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## **Mai i te pō ki te ao mārama: From the darkness into the light – supporting early childhood education students to become culturally competent**

**Hoana McMillan** | *Toi Ohomai Institute of Technology***Rawhia Te Hau-Grant** | *Toi Ohomai Institute of Technology***Sue Werry** | *Toi Ohomai Institute of Technology*

*Graduates of initial teaching programmes are required to be culturally competent which has implications on teacher educators and their responsibility to provide culturally responsive programmes. This article captures how an action research project at Toi Ohomai Institute of Technology which initially sought to make te reo Māori more visible took the three researchers on a collective journey from te pō (a state of frustration and uncertainty) into te ao mārama (enlightenment and clarity). The article will give a description of the background of the research and its findings and then through pūrākau (a Māori Indigenous form of narrative) will give three different perspectives: two Māori and one Pākehā which highlights how the researchers used the process of reflection, planning change, implementing change, evaluation and professional research conversations used in the action research to inform and develop their practice. The pūrākau will also explore the complexity of realising the aspirations of our initial teaching programme, and the professional responsibilities outlined in the Code of Professional Responsibility and Standards for the Teaching Profession (Education Council, 2017), Tātaiako (Education Council, 2011) and the national curriculum for early childhood education in New Zealand, Te Whāriki, (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2017) within the early childhood education (ECE) context.*

### **Introduction**

The Code of Professional Responsibility and Standards for the Teaching Profession (Education Council, 2017), Tātaiako (Education Council, 2011) and the national curriculum for early childhood education in New Zealand, *Te Whāriki*, (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2017) require registered teachers to be committed to Te Tiriti o Waitangi partnership. This means that there must be a commitment to “practise and develop the use of te reo and tikanga Māori” (Education Council, 2017, p.18). Early childhood student teachers need to develop sufficient cultural competence and confidence to speak te reo Māori and have an understanding of te ao Māori to become advocates and role models in the centres where they will work. They need to learn this in their initial teaching programme so they understand the pivotal role they have as teachers in ensuring success for tamariki Māori (Durie, 2008). We wanted our students to be able to value and affirm the identity, language and culture of tamariki Māori (MoE, 2017, Education Review Office, 2012; Macfarlane, 2004; Bishop, Berryman, Tiakiwai & Richardson, 2003).

Conventional approaches included having te reo Māori and tikanga Māori taught separately from the curriculum and professional practice courses (Hunt & Macfarlane, 2011). Although this had varying degrees of success, our students were unable to contextualise this learning into their practice in the centres. This was highlighted by a question posed by a student who was wondering about the relevance of her te reo Māori courses to early childhood teaching. She asked “*What has the te reo Māori we learn in Te Puawai got to do with ECE?*”

This provoked a conversation with the students and we learnt that they felt they lacked the language and the confidence to meet the requirements of the Graduating Teaching Standards (Education Council, 2015). It then led us

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to reflect on whether our approach to support our student teachers to become culturally and linguistically competent was effective. We felt that our programme was offering our students an invitation rather than an expectation to commit to treaty based practice. If this expectation is not created while teachers are training, then it is likely that bicultural practice will not be obvious in their practice as registered teachers (Education Review Office [ERO], 2010). Thus, began our action research project *Kōrerotia - Use it or lose it with our research question being:*

*How can we embed te reo and tikanga Māori in our classroom practices and approaches to help ECE students use and contextualise what they have learnt in their practice?*

When we began we did not envisage how the process of analysing, discussing, reflecting on and challenging the data would take us on a journey which would deepen and widen our understanding of treaty based practice (Ritchie, 2008) and profoundly change how we design our programmes and challenge our own understandings of how we might help student teachers start to become bicultural practitioners.

**Methodology, participants and data analysis**

Action research was chosen as it allows practitioners to investigate a professional puzzle and develop innovative changes to their practice through reflection (O'Hara, Carter, Dewis, Kay, & Wainwright, 2011). We wanted to review our practice then "act, reflect on our actions, and modify our practice in light of what we learn" (McNiff, Lomax, & Whitehead, 2003, p.13). Two cycles of action were held with each cycle involving preparatory reflection, planning an action, implementing the action, collecting and evaluating data.

The participants in the first cycle were 13 student teachers who were enrolled in the second year professional practice course. For the second cycle there were two cohorts; 16 students from year one and 27 students from year two. Participation in the research was voluntary. In both cohorts a few students in each class chose not to be part of the project.

