

A Bicultural Curriculum for Toddlers: Living It Every Day

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Abstract: Early childhood teachers' practice in Aotearoa is guided by *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996) and their obligations to Te Tiriti o Waitangi. However, many teachers don't feel comfortable with bicultural practice and find its application bewildering. Therefore, this research paper was aimed at strategies in which Te Ao Māori could be integrated into the curriculum for toddlers naturally. The research was conducted by using action research methods at a younger toddlers' room with the participants being both teachers and children. Waiata, pakiwaitara and toi Māori were introduced over a three-week period. The evaluation of findings, gathered by observation sheets, questionnaires and a research journal, showed that waiata and pakiwaitara were very effective teaching strategies. Throughout the research it became clear that the level of children's learning depended greatly on the level of teachers' involvement. While the research was successful in its main goal, the fact that it was not the undertaking of the whole team at the centre made it hard for some teachers to feel the same degree of responsibility for its implementation and results. However, the findings clearly show that this approach to a bicultural curriculum works very well for the young age group and could be easily adopted by other centres to make Te Ao Māori part of their daily learning programme.

Key Words: bicultural, Māori, toddlers, curriculum

Introduction

*Kaua e rangiruatia te hāpai o te hoe;
E kore tō tātou waka e ū ki uta.*

*Don't paddle out of unison;
Our canoe will never reach the shore.*
(Ministry of Education, 2007)

This whakataukī became the motto of this research as it signifies the need for the whole team of teachers to work as one and collaborate to bring improvement to the overall practice at a centre and benefit for all children.

Living and teaching in Aotearoa New Zealand carries specific responsibilities towards tangata whenua. All non-Māori partners of Te Tiriti o Waitangi have the duty to honour the obligations stated in the document. Among these are the right to tino rangatiratanga, protection of taonga and recognition of tikanga Māori (Ka'ai, Moorfield, Reilly & Mosley, 2004). In addition, early childhood teachers are guided by the curriculum document *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996) which further stresses the importance of bicultural practice by incorporating te reo Māori me ngā tikanga. From these obligations it is clear that bicultural practice in early childhood settings is a must and should be an established part of the curriculum.

This leads to the question: How can we incorporate the obligations mentioned above into the curriculum for young toddlers naturally? That is the issue many centres might be dealing with and is the focus of this action research project conducted in a small Auckland centre. For this reason the research goal, to incorporate a bicultural curriculum into everyday life of toddlers naturally, originated from the desire to honour the principle of a partnership between two peoples inherent in Te Tiriti o Waitangi. The main aim of the research was to find

practical ways in which teachers could integrate Te Ao Māori into the curriculum. There are already many publications that include useful resources and ways to develop strategies that facilitate delivery of a bicultural curriculum. The aspiration of this research was to identify these and help teachers to implement bicultural practice confidently and competently. The researcher's goal was to empower teachers and find methods of implementation that would be simple yet effective. These strategies would then give teachers a sense of ownership for both their own actions and those of the whole team (Jenkin, 2011).

It is true that many practitioners struggle with the delivery of a bicultural curriculum in practice (Jenkin, 2011). While this struggle may have roots in the educators' lack of confidence and their reluctance to change (Williams, Broadley & Lawson Te-Aho, 2012), *Te Whāriki* could also be blamed. The generalised description of outcomes and strategies in *Te Whāriki* allows practitioners to choose what and how they will implement. While this offers great independence and tino rangatiratanga (Reedy, 2003), there are no strict procedures or rules related to a bicultural curriculum and the lack of guidance from the document is evident.

Strategies and resources.

To achieve the goal of successful implementation of a bicultural curriculum, teachers need to employ a certain set of strategies and resources. These include, for example, using te reo and tikanga Māori, singing of waiata or introducing traditional symbols and patterns. There is plenty of literature connected with this issue but someone not knowledgeable in this field might still find these strategies and resources confusing.

Williams and Broadley (2012) assist teachers by offering them guidance through the main tikanga Māori in their brochure *Resource Kit for Graduate Teachers*, while Mihaka (2008) claims that te reo can be learnt through Māori waiata. Even though the knowledge of te reo Māori and tikanga Māori seem to be the most important concern (Jenkin, 2009, 2011), the strategies involved need to be also centred on the behaviour of teachers and their commitment to the common goal (Jenkin, 2011).

Influence of the environment on bicultural practice.

Teachers' behaviour and performance are closely linked to the environment and context of their centre. Jenkin (2011) argues that "Teachers who are going to routinely implement te reo Māori me ōna tikanga need to have a context within which Tiriti-based curriculum is normal practice; where such a context does not exist, it clearly needs to be collaboratively created" (p. 54). For this reason it is necessary for centre management to have an understanding of bicultural practices and implementation (Williams, Broadley & Lawson Te-Aho, 2012). Jenkin (2011) adds that it is necessary for one teacher to become the leader who can motivate the rest of the team and for the team to take ownership of their actions. Only then will the team achieve their goal.

Balancing Māori and Pākehā parts of bicultural curriculum.

