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Being Māori: culturally relevant assessment in early childhood education

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Concern has been raised about the under-achievement of Māori children in education. The problem has tended to be located with Māori children rather than with assessments. Clearly if one takes a sociocultural perspective achievement is situated. Although studies in early childhood education have examined and developed assessment tools and frameworks there has been little attention given to early childhood assessment methods that are congruent with Māori worldviews, ideas of valued learning and aspirations for children. This paper illustrates and provides insight into assessment by and for Māori. The paper analyses the nature of assessment understandings and practices that reflect traditional Māori values. It highlights culturally relevant assessment that makes sense to Māori, that reflects ‘being Māori’ and that supports Māori ideals and aspirations for children.

Keywords: identity; genealogy; early childhood assessment; spirituality

Introduction

Te Whāriki is the New Zealand Ministry of Education’s early childhood curriculum policy statement. *Te Whāriki: He Whāriki Mātauranga mo ngā Mokopuna o Aotearoa/Early Childhood Curriculum* (Ministry of Education 1996) is a bicultural, socioculturally conceived curriculum document, partially written in Māori (the language of the indigenous peoples of Aotearoa, New Zealand) founded on the aspiration that children ‘grow up as competent and confident learners and communicators, healthy in mind, body and spirit, secure in their sense of belonging and in the knowledge that they make a valued contribution to society’ (1996, 9). Te Whāriki translates to ‘a woven mat’ that allows for diverse patterning depending on knowledge bases, beliefs and values. Te Whāriki reflects the partnership between Māori and Pākehā (New Zealanders of British descent) inherent within the Te Tiriti o Waitangi, New Zealand’s founding document, and is an example of how traditional Māori and Pākehā values, concepts, worldviews and philosophies have been integrated into a modern, bicultural, educational document.

The Te Whāriki curriculum has led to exploring new ways to assess young children’s learning and development. This paper is a result of work completed on two interrelated projects aimed at exploring assessment tools that are grounded in Māori ways of knowing and being. The first project is reported in *Te Whatu Pōkeka*:

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Kaupapa Māori Assessment for Learning Early Childhood Exemplars (Ministry of Education 2009), a Ministry of Education professional support assessment resource for Māori early childhood services, based on Māori values, philosophies and cultural contexts. The second project is my doctoral thesis, entitled *Te Whatu Kākahu: Kaupapa Māori Assessment Praxis (in progress)*, which journals the progress of participating Māori early childhood services towards the development of Māori early childhood assessment approaches and framings.

Participation in the assessment projects allowed teachers to explore assessment understandings and processes and required reflection on what made them Māori, what made them different from mainstream early childhood services and how this was and could be reflected in practice. The process required exploration and articulation of what the early childhood centres did that was specifically Māori, what expressed and reflected 'being Māori' and dialogue on why these practices, routines and understandings were important to 'being Māori'. A service supervisor (doctoral thesis interview transcript) makes the point that 'being Māori' or seeing through Māori eyes was key to their assessment understandings and practices. She also emphasises the importance of assessment making sense to Māori:

I think European assessment is totally different than Māori assessment because our eyes look at it different. (Interview Transcript – Best of Both Worlds Centre Supervisor 2008, 1)

... you have to see it through Māori eyes in order to understand. (Interview Transcript – Best of Both Worlds Centre Supervisor 2008, 3)

Recognition of what made them Māori, what they valued, how they viewed the world and how this was reflected in centre practice and assessment processes was key to the development of understandings, as was the realisation that Māori assessment did not have to parallel Pākehā or Western assessment; that it was acceptable to be different; that in fact difference was crucial if it was to make sense to Māori.

This paper will first examine understandings of Māori ways of being and identity, making links to whakapapa (genealogy) and Māori worldviews. It describes the relationship Māori have with ancestors, the creation of the universe and everything in it, and the world of the gods, the spirit world. It then discusses the spiritual attributes that Māori children inherit through these relationships that are fundamental to their learning and holistic well-being. It finally examines an early childhood assessment that has been developed to reflect and support Māori worldviews – ways of knowing, identity – being Māori and doing – teaching, learning and assessment.

