

# Māori literacies

## *Ecological perspectives*

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### KEY POINTS

- This article supports teachers to consider four Maori concepts associated with ideas about Māori eco-literacies.
- The ideas in the article encourage teachers to consider where Māori belief systems connect into literacy practices.
- We advocate that when engaging with these concepts the teachers work from a holistic curriculum framework that reflects environment, place, identity and wairua (spirit).

An important aim of the Tuhia ki Te Ao—Write to the Natural World project is to investigate ways in which the cultural and ecological perspectives of Māori can be recognised and developed within literacy practices in secondary schools. In this article we propose four significant aspects to engaging with Māori literacies in classroom pedagogy and practice: place and environment; the relation of the tangible and intangible; “capturing the being”; and the concept and practice of *tohu*. Attention to, and awareness of, these areas may help mainstream educators to engage in conversations about how eco-critical literacy can be situated in Māori ways of knowing and operating.

## The importance of environment to Māori cultural identity

Māori perceive *whanaungatanga* (interconnectedness) as the art of relating, and hold the notion that everything in the universe is related or interconnected (Hindle, Hynds, Phillips, & Rameka, 2015). From this perspective, *whanaungatanga* affects relationships between ourselves, others, and our universe, and that underpin our worldview. The notion of *whanaungatanga* help us to frame this article in the belief system that Māori are not separate from the environment, but literally are one with the environment. This idea is expanded in the examples within the article.

## Our rationale

Place and environment are particularly salient concepts for enriching literacy learning for Māori students. Our contention is that students may have very powerful affiliations and views of place and environment which are part of their cultural identity and which are embedded or implicit within cultural literacy practices. Conversely, alienation from the natural environment and the experience of displacement through migration or through changes to home environments can be highly destructive of cultural identities and communities which may need rebuilding (Nixon, 2011). In the project Tuhia ki Te Ao—Write to the Natural World<sup>1</sup> we argue that students should develop a sense of environmental identity as part of their cultural heritage. The project investigates how students’ environmental identities can be conceptualised as central to culturally responsive pedagogy within literacy practices in Aotearoa New Zealand.<sup>2</sup> We are not offering a practical toolkit for doing this, rather we are opening up a *kōrero* (conversation) about how Māori perspectives could be recognised with illustrative examples drawn from our experiences.

Beyond a focus on place and environment, there are concepts within a Māori worldview which hold deep ecological significance and potential for the learning of literacy in Aotearoa. Rawiri Hindle proposes four areas of significance for the development of Māori literacies and Sasha Matthewman attempts to articulate the affinity of these areas to eco-critical literacy and the work of the project. We have categorised these areas as follows: place and environment; the relation of the tangible and intangible; “capturing the being” and the concept and practice of *tohu* (symbol).

We suggest that these four concepts are intertwined and all reflect harmonious ecological relations that are inherent to the cultural being of Māori. We have separated them out as an aid to understanding so that teachers may gain insights into Māori perspectives on the environment.

## Place and environment

Traditionally, Māori have a strong physical, emotional, and spiritual connection with place and environment. Māori genealogy acknowledges the relationship between people and the natural world, and a rationale for endorsing these concepts sits within the idea that humans are not separate from phenomena but are a part of the *mauri* (life force, vigour, impetus and potentiality) that connects everything (Royal, 2003). This *whakapapa* Māori (Māori genealogy) infers that as humans beings we are the natural environment. Human beings are part of, not separate from, the *mauri* that connects everything in the universe (Hindle et al., 2015; Durie, 2003). Or as Jones and Hoskins (2015) put it, “the identity of things in the world is not understood as discrete or independent, but emerges through, and as, relations with everything else” (p. 25).

The notion that everything in the universe is connected through *mauri* frames the expression of

kaitiakitanga (guardianship) which acknowledges the importance of a deep and caring love for the natural environment. Kaitiakitanga is embedded in the Āti Haunui-a-Pāpārangi (Whanganui) tribal saying, “Ko au te awa, ko te awa ko au” (I am the river and the river is me). If we were the river then would we defile it? If the earth or the land is our mother, then would we destroy or pollute her?