Data was collected using a self-assessment tool which asked the students to rate their knowledge and confidence in using te reo Māori and to list the kupu they knew and outline their understanding of tikanga. This self-assessment was done twice; first at the beginning and then again at end of the semester once the students had been on practicum. Analysis of the data was through repeated reading and discussion to "understand the socially constructed, negotiated and shared meanings" (MacNaughton, Rolfe, & Siraj-Blatchford, 2001, p. 36) the students had. It was also a time when we, the kaiako researchers negotiated our shared meanings.

Each evaluation of the data raised questions for us and so after both cycles, a focus group was held to understand the unique lived experiences of the students and to give them the opportunity to suggest the actions they thought would support the development of their treaty based practice. These focus groups were drawn from the same student cohorts but not all the students who did the self-assessment chose to participate in the focus groups. These focus groups were facilitated by the researcher who was not teaching that cohort of students and therefore not responsible for assessing the students in any way.

For the first action cycle, the action was a structured programme of te reo Māori tasks embedded into one of the practicum courses. The tasks were based on Ellis' (2005) second language acquisition task based pedagogy of giving opportunities to use the language, negotiate understanding and receive feedback. In the second cycle a set of practicum competencies for te reo and tikanga Māori were developed. The competencies have two strands both based around the requirements of standard one of the *Standards for the Teaching Profession* (Education Council, 2017). One strand is based around the *Tātaiako Cultural Competencies* (with appropriate indicators for each year group as they

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grow in their teaching skills). The other strand aims to increase te reo Māori skills starting with mihi, pepeha and giving positive praise to children, moving to the language of routines, then by year three into language of the curriculum areas. These competencies are now assessed at each practicum.

**Findings**

The data we collected from the students at the end of the first cycle told us that while their knowledge had increased overall, for several their confidence to use the language had decreased. This paradox intrigued us so we asked the focus group what would help increase their confidence. Three key themes emerged:

1. The importance of Repetition *repeat, repeat, repeat*
2. Continuity - that te reo is used in all classes *use one karakia until we learn it; focus on one area at a time*
3. The role of the kaiako - The students wanted to hear te reo being used in class by both teachers who are confident when using Te Reo and those who were less confident *because she [a kaiako] is learning as well, it's nice to know she is on the same level and we are not afraid to make mistakes.*

During the second action research cycle, the analysis of the data from the self-assessment confirmed that the consistency across classes was helpful to the students. As one second-year student said *"What you guys are doing is helping me, it's the repetition and reinforcement of stuff going over it again and again it is really sinking in and that helps me to gain more confidence in using it"*. The data from the first years also confirmed that most had both more te reo Māori knowledge and confidence as a result of the intervention (Werry, McMillan, Te Hau-Grant, 2016). However, the most striking difference between the first-year students and the second year students was around their understanding of tikanga. While the first-year students considered tikanga to be practices like not sitting on tables, the following comment from a second year student caused a major shift in our thinking. This particular student discussed how she could now see te ao Māori and tikanga Māori across all the curriculum subjects and how the teachers helped her in her understanding of Māori culture. *It's not just about te reo, it's about the holistic being of family, community, relationships and other aspects of it (Māori Culture) and so for me that's how I have really learnt.*

This shift in our thinking or as we called it, our 'aha' moment, was to reconsider the kind of learning the students were doing. It seemed to us that the second year students had moved from surface learning to deep learning. Thus, we moved from te pō and into te ao mārama; from having te ao Māori and te reo Māori as an add-on to embedding te reo Māori and making tikanga Māori and Māori epistemologies a part of the everyday curriculum. As one of our students has suggested it is about centralising te ao Māori.

We have now taken a multifaceted approach which includes embedding te ao Māori and te reo Māori in all areas of our programme, including programme design and development, teaching, assessment and expectations when out on practicum. While anecdotally these competencies seem to have raised the awareness of the importance of te reo Māori me ngā tikanga in our programme we have not yet assessed the impact of these competencies on the students' knowledge and confidence. This is a journey that has not yet finished and we will continue to reflect, discuss and challenge ourselves to ensure our curriculum is culturally responsive. The next section includes the three different pūrākau which highlights how the researchers used what they had learnt from the action research project to inform and develop their programmes to be more culturally and linguistically responsive.

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## Nga Pūrākau e toru

### *Rawhia's Pūrākau*

I have always been an educator even when I wasn't. In the last fifteen years I have been a team-trainer educator, a teacher and for the last five years a lecturer on an initial teaching programme. I am Māori, I am Rongomaiwahine and my understanding of what that means has come from my whānau, hapū and iwi but also from years of study, discussion, self-reflection and experiences. The initial wero for me was how do I share what is a part of me, what feels like is innate within me, how can I explain what it is to be me to help my students and my colleagues. So although this project was about my students it was also about me and my experiences in developing a culturally responsive course.