One issue that seems to prevail among practitioners is the desired balance in delivering both parts of the curriculum. "How much is too much?" and "How much is not enough?" are questions that are vital to this matter. Further inquiry into Māori tikanga showed that traditional practices align well with the requirements of *Te Whāriki* and a Māori curriculum could successfully be used with all children. Meade and Hanna (2003) reached the same conclusion when they said that "because what is good for Māori children is also good for all children such a framework would be beneficial for every child involved in New Zealand general early childhood services" (pp. 1–2). It needs to be realised that Māori and Pākehā

curricula don't contradict each other; these two curricula can coexist within one curriculum used for all children (Ritchie, 2003).

Avoiding tokenistic behaviour.

The uncertainty many teachers feel in delivering a bicultural curriculum lies in their fear of coming across as tokenistic. They feel that what they do is not enough and that it doesn't make much difference anyway. Correct knowledge of me ōna tikanga Māori and practical strategies can help the team succeed. Rau and Ritchie (2011) argue that tikanga actually means "being Māori" (p. 797). This could imply that tikanga could be crucial to the survival of Māori culture (Williams, Broadley & Lawson Te-Aho, 2012).

Tokenism can be avoided by practitioners' knowledge of Māori development theories and the accurate vision of a Māori child. Royal Tangaere (1997) proposed that Māori theories can be likened to Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory. In all these theories a child "does not develop in isolation; a child develops through interactions and within a certain cultural context" (Royal Tangaere, 1997, p. 55).

To avoid tokenism the whole team has to participate equally. As individuals, teachers will only offer tokens, whereas a team with a passionate leader will triumph (Jenkin, 2011). This notion is shared by Meade and Hanna (2003), who stress that to achieve success all teachers must contribute and persevere.

Thus, for the research to be successful it was necessary that the whole team be involved in the process. It was also vital to choose methodology that would allow initiating and monitoring of changes in the centre's bicultural practice.

Methodology

Based on the considerations and ideas mentioned above, the researcher chose an action research methodology. This approach allowed the researcher to evaluate the current situation, implement changes, and analyse the situation after the implementation (MacNaughton & Hughes, 2008).

The research was conducted at a privately owned centre in central Auckland. The room was licensed for 20 children between the ages of 18 months and 2½ years. There were six teachers employed in this room, three full time and three part time. Participating children were predominantly New Zealand European with only a low percentage from other cultures (Indian, Chinese, Māori and Pasifika). All teachers were New Zealand European.

The research topic aimed to promote a bicultural curriculum as a valid way of teaching and learning. To achieve this it was necessary to increase the knowledge and confidence of all teachers in Te Ao Māori. This was done by incorporating waiata (songs), pakiwaitara (storytelling) and toi Māori (art experiences) into everyday practice through interactive tools (for example, puppets, flashcards and magnetic stories). By initiating three cycles of change in which one aspect of Te Ao Māori was introduced every week, it was possible to evaluate the results with the help of observation sheets and a research journal. At the end of the third cycle, observed teachers completed a questionnaire with questions relevant to theirs and the children's learning. These methods of data collection were appropriate to the research topic. The observation sheets showed what knowledge and skills the children and teachers held and if and how immersion in a bicultural curriculum altered the situation. They also revealed gaps in knowledge and helped to specify areas needing additional resources and development. The questionnaires offered an insight into teachers' thoughts and learning connected with the research. Throughout the research the researcher's own thoughts,

experiences and discussions with teachers were recorded in a research journal which was used as an additional data collection method. Collaboration with the whole teaching team and the centre manager was necessary and a vital part of this research.

A mixture of quantitative and qualitative methods was used to analyse the data. The frequency of implementation of Te Ao Maori aspects was recorded through observation sheets. The questionnaires and the research journal helped to interpret teachers' attitudes and thoughts (MacNaughton & Hughes, 2008; Roberts-Holmes, 2011).

Findings and Discussion

Through implementation of three cycles of change, it became possible to identify the most effective aspects of Te Ao Māori when working with the toddlers in the research group.

Resources Created by the Researcher to Help Deliver a Bicultural Curriculum



Figure 1: The myth resources were made using books written and illustrated by Peter Gossage (2005a, 2005b, 2006).

Waiata.

Children's knowledge increased rapidly in the field of waiata and in the understanding of te reo Māori. This could be because children are musical creatures. They seem to have an innate sense of rhythm and through music can connect with their daily experiences (Russell-Bowie, 1989). The research findings were consistent with this belief and showed that including waiata in the first cycle was the best method of incorporating te reo into the curriculum. Given children's love of singing, including Māori songs, was genuine. They didn't worry about the different language; instead they learnt the language in an effortless and fun way (Mihaka, 2008). In addition, learning the language through songs didn't feel tokenistic in any way; instead it was very natural and intuitive (Jenkin, 2009). Interactive

singing (including dancing, musical instruments, CDs and flashcards) proved to be even more effective. With the added action or object the children's interest grew and their involvement in the experiences intensified.