Ways of being – being Māori

E kore au e ngaro, he kākano i ruiuria mai i Rangiatea.

[I will never be lost; the seed was sown in Rangiatea.] (Traditional Māori Proverb)

This whakataukī (traditional Māori proverb) emphasises that the speaker has and knows his or her whakapapa (genealogical links) to Rangiatea (the Māori spiritual homeland), so is confident with a secure identity and a positive future. Early

childhood assessment tools that are grounded in Māori understandings, worldviews, philosophies and practices can support the development of a secure Māori identity and thus a positive future for Māori children. Assessment for Māori therefore must reflect and support ‘being Māori’.

Contemporary ideas of Māori identity, of ‘being Māori’, are both complex and increasingly diverse. Māori are not a homogeneous group and there is no one single Māori identity, Cunningham (1998) suggested that we are now more socially and culturally diverse than at any other time in our history. Durie concurred, stating ‘Māori are as diverse as any other people – not only in socio-economic terms but also in fundamental attitudes to identity’ (1998, 59).

Living in the modern world requires that Māori develop the ability to operate successfully across two separate cultures, the Pākehā (New Zealander of British Descent) and the Māori, to become effectively bicultural (Durie 1997). While operating biculturally does not necessarily result in cultural schizophrenia, it does require extra resilience in the development of strong identities, both personal and social. Salmond (1975) described how Māori are required to negotiate radically different cultural terrains, including assumptions, behaviours, values and beliefs about how the world is constituted, and what each culture holds as truths. She stated:

In European situations, most Māori people follow a dominantly European conception of reality, one they have learned at school and in church. The dead go to heaven, buildings are inanimate, New Zealand is divided into counties and governed by Parliament, and its history traces back to Britain. In Māori situations, however ... the dead go to ‘Te Po’ or Underworld to join their ancestors, the meeting-house is addressed as a person, New Zealand becomes Aotearoa, divided into tribal districts, and its history traces back to Hawaiiki. (Salmond 1975, 211)

Māori live in and between at least two worlds. While they may position themselves differently in these worlds they are, by virtue of descent, Māori (Nikora 2007). Whakapapa (genealogy) therefore is a crucial element of identity and being Māori. Blank claimed that whakapapa means that ‘I am Māori and from there I determine what it means for me’ (1998, 225). Love added that it is not necessary to know one’s whakapapa to be Māori, rather ‘whakapapa is embodied in Māori individuals ... whether or not one “knows” or has “learned” it’ (2004, 12).

Whakapapa

Whakapapa has many meanings but can generally be viewed as genealogy and history. The Williams Dictionary (2001) definitions of whakapapa include:

To lie flat.
Place in layers, lay one upon another.
Recite in proper order genealogies, legends etc.
Genealogical table.

‘Papa’ describes something that is broad and flat such as a board or slab and ‘whaka’ can be translated as ‘to enable’ or ‘make happen’. Whakapapa relates to the idea of placing in layers or laying one on another. Whakapapa operates at various levels but is most commonly concerned with genealogical narratives, stories that are recounted layer upon layer, ancestor upon ancestor up to the present day, a

genealogical layering of one generation of ancestors upon the previous. Whakapapa is a continuous lifeline from those who existed before to those living today. It encompasses everything that is passed from one generation to the next, from one ancestor to the next and from the deceased to the living (Berryman 2008).

Whakapapa is fundamental to traditional Māori understandings of the world and identity (Berryman 2008; Rangihau 1977). Māori are descendants of the heavens and through whakapapa can trace lineage back to the very beginning of time and the creation of the universe (Te Rito 2007). 'Whakapapa is the genealogical descent of all living things from the gods to the present time; whakapapa is a basis for the organization of knowledge in respect of the creation and development of all things' (Barlow 1991, 173).

Whakapapa therefore is at the heart of not only how Māori came into the world but also how Māori understand the world and their place within it (Berryman 2008).