In the project we have sought to emphasise that literacy always happens somewhere — it is located in particular places and environments (Comber, 2015). Attention to the place connections of literacy practices demands attention to the way that the natural world is represented in literary and cultural forms. A literacy attentive to place raises the importance of learning in, through, and about the local environment, and makes explicit connections between culture and environment. For example, in the project an English teacher, Newton Rewi, supported students to create a series of haiku linked to images to represent their sense of place and cultural connections. In art, teacher Paddy O’Rourke encouraged students to research their cultural affiliations and their links to a mountain, a river, and a particular place. The concept of the natural world as kin is a deep level of engagement which may be accessed through an introduction to Māori literature and cultural forms representing this worldview. For example students at James Cook High School learnt about the myth of *Ponga and Puhibuia* and the connections between the people and Maungawhau before the students visited Maungawhau/Mount Eden. The idea of the environment as being embodied in us was demonstrated by a Māori teacher on the English field trip to Maungawhau who said, “We have been told that when we are homesick we should raise up our knuckles and the shape will remind us of our mountain, Rangitoto” (See Figure 1). The students all raised their hands up to note the correspondence between the line of their knuckles and the striking line of Rangitoto in the distance. In literature, art, or in performance the shape of your mountain and the sweep of your river may be enacted on the page or in the body.

## Tangible and intangible

The idea that we are intrinsically linked to our environment through whakapapa might lead us to give more value to the intangible and tangible dynamics within the learning process. Whakapapa expresses the coming into existence of all phenomena, both the tangible (natural phenomena) and intangible realities (values, qualities, and levels of consciousness). In theatre and dance, van Dijk (2006) states that tangible and intangible dynamics need to link together. He describes the tangible

dynamics as *form* and the intangible as *content*. The form is what we see or touch, and the content, is the unseen aesthetic dimension, qualities, values and beliefs and levels of consciousness (2006). The idea of the tangible and intangible going “hand-in-hand” is shown in the image of the haka (dance) expressed through pūkana (dilating of the eyes) (See Fig. 2.). Although the haka has a physical, tangible form (movements, words, actions, sound and gestures) it also has an intangible energy that goes beyond the physical form. The intangible qualities of the performer are unique to the individual. The tangible (form) expresses the narrative and the skill set necessary to present the haka. The intangible (quality) accesses the wairua and transmits an energy to the audience.

The idea of accessing wairua is complex. In this article, we use the term *wairua* to convey a sense of something that is inherently part of someone’s essential being. The haka image, for example, exudes a wairua that can be interpreted as an energy that comes from within the performer. We suggest that the performer connects to an energy situated in her being. An energy that evokes an emotional or even spiritual response—you know that it’s there, but cannot predict what it will look like or the impact it will have. Although the narrative of the haka is important, we argue that the transmission of emotion and being (*wairua*) is even more important.

In the pre-European whare wānanga (institute of higher learning), tangible and intangible qualities were expressed through students being immersed in the environment. This idea is expressed by the Rev. Māori Marsden as teaching that involves things of the spirit (cited in Royal, 2003, p. 78). Marsden’s idea of invoking the spirit within our teaching and learning expresses the belief that being immersed in a certain environment for a good period of time is to see things related to that environment in a different and deeper way, becoming physically, mentally, and spiritually attuned to that environment. Marsden’s description of the whare wānanga invokes a sense of oneness with the environment, of learning to be, or become attuned to the tangible and intangible qualities of life and learning through *ngā tairongo* (the senses).

## Capturing the being

We have described how Māori knowledge embodied in meaning-making practices acknowledges tangible and intangible realities. We further suggest that the intangible qualities are expressed through the concept of *being*. This raises the related challenge of how we manifest the concept of being within mainstream literacy practices. Whakapapa Māori acknowledges and celebrates the dynamics of being as a fundamental component of Māori

knowledge. Through whakapapa, Marsden acknowledged three stages of being: Te Korekore is the realm of potential being; Te Pō is the realm of becoming; and Te Ao Mārama is the realm of being—a realm of creativity, innovation, and imagination.