The level of children's learning, however, seemed to depend greatly on their teachers' involvement. This could be related to children needing role models to follow, having the knowledge that what they are doing is meaningful and brings joy also to the adults in their lives, and having people to share their pleasure with (Russell-Bowie, 1989). This would also conform to Vygotsky's and Bronfenbrenner's notions that children develop through association with others (Santrock, 2009). Some teachers claimed they were reluctant to join in because they had limited personal knowledge and confidence to initiate these experiences (even though resources were provided). There seemed to be a correlation between the teachers' knowledge and confidence and their commitment to being involved. The children learnt the songs and actions after only a few repetitions, which showed that with a bit of practice, the teachers could have learnt them, too. With all teachers equally incorporating waiata into practice, the learning would increase (Jenkin, 2009). On a positive note, it should be stated that teachers' ability to get involved increased with the use of interactive resources.

Pakiwaitara.

The aspect that showed the second largest improvement in terms of implementing a bicultural curriculum was pakiwaitara, or storytelling. The children were introduced to some history of Te Ao Māori by the inclusion of myths and legends into the programme. The interactive way these stories were narrated (with the use of puppets and props) helped the children to focus, join in and communicate with each other. This strategy corresponded with Wright's (2003) opinion that toddlers' learning "consists of constructing meaning through interactions with others, and through the exploration of objects and events" (p. 114). *Te Whāriki* also states the expectation that children will be familiar with stories of their culture and the cultures of others (Ministry of Education, 1996). Furthermore, many children from the older toddlers' room participated in these experiences. Their questions not only provided the younger children with important tuakana-teina (older child – younger child) interactions but kept the interest in the experiences going for longer periods of time. Their presence also contributed to the important concept of whanaungatanga (relationships) within the centre (Hogan, Chisnall & Rongo Culbreath, 2010).

All the teachers were provided with words to the introduced myths. Despite that, some didn't feel confident in narrating them to children. However, only listening passively didn't raise the teachers' confidence nor did practising alone – it was only the teachers who tried saying the words with the children who noted significant improvements in this area on their questionnaire sheets. This hesitation could have been caused by the loss of the teachers' storytelling ability. Scroggie (2009) claims that with the progress of our culture, some of the old art might have been lost. She adds that the arrival of written word marked the beginning of the end for oral tales.

On average, the teachers indicated bigger improvements in waiata than in pakiwaitara. Given that waiata were sung in te reo but the myths narrated in English, the results were interesting. Could this have been caused by the frequency of implementation which was higher in waiata singing? Or was it connected with the notion that waiata could be learnt but a story was interactive and had to be lived, imagined and responded to? (Scroggie, 2009). Were the teachers afraid that they wouldn't be able to answer children's questions should they ask any? These questions suggest the need for further research in this field.

Toi Māori.

Immersing toddlers in Te Ao Māori through art proved to be the least effective method of the three tried. This could have been caused by the toddlers' inability to relate these experiences to previous events in their lives as this way of learning is very important to children of this age (Brownlee, 2007; Wright, 2003). In the offered experiences children had the opportunity to help with flax preparation, weaving, painting and clay carving. However, these actions were not connected in any way to the children's past and were very teacher directed and controlled. The exposure was mainly visual and, as a result, the children didn't show as much interest in these activities as they did in waiata and pakiwaitara. Consequently, the inclusion of art experiences felt quite forced, and if they were not accompanied by continuous practice of waiata and pakiwaitara, their use as a means to implement a bicultural curriculum would actually appear quite tokenistic (Jenkin, 2009).

Conclusion

The need for a bicultural curriculum in early childhood settings is underpinned by New Zealand Government requirements and the curriculum document *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996). During the research period it became obvious that singing waiata seemed to be the most effective method of teaching te reo to both children and teachers. Therefore, the researcher would recommend to all early childhood settings starting to implement bicultural practice that they use Rotu Mihaka's (2008) article "Te reo can be easily learned through waiata tamariki" and Williams and Broadley's (2012) *Resource Kits*.

After waiata, pakiwaitara closely followed as an effective method of introducing a bicultural curriculum. On the other hand, toi Māori didn't provide children of the researched age group with enough interactions to sustain interest and support learning. The level of teachers' involvement in the experiences corresponded with their confidence in and knowledge of the topics. Moreover, the degree to which teachers' understanding grew over the period of the project, in terms of both Te Ao Māori and how to implement bicultural practices, was directly related to their ability and efforts to initiate the bicultural activities.

The limitation of the research might have been the position of the researcher as the team leader within the team. As all the changes were initiated by the researcher, other team members might have thought that this was only a one-person project and their contribution wasn't required. Would the results have been different if the research had been the work and responsibility of the whole teaching team? And would the collected data have been different in all three approaches chosen to facilitate incorporation of a bicultural curriculum? Whatever the answers to these questions, the main aim of the research was achieved, namely that two strategies – waiata and pakiwaitara – were found to be valid methods of bicultural learning and teaching. Thus, the researcher recommends that waiata and pakiwaitara be used as everyday techniques for the delivery of a bicultural curriculum.

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