Whakapapa grounds Māori over time and space not only with the land and other forms of life but with people. Whakapapa connects one to whānau (immediate family grouping), and hapu and iwi (extended groupings of people who share a common genealogy). Through these connections whakapapa establishes personal and collective identities, positioning and connectedness (Berryman 2008). The importance of whakapapa for Māori therefore cannot be overestimated. It is not only at the very core of what it means to be Māori, but 'it functions as an epistemological template' as a 'fundamental form of knowing' (Whitt, Roberts, Norman, and Grieves, 2003, 5).

Ways of knowing – spiritual connectedness

Traditional Māori ways of being and knowing thus can be seen as originating in Māori perspectives of the universe and the creation of the universe. In this way people are inherently connected with the universe, with the world of spiritual powers, the world of the gods. There is general agreement that the spiritual and the secular are not closed or separate from each other. The worlds are intimately connected with activities in the everyday material world coming under the influence and interpenetrated by spiritual powers from the higher world, the spiritual world (Marsden 2003; Reilly 2004; Shirres 1997).

The cultural milieu (of the Māori) is rooted both in the temporal world and the transcendent world. This brings a person into intimate relationship with the gods and his universe. (Marsden 2003, 137)

Whakapapa provides a continuum of life from the spiritual world to the physical world and from the creation of the universe to the human person, past, present and future. Identity past, present and future comes from whakapapa links: to the past through ancestors; to the present through whānau (family); and to the future through children (tamariki) and grandchildren (mokopuna).

Teachers who work with Māori children need to recognise and acknowledge who the child is and his/her links through his/her ancestors to the spirit world.

Tama is derived from Tama-te-ra the central sun, the divine spark; ariki refers to senior most status, and riki on its own can mean smaller version. Tamariki is the Māori word for children. (Pere 1991, 4)

The moko is the traditional Māori art of tattoo. Moko were visual representations of the flow of the wairua [spirit] into the temporal realm... Moko were engraved into the face and sometimes other body parts of men and women. They were unique to them and incorporated symbolic representations of their whakapapa and other domains of identity... One's moko was one's sign; to see the sign was to know the person. A puna ... is a spring of water. Thus the two concepts ... combine as the representation of ... the ongoing spring of the people... Mokopuna are the temporal signs or manifestations of the tupuna [ancestors]. (Love 2004, 50)

The child's holistic well-being is linked to whakapapa. Through whakapapa the child inherits many characteristics including spiritual attributes that define the nature and sanctity of the child (Mead 2003). They include but are not limited to: tapu and mana (potential and spiritual power); mauri (living essence); and wairua (spiritual self).

Tapu/mana

Tapu can be translated as 'being with potentiality for power' (Shirres 1997, 33). Mead (2003) claimed that personal tapu is the person's most important spiritual attribute. It is pervasive, influencing all other attributes. It is akin to a personal force field that can be felt and sensed by others. It is the sacred life force that reflects the state of the whole person.

Tapu and mana are intimately connected. Whereas tapu is the potentiality for power, mana is the actual power, the realisation of the tapu of the person. 'Mana is derived from the spiritual dimension and humans are merely the vessel through which mana flows and manifests itself' (Paul-Burke 2011, 14). Mana can also be translated as 'prestige, power, or reputation', but, it also has a deeper meaning of 'spiritual power and authority'. The concept of Mana is central to the early childhood curriculum document *Te Whāriki*, which states: 'Ko te whakatipu i te mana o te mokopuna te tino taumata hei whāinga ma tātou [Enhancing the power/status of the child is the highest objective for us all]' (Ministry of Education 1996, 32).

Mana is a crucial aspect of Māori perceptions of the world and identity with almost all activities linked to upholding mana. Mana can only be present if the vessel in which it resides has mauri (life-force or life-energy). Mauri is a requirement of life itself.

Mauri

Mauri is a generic life force. All living things have a mauri and all things are connected. Mauri is the spark of life, the active element that indicates one is alive (Mead 2003). Mauri is an essential and inseparable aspect of the child. It is an active sign of life, an attribute of self. The Māori child is born with mauri, which remains with that child all of his/her life. When the child is physically and socially healthy, the mauri is in a state of balance, known as Mauri tau (the mauri is at peace). It is therefore important to nurture and protect the mauri of the child (Mead 2003).