Placing these concepts within a present-day educational context we suggest that Te Korekore is situated in the mind or is cognitive; Te Pō is situated in the body or is about the skills we learn; and Te Ao Mārama is situated in the being and is about the intangible qualities we bring to the task. As the national co-ordinator Ngā Toi (Māori Arts) I (Rawiri) was responsible for the development of the national Ngā Toi arts exemplars. One of the exemplars that we developed with a class of 5 to 6 year olds was titled “The Leaf in the Wind” and exemplified the important part that “being” plays in teaching and learning through the performing arts.

#### *The Leaf in the Wind*

We used a local story about how Aoraki (Mt Cook) was formed and explored theatre techniques to tell that story. One of these techniques encouraged the students to use moulding, flowing, flying, and radiating to give quality to body movements (van Dijk, 2006). The exercise aimed at getting the students to use their bodies and move slowly to mould the shape of Aoraki.

To emphasise different ways of moving, in one of the activities we encouraged the students to move with the quality of flying as if they were a leaf in the wind. One boy started to move, and his imagination was so alive and in the moment that it was as if he was a leaf in the wind. The quality of his “being” was evident to all those watching.

This performance led me to question what it was that the boy was doing which had such a heightened impact on his audience. If we were to assess this performance according to skill-based performance criteria, we would look at: the child can rotate, use levels, move through space and so on. But what was more important was the quality of his actions, the state of his being, the aliveness of his imagination, and the impact of the performance on the audience. These intangible aspects are not easy to describe, but made this performance stand out from the others. This analysis of “The Leaf in the Wind” exemplar illustrates how arts and literacy education can acknowledge the tangible and intangible alongside “capturing the being”.

Within the project we aim to highlight and heighten students’ literacy expressions of “being” in relation to the natural world. Embodied expression through performance can support and provoke written literacy practice as well as being a valuable form of multimodal

literacy. Literacy is more than the functional transmission of information. It embodies values and can express our sense of being. Being may be captured in symbolic cultural forms. Eco-critic Jonathan Bate (2000) has argued that the capturing of being is particularly germane to poetry. He argues that poetry can bring the experience described into a vivid presence so that it can be felt viscerally in the body—like the beat of a bird’s wing. This suggests the power of poetry to give voice to the natural world. For example, some of the students seemed to get close to this affect through writing about an endangered bird or a favoured place in the form of an eco-poem. When asked about her aim in writing her poem one 13-year-old student commented:

I guess you say nature doesn’t really have a voice to kind of just stop it. I am in a position where I can raise awareness so I can try and be responsible for it and I can just try to get more people thinking about it.

In this comment the student is making the connection between her felt responsibility to “capture the voice” and “being” of nature through her poetry—the spirit of the forest. Her personification of nature enables her to make deeper emotional, spiritual, and symbolic connections with the natural environment.

#### Tohu (symbol)

In this article we view tohu as symbols, present in the natural environment. The ability to read tohu was the work of the tohunga (expert), a person who sees things in new ways (illumination) and operates on a metaphorical, symbolic level (Royal, 1998). Within the context of this article we associate the term *tohunga* with the idea of teachers and learners being open to different views and interpretations that may be highly symbolic, metaphorical, or both. We suggest that when teachers and learners engage in symbolic and metaphoric representation of the environment then they are engaging with a different, perhaps deeper level of being attuned to the natural world.

Historically, Māori culture was oral and multimodal, rooted in complex symbolic meaning making and communication. Written language has become a central part of Māori literacy but best fits within a rich set of oral and symbolic practices. One example of a multimodal way of sharing knowledge is based on symbolic communication exemplified in tangible forms such as kowhaiwhai (patterns representing tribal genealogy). These forms codify symbolism to capture meaning related to symbols, or tohu. When considering the notion that the tangible and intangible are intertwined we suggest that the work of tohunga was situated in their ability to not only know about the tangible form, but also to possess the intangible qualities of interpreting the

form. Possible examples were expressed in the tohunga's ability to read natural signs, as in reading the stars or interpreting weather patterns.

