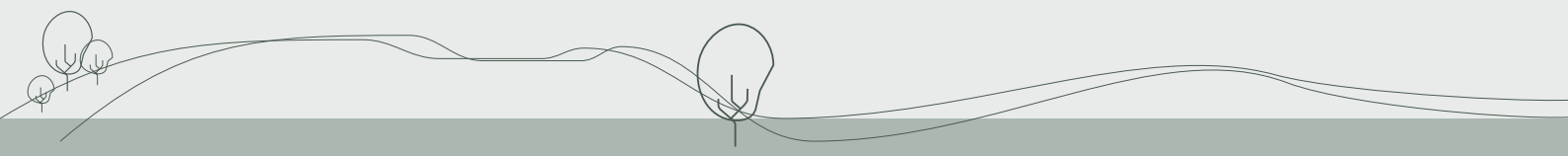
Research aims

The project aimed to:

- document the narratives of a diverse group of children and families as they engage with early childhood education and care services committed to honouring the bicultural intent of the early childhood curriculum document, *Te Whāriki*

- work collaboratively with colleagues and alongside tamariki/children and whānau/families to co-theorise bicultural pathways which are empowering for all participants within that service—Māori, Pākehā, and Tauiwi

- give voice to the perspectives of children, parents, and caregivers on their experiences of bicultural early childhood education.

Research questions

1. How can narrative methodologies enhance our reflective understandings as educators on a bicultural journey?

2. How do the tamariki/children and whānau/families (Māori, Pākehā, and Tauiwi) experience and respond to the bicultural programmes within these early childhood settings?

3. In what ways are Māori/Pākehā/Tauiwi educators committed to a Tiriti-based curriculum paradigm, enacting ways of being that are enabling of cross-cultural understandings and that embrace tamariki/ children and whānau/families of different ethnicities from their own?

Research design and methodology

The research partners included two research co-directors, a research facilitator, and 19 early childhood educator co-researchers (from a range of kindergartens, a Playcentre association, and a childcare centre), along with a kuia and kaumātua who provided mentoring, advice, and help with the research design.

The project drew upon both narrative and kaupapa Māori research methodologies (Bishop, 2005; Clandinin et al., 2006). Modes of data collection were diverse, incorporating audio- and video-taped interviews and transcription, field notes, photographs, examples of children's art, and centre pedagogical documentation. The research co-directors and the research facilitator facilitated the data collection by the educator co-researchers, in collaboration with tamariki/whānau. The co-directors and research facilitator also maintained ongoing research co-theorising conversations with co-researchers, some of which were also tape-recorded as data.

The narratives generated in this project were analysed initially at the individual centre level by the educator researchers, tamariki, and whanau within each setting. Educators liaised with tamariki and whānau to identify key themes and strategies that were embedded within their stories. Further co-theorising took place at cluster hui and then at a final hui of the wider research collective.

The educator co-researchers were central to the research process and the narrative methodologies. The study involved collaboration, shared commitment, and responsibility within the teams. Teams began with a review process, often using visual narrative methodologies (Pinnegar, 2007). They also conducted interviews with a wide range of tamariki and whānau, including parents and grandparents, and involved these whānau in co-theorising the data, generating shared understandings.

Findings

Our dominant western culture highly values verbal and written languages, privileging these over other, more subtle forms of communication. In this study, educator co-researchers explored many alternative ways of generating dialogue with tamariki/children and their whānau/families. One of the key insights gained from this project was the deepened understanding and empathy generated by the teachers, when they made the time to sit and talk responsively with parents and other relatives of children in their centres.

Findings from the voices of tamariki and whānau provide examples of Tiriti-based early childhood centre practice; that is, programmes that honour the expectation that centres reflect the unique place of Māori as tangata whenua and the notion of partnership inherent in Te Tiriti o Waitangi. Children and their families experienced Māori ways of being and doing as normalised; this, in turn, affirmed Māori identities and aspirations. Whānau reported their strong sense of feeling welcomed, comfortable, and belonging, with intergenerational involvement a particular feature.

The educator co-researchers in the study demonstrated Tiriti-based practice by actively following the principles of whanaungatanga and manaakitanga, and showing concern for the collective spiritual well-being of all those present. They realised that they needed to engage deeply in listening to tamariki and whānau in their centres. Judith Nowotarski, a Māori head teacher, in theorising Māori children's comments about their attendance at marae, articulated how creating spaces for such conversations simultaneously validates both their experiences and identity:

It's also the innate learning that takes place—wairua. It's acceptance. There's trust in the people around them and they are not told what to do, they learn by being involved. It's ways of doing . . . It gives a sense of whānau within whānau. It's an extension to the collective. They see they have place there, they work it out—who is in the front, who is in the back.

There is an inherent tension in our current early childhood practice of pedagogical documentation, in that we as educators enacting our professional obligations often assume the responsibility for making judgements as to what to notice, what to include, and how these focuses are then interpreted. Robyn O'Dea, a Pākehā kindergarten teacher, noticed that her involvement in the research had generated for her a shift in her orientation towards parents which she articulated as "Rather than judging them, the relationship is the most important thing". Confronting the tendency towards judgement is an important challenge, because such habitual judging and stereotyping undermines relationships with parents and therefore children. Suspending judgement is hard for many of us, whose culture, upbringing, educational, and consequent epistemological orientation has engendered a will to understand through naming, judging, labelling, and categorising whatever we encounter. Yet these teachers demonstrated their willingness to open themselves to "otherness", without judgement.

The use of narrative methodologies enabled layers of storying of deeper meanings to be articulated and shared within each centre, and beyond. As the teachers from Hawera Kindergarten wrote, "Using narrative methodologies has absolutely enhanced our reflective understandings as we have travelled this special journey. Capturing the tamaiti and whānau 'voice' is a challenge but so beautiful when we do!"

This project has reconceptualised the role of "teachers" to be one of "educator-researchers" or, as the teachers described themselves, "hands-on researchers", deconstructing the artificial boundaries between educational practice and academia. It has demonstrated that research "can and should take place as much in the classroom and by teachers as in the university and by 'academics'" (Dahlberg & Moss, 2006, p. 17), relocating the ownership of the research within the collective of educators and their wider early childhood centre collective of tamariki/children and whānau/families. All the educators experienced the role and responsibility of being a researcher, not only fully engaging with the data from their own centre but also sharing the responsibility of co-theorising data across the wider project.

Conclusion

It is difficult to reflect the wealth of data generated from this study within the constraints of this brief summary. The data have highlighted the value of narrative methodologies to elicit tamariki, whānau, and educator voices, generating deeper meanings of cultural understandings, enhancing empathy, and enabling meaningful relationships to be embedded at the heart of pedagogical practice. Through their involvement in this study, educator co-researchers experienced their complicity as teachers responsible for the worlds they create within their early childhood centres, involving tamariki and whānau of their centres as co-constructors in a process in realising the vision of *Ka Hikitia: Managing for Success: Māori Education Strategy 2008-2012*, for "early childhood services [to] promote and reinforce Māori cultural distinctiveness" (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 31).

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Research co-directors

Jenny Ritchie, Associate Professor Early Childhood Teacher Education, Te Whare Wānanga o Wairaka, Unitec Institute of Technology, and **Cheryl Rau**, who was, at the time of this project, a researcher at the University of Waikato, were lead researchers on an earlier TLRI project, *Whakawhanaungatanga— Partnerships in Bicultural Development in Early Childhood Care and Education*. The current Te Puawaitanga project built on the collaborative relationships developed during that earlier study. Cheryl is now a researcher at Te Whare Wānanga o Wairaka, Unitec Institute of Technology.

Research partners

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