Patterson (1992) identified mauri with a number of values that have relevance for the teaching, learning and assessment such as:

self-esteem – there is an obligation to foster children's self-esteem;
 enlightenment – children have a right to seek enlightenment, to extend their mauri;
 knowledge is power – learning can contribute to the mauri of the child;
 respect – respect and acceptance supports mauri;
 harmony – live in harmony with and care for the natural world.

Pere (1991) raises a number of questions that are pertinent for early childhood teachers with regard to the child's mauri:

How carefully do we feel for and consider the mauri of each child in our care? Have we done everything we can to build up the mauri, or do we damage it in a small way each day? If a child feels that she or he is respected and accepted, then her or his mauri waxes. (1991, 12)

Wairua

Whereas mauri is bound to the person and ceases to exist when the person dies, wairua can leave the body and lives on when the person dies. Wairua is an unseen energy that impacts upon all aspects of a person's being and, according to Durie (1985, 483), it is the 'most basic and essential dimension of Māori health'. All Māori children are born with wairua, which can be translated as 'soul' or 'spirit' (Mead 2003, 54).

Key to understandings of wairua is the acknowledgement that wairua is subject to damage through illness, injury and the actions and deeds of others. Early childhood teachers must ensure that children's wairua is acknowledged and protected. Pere stated that 'wairua denotes two waters. There are both the positive and the negative streams for one to consider. Everything has a wairua, for example, water can give or take life. It is a matter of keeping balance' (1991, 16).

Ways of doing – balance and assessment

Maintaining balance is a key feature of Māori ways of knowing that relate directly to educational and assessment understandings and practices. Balance between the sacred and the secular, good and bad, life and death – a traditional Māori view of the world is one where balance is maintained between opposing forces. Māori did not adhere to the concept of good being opposed to evil, just as there was no concept of people being good or evil; instead they were important components of a single harmonious world (Patterson 1992). Actions were therefore not viewed as good or bad, but rather were perceived in terms of harmony and balance.

Respect is fundamental to the concept of balance and understandings of Māori values, ideals and ethics. Patterson (1992) makes the point that there are basic differences between Māori values and Pākehā values. In a perfect Pākehā world good reigns supreme. However, a perfect Māori world contains good and bad, light and dark, life and death, balanced but none the less oppositional.

... pairs of equal and opposite forces are prominent: light and dark, life and death, male and female, tapu [sacred] and noa [profane]. When things go wrong the trouble is often attributed to a lack of balance between one or more of these pairs of forces. Thus the remedy is always a matter of restoring balance. (1992, 183)

This focus on balance is reflected in traditional Māori narratives and myths such as the stories of the demi-god *Māui tikitiki a Taranga*.

Māui tikitiki a Taranga

The *Māui tikitiki a Taranga* assessment framework was developed by Best of Both Worlds Bilingual Preschool. Best of Both Worlds Bilingual Preschool is a Māori/English bicultural, bilingual early childhood service located in Papakura, South Auckland, New Zealand. The articulation and reification of *Māui-tikitiki-a-Taranga* as an assessment frame involved exploration and interpretation of his behaviours, traits and characteristics, trial and error, ongoing discussion with community, whānau (extended family), knowledgeable others, and research.

Māui tikitiki a Taranga, the ancestor hero, is known throughout Polynesia. He was a romantic figure, a mischief-maker and a culture hero (Walker 1996). He served as a model, characterising personal qualities and traits valued in Māori society. The names he is known by give an insight into his character: *Māui-mōhio* (great knowledge), *Māui-atamai* (quick-wittedness), *Māui-toa* (bravery). Māui was a trickster who used deception to achieve many of his accomplishments. This is where he derived his other names, *Māui-nukurau* (trickster) and *Māui tinihanga* (of many devices). 'He was quick, intelligent, bold, resourceful, cunning and fearless, epitomising the basic personality structures idealised by Māori society' (Walker 1990, 15).

Best of Both World's assessment framework mirrored these personality structures and includes:

Mana: Identity, pride, inner strength, self assurance, confidence

Manaakitanga: Caring, sharing, kindness, friendship, love, nurturance.