Interpreting or reading *tohu* allows for multiple meanings to emerge. The importance of *tohu* in this project is the notion that ideas can be conveyed (multimodally) in multiple ways that allow for a multitude of interpretations. Creative expression can be lifted into a symbolic level so that people can read different meanings into an artefact—whether it is a poem or a carving.

Interpreting the environment through symbolism and metaphor can also be part of a cultural story. For example, a friend tells the story of how her 7-year-old son came running into the house calling, “Mum, Mum, Ranginui is tearing on me!” Her son had been learning about the separation of Ranginui the sky father and Papatūānuku the earth mother and how the separation caused a deep sadness between the two—expressed through the rain falling from the sky as the tears of Ranginui and the dew of the earth as the tears of Papatūānuku. This interpretation provokes a sense of natural phenomena as emotionally meaningful rather than (only) meaningful from a scientific understanding of natural processes. The son used metaphor and symbolism to make sense of the world through interpreting symbolism as part of a different view of relationship to the natural world.

In making artefacts there should be a harmonious and sustainable relationship between the thing created, the creator, and the natural material used. This respect for material resources is exemplified in the Māori skill of weaving flax. The Māori proverb asserts that the flax must always be carefully cut to preserve the ecological value of the flax.

Hutia te rito o te harakeke  
Kei hea te kōmako e kō?

*Pull out the shoot of the flax bush  
Where will the bellbird sing?*

Ki mai ki ahau he aha te mea nui o te Ao?  
Māku e kī atu – he tāngata, he tāngata, he tāngata.

*If you were to ask me what is the greatest thing in the world?  
I would reply – it is people, it is people, it is people.*

This proverb reinforces *kaitiakitanga* and supports the idea that human beings are important in terms of caring for and sustaining life within the natural environment. The study of Māori proverbs and sayings allows an ecological and cultural perspective to be shared in a school context.

The use of *tohu* from the natural world is important in relation not just to making things but to making meaning through engagement with *te reo* as an evolving

metaphorical language. The case for the importance of *te reo* in mainstream schools as fundamental to literacy in Aotearoa has been well made elsewhere (see for example Stewart, 2014). We wish to add that school engagement with *te reo* should allow the language to grow and operate on the symbolic level, valuing and respecting kinship to the natural world. This may be encouraged through the exploration of metaphors and symbols drawn from Māori cultural and environmental forms such as *waiata*, poetry, myth, *whakataukī*, and story.

## Conclusion

In this article we have linked four Māori concepts to literacy practices. The connection to the ecological and the environmental is woven deeply into these cultural beliefs and practices. We have aimed to show how the ecological element can be acknowledged and woven within culturally responsive pedagogy in relation to Māori.

We are at an early stage in weaving these complex ideas into the project work. The more intangible and philosophical aspects are subtle and may only be realised through the guidance of a teacher steeped in Māori worldviews and contexts. We have put forward some illustrations and examples of where teachers can begin to make these cultural and environmental connections. These include making connections between cultural stories and real places; encouraging embodied and spiritual response to place and natural phenomena; finding ways for students to give voice to the natural world in creative work; and the potential of engaging with *tohu* of the natural world within the artwork, dances, stories, sayings, *waiata*, and myths of Māori art and culture. This article has aimed to inspire teachers to engage with and find out more about Māori ways of knowing and operating so that these perspectives may be part of a holistic curriculum articulating a sense of spirit, place, and identity (Hindle et al., 2015; Hindle, 2010; Penetito, 2009).

## Notes

1. Funded by the Teaching Learning and Research Initiative (TLRI).
2. See the overview paper in this issue for an explanation of the wider project.

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