In the programme's second practicum paper which is in year one, there is a particular focus on Māori and socio-cultural theory around child development and learning. During the practicum students are expected to apply these theories within their own practice. However, the way the course was taught was privileging the socio-cultural theory and the 'Māori theory' was tagged on the end so it appeared almost as an afterthought. During one of the project's data analysis conversations we started talking about how we might address this imbalance. This was the easy part; we would start with 'Māori theory'. But then we asked ourselves if starting with an academic reading was an appropriate way to explore 'Māori theory'? The answer was an emphatic no; that for our students to understand Māori theories they first needed an insight into te ao Māori.

So, we had to ask what is knowledge and whose knowledge was the right knowledge? Tangaere (1997) reminded us that *for te iwi Māori ... theory ... has been passed on by kaumātua* (p.45) and is found in waiata, pūrākau and pakiwaitara. These taonga *provide cues mapping pathways and life passages* (Ritchie & Rau, 2011, p.10) and offer ways to access mātauranga Māori. Thus, we decided to begin by getting students to look at pūrākau like Ranginui and Papatūānuku, Kupe and the giant wheke and the three baskets of knowledge. Students discussed the concepts within the narratives and then linked them with Pere's (1997) *Te Wheke*, Tangaere's (1997) *Poutama*, and Macfarlane's (2004) *Educultural wheel*. Our next step was informed by Mead (2016) *Tikanga Māori: Living by Māori values*. In the chapter titled Ngā Pūtake o te Tikanga, Mead (2016) states that tikanga and kawa are underpinned by the principles of tika and pono and the values of whanaungatanga, manaakitanga, mana, tapu and noa. While some of these are different from the cultural competencies in *Tātaiako* (Education Council, 2011), we choose to start with Mead's framework as we wanted the students' knowledge to grow first from mātauranga Māori before they unpacked the cultural competencies framework.

We also used the resources Williams, Broadley and Te-Aho (2012) had developed to help the students understand what concepts like whanaungatanga, manaakitanga and ako might look like in an early childhood context.

This multifaceted approach helped the students to have a beginning understanding of te ao Māori and be more willing and able to engage with Māori theories of learning and development to use in practice as they had something to hang this new knowledge on. This journey is nowhere near finished but it is one I am happy to take alongside my colleagues and our students for the benefit of our tamariki and mokopuna.

### *Hoana's Pūrākau*

The second-year practicum paper is crucial in the development of our student teachers. One of the learning outcomes for this practicum paper is to support students to develop knowledge of the *Graduating Teaching Standard* te reo Māori and tikanga Māori (Education Council, 2015) and apply this within their practice. As the overarching theme of the practicum is the ability of students to notice, recognise and respond to learning, students are given support throughout the paper to develop their knowledge of kaupapa Māori assessment and what this means for not only Māori children, but all children. *Te Whatu Pōkeka kaupapa Māori assessment* (Ministry of Education, 2009) was

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developed as a tool to support teachers (Rameka, 2012) and we felt it was equally important that our students had the opportunity to develop their own understanding. As the course lecturer and someone who I consider to be well grounded in her identity as Māori, making sense of *Te Whatu Pōkeka* and what this means for my students has been a powerful journey.

As a relative newcomer to the early childhood sector (and bringing my experience from within *kōhanga reo*) I found that *Te Whatu Pōkeka* captured the essence of what is important to notice and recognise about the Māori child. For example, the importance of origin, of whakapapa, of mana, mauri, tapu and noa and other important tikanga such as whanaungatanga and manaakitanga. I found it interesting to read about how other centres and *Kōhanga Reo* had interpreted these key concepts and captured them within their learning stories. But what I found difficult was understanding what this meant for my students and found myself in *te pō* - a state of frustration and uncertainty.

The journey out of uncertainty and into *te ao mārama* – enlightenment and clarity involved a number of steps. The first came in the form of professional conversations with my Māori work colleagues including our most recent addition Aunty Maybel who had come with years of working in an early childhood centre. As we wrestled back and forth with the concepts outlined in *Te Whatu Pōkeka* Aunty Maybel and I decided that our students needed to develop their own framework to make sense of these concepts. We also decided this would be a valuable exercise for them as they would enter the early childhood sector as teachers ‘knowing’ how to interpret *Te Whatu Pōkeka* for themselves.

