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Journeying toward cultural identity: An interview with Lorraine Kaihau

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I recently interviewed an early childhood practitioner on how they implement biculturalism in their practice and centre, and what resources they use to do this. Lorraine Kaihau (qualified early childhood teacher) is the centre manager of Te Kahui Iti Nei O Te Kopu, a bilingual centre set on the grounds of Tahuna Marae. The centre itself is the vision of Lisa and Roimata Minhinnick and will celebrate its 10th anniversary early next year with a big celebration. It is designed as a place where the future of the iwi could be built, where future leaders are developed, kaitiaki (guardians) that will know their culture and where they come from. These aspirations, the philosophy, and curriculum of the centre have come from the iwi and whānau.



Figure 1: Awaroa Iti is visible from the puna and a short walk across the paddock.



I went prepared to interview Lorraine with some set questions about how bicultural practices are implemented within the centre that support children's understanding of te ao Māori, ngā tikanga and te reo, and quickly understood that the answers that I was looking for were not going to be so simply gained. Lorraine explained to me that children are immersed in their culture from the moment they arrive to the moment they leave, everything is utilised to support children's understanding of who they are and their sense of belonging and place, 'the kids know it's their place'.

The environment surrounding the centre is utilised to support children's learning, 'everything has a name, a story, a waiata...we are all connected'. And Lorraine doesn't mean connected just in a philosophical sense, another aspect of this centre is that almost all the children and teaching team are related to each other in some way – this creates a truly unique sense of whānau, almost like the setting itself is a blend of the traditional ways of caring for the iwi's tamariki within a western education system context. These strong connections mean the centre is like an extension of home. Whānau and visitors are welcomed into the centre 'when people step through the doors it's like welcoming them into your home. You offer a coffee and a kai, you've got to say hi to everyone, all the tamariki have to come and check you out...the only difference is we're not your typical nuclear family – there are six mums and 30 tamariki!'

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Figure 2: Exploring the shoreline, looking for crabs... the riverbank is part of an extended classroom

The centre itself is set on a bank up from the Awaroa iti (smaller river), with the marae and urupā (cemetery) flanking the centre. There is also a gym (or health centre) and the office of the local youth organisation that supports the rangatahi of the tribe - aged from 16-25 years on the grounds. The environment is utilised to embed in children an understanding of their history and culture. On a regular basis the centre organises 'significant sight visits' where kaumātua accompany the teachers and children on visits within the local surroundings and explain the significance and kaupapa to the children. It is explained to parents on enrolment that the entire area surrounding the puna is used as part of the daily curriculum and consent gained for daily outings within the grounds.

times and at the end of the day. Lorraine explained that the dialect that is spoken in this place is unique to Ngāti Te Ata, these are taonga that belong to these children and this place and are protected as such. Lorraine explained that for the majority of the children that attend the puna, English is their home language, and that 80% of their daily life is dominated by western culture. Māori is given here as a taonga.

Te ao Māori, ngā tikanga and te reo are embedded within the curriculum of the centre. The day is started with a karakia to Uenuku the Ngāti Te Ata deity, and karakia is spoken before meal



Figure 3: Kingitanga shares a waiata and the sign for para-karaka (orange)

As we korero we are visited by Lorraine's son Kingitanga, and Lorraine explains to me that they gave Kingitanga his name so that he would never forget who he is and where he comes from. His name is significant and 'represents the values and beliefs of his father's side'. Kingitanga's grandfather was a speaker for Dame Te Atairangikāhu, the Māori Queen. Ngāti Te Ata are supporters of the Kingitanga movement, so the name is significant to the tribe. The name represents his iwi, hapū and also his grandfather, his whakapapa (ancestry). The story above is a good example of how tamariki in this centre learn about their culture, as was earlier stated everything has a story and these stories connect the tamariki and whaea to their culture and who they are. 'Names are significant and important. They tie you back to where you come from so that children will never forget who they are – cultural identity from the time they are born'. For teachers teaching children this is a reminder that there are no short cuts – when we shorten names we

change the meaning – we change the intention of the taonga children were gifted at birth.

Lorraine has been involved with the puna for three years. When her third child was born, her sister-in-law (the then centre manager) suggested that she bring Kingitanga into the centre while she was on maternity leave, and in her own words she became the parent who didn't leave. Through her time in the centre Lorraine developed a desire to make a difference in the lives of children. Stepping away from a career in a corporate environment into the world of early childhood Lorraine has come to realise that the children have taught her, 'my ways of thinking and being have completely changed'... 'I couldn't ask for anything more'. Lorraine's cultural identity has been a journey that she still finds herself on, from a place where it wasn't okay to be Māori to an understanding that it is okay to be Māori and to feel pride in who she is.

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My last question to Lorraine was what advice would you give to others starting out, wanting to increase their knowledge and understanding of te ao Māori, ngā tikanga and te reo? 'Get past the fear...use what you have...use the words, even if it is only to say kia ora', make a start and build from there. Lorraine explains that it is about embracing what there is and knowing you have something to bring, to contribute. The centre has all the same resources that



Figure 4: Engaging children in collaborative play

other centres have, the same kinds of resources, 'we are very hands on, we make sure the children have opportunities to play and explore, try things out, there are no boundaries' – in other words children are given responsibilities to take care of each other and responsible for the risks that they take, and children are reminded in their play to tiaki pēpi – look after each other and the younger children. Stories and waiata are incorporated naturally within conversations and children's play as teachers work alongside children. The children in this setting are confident, they know who they are, they know that they are safe, they get everything here, comfort, friendship, whānau. This is all cultivated through the tikanga, the love is how they learn... 'a strong sense of belonging, this is their place and they know it, even after they have left we are still their whaea, and their whānau'.