The second step which validated the first and which was one necessary in my own journey was to unpack and repack as much as I could the steps that led to *Te Whatu Pōkeka*. This was achieved by reading the research about the centres who originally participated in the development of *Te Whatu Pōkeka* (Paki, 2007). What I learned from this process is that the frameworks presented were a result of each centre or *kōhanga reo* undertaking the very process spoken of above – that is developing a framework that made sense to them. For one centre this involved the strands of *Te Whāriki*, for another centre this involved the stories of Māui. For our students this meant finding *pūrākau* that they could relate to.

Our reflections in class led the students to selecting *pūrākau* and characters within these *pūrākau* who they thought demonstrated select Māori learning dispositions. The six Māori learning dispositions the students identified (one for each character) were: whanaungatanga, manaakitanga, pukumahi (diligence/hardworking) mahi tahi (cooperation/group endeavour), ohaohanga (generosity), and arahina (leadership). Like my journey the students found that their discussions created powerful parallels between the *pūrākau* and what these Māori learning dispositions entail. These meanings were recorded in a series of bullet points and then captured in posters. The students agreed that in their learning stories they would be focusing on only one learning disposition but that in their interpretation of the child’s learning they would need to make connections with all the key points identified in the framework for that disposition. Considering all the bullet points rather than a single use of a term would avoid the watering down of the Māori learning disposition and give depth to their ‘recognition of the learning’. Our students are now using their framework during their practicum and we look forward to reflecting with them about how the framework helped them make sense of *Te Whatu Pōkeka*.

**Sue’s Pūrākau**

As a Pākehā this research project has both affirmed and challenged my beliefs. When I joined the teaching team I thought I was doing well in terms of being bicultural but I now know this is a journey with no end for me. The most important learning for me from this project is that *te ao Māori* is now centre front. My responsibility is to take every opportunity I have to learn more about *te ao Māori*, to continue to work out what it means to be Pākehā in Aotearoa and in the teaching profession and to work with my colleagues to ensure *mātauranga Māori* is central in our programme.

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The course that I teach which has been most changed by the project is the third year pāngarau (mathematics) course. One of the learning outcomes says identify and apply bicultural mathematical language, concepts and processes. The journey out of *te pō* (uncertainty) and into *te ao mārama* (enlightenment) involved moving from considering what Māori math resources might be, to thinking about ethno mathematics and Barton's (1991) framework for bicultural mathematics in Aotearoa. While these ideas helped to spark debate, they did not provide satisfactory answers until we started thinking of mathematics as being about making meaning. Early childhood mathematics is about playing with the big ideas (Karttinen & Kaupulainen, 2012) or as Katz (2014) would call them, the intellectual ideas rather than the academic (school) concepts.

This has led me to get the student to consider the difference between seeing mathematical concepts as universal but interpreted through cultural concepts (like using *kōwhaiwhai* patterns when teaching geometry) (Education Review Office, 2016) and considering *how each culture constructs its own mathematics to be congruent with its cultural context* (Hilder, 2007, p. 4). These are contested constructs so I do not expect my students to see them as answers, but use them to develop their own meaning for bicultural mathematical language, concepts and processes.

### Conclusion

This article has illustrated the complexity of making *te reo* Māori visible and ensuring *tikanga* and Māori epistemologies are a part of the everyday initial teaching and early childhood education curriculums. We have learnt the importance of having professional reflective conversations with our students which have given us the insight required to meet their needs. The findings have also given us the opportunity to critically reflect and change our practice as initial teacher educators. In many ways our *pūrākau* has only just begun. As we look to the future the next chapter involves exploring the effect this project has on the redevelopment of our team, our collective courses and the programme as a whole.

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**Glossary**

Hāpū - sub-tribe

iwi - tribe

kaiako - teacher/educator

karakia - prayer

kawa - protocol

kupu - word(s)

kaumātua - elders

mana - prestige

manaakitanga - care

mauri - life force

mātauranga Māori - Māori ways of knowing and being

mihi - introductions

noa - free from tapu

Papatūānuku - Earth Mother

Pepeha - proverbial saying

Pono - truth

pūrākau - Māori form of narrative

pakiwaitara - story

Ranginui - Sky Father

tamariki - children

tapu - scared

te ao Māori - the Māori world

te reo me ngā tikanga Māori - Māori language and cultural practices and beliefs

tikanga Māori - cultural practices and beliefs

waiata - song(s)

whakapapa - genealogy

whanaungatanga - relationship(s)

whānau - family

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