Whanaungatanga: Developing relationships, taking responsibility for oneself and others, tuakana/teina.

Rangatiratanga: Confidence, self-reliance, leadership, standing up for oneself, perseverance, determination, working through difficulty

Whakatoi: Cheekiness, spiritedness, displaying and enjoying humour, having fun.

Tinihanga: Cunningness, trickery, deception, testing limits, challenging, questioning, curiosity, exploring, risk-taking, lateral thinking.

Mana

As previously stated, mana can be described as power or prestige. Within the context of early childhood it is crucial that the child's mana be nurtured and enhanced (Hemara 2000; Marsden 2003; Metge 1995). Education and learning are important aspects of the child's upbringing that can enhance mana.

For Best of Both Worlds Bilingual Preschool the expression and assertion of mana includes: standing up for oneself and others (being courageous), confidently stating ideas and thinking, having a positive view of one's abilities, views, relationships, self and place in the world and in those of others. For this to happen children must know 'who they are' and where they belong, and acknowledge and respect this in others.

Manaakitanga

Manaaki is derived from the word ‘mana’. Manaaki can be translated as ‘to entertain or befriend, to show respect or kindness’ (Patterson 1992, 148). Manaakitanga acknowledges the mana inherent in each child. Within the early childhood service context, assessment requires the centralising of Māori constructs of the child within the assessment frame, ensuring that assessments capture the strengths, abilities and competences of children and whānau rather than any perceived deficiencies (Rameka 2007).

Manaakitanga for Best of Both Worlds Bilingual Preschool is reflected in behaviours such as: showing respect and kindness to others, caring, sharing and being a friend. It requires that children develop empathy and connectedness with others, social and communal identities, and understandings of roles and responsibilities associated with those identities.

Whanaungatanga

Whanaungatanga comes from the word whānau (‘be born’, or extended family). The whānau is the basic social unit of Māori society, the inner circle of kinship, the smallest unit of societal organisation (Reilly 2004). ‘Whanaungatanga’ (kinship) is the way Māori view, maintain and strengthen family relations. It involves rights, responsibilities, obligations and commitments among members that generate family cohesion and cooperation. Macfarlane, Glynn, Grace and Penetito maintained that, within an educational context, whanaungatanga ‘involves the central importance of establishing and maintaining effective and equitable relationships between teachers and learners’ (2005, 25).

Best of Both Worlds Bilingual Preschool recognised that the child’s self-esteem is not a matter for the individual. Rather, it depends on positive relationships with others, and it is reflected in the way children develop and maintain kinship relationships, take responsibility for themselves and others, and connect with others.

The following story highlights how children are able to express whanaungatanga and manaakitanga, and nurture the mana of others by taking responsibility for the well-being of others. Despite their young ages, these two children are able to ask for and receive compassion, empathy and reassurance.

Kaua e Haere Paawai – Don’t Go Paawai! (Written by Parewai’s mother)

Today when I went to pick up Parewai (aged 2 years 4 months) from kōhanga we were walking out the gate towards the car, and Tū (same age), began calling out ‘Kaua haere Paawai, kaua haere (Don’t go Parewai, don’t go)’. She was holding onto the bars of the gate with her face between two bars as if in jail. She looked very sad and Parewai went back. They touched hands affectionately and talked quietly, face to face. This went on for a few minutes, then, Parewai turned to leave. Tū called out again ‘kaua haere Paawai’ and again Parewai turned back. The talking and touching took place again and finally Tū said ‘see ya’. Parewai replied ‘see ya’ and both went happily their different ways.

It was amazing to see the affection and caring the girls had for each other. I was very touched to see my baby being so loving towards her hoa [friend].

Manaakitanga: Parewai acknowledges and is respectful of Tū’s feelings and takes responsibility for her friend’s well-being.

Mana: Parewai's action not only acknowledges Tū's mana but also reflects her own 'mana' and understandings of manaakitanga.

Whanaungatanga: Parewai has developed a strong relationship with Tū and therefore has a commitment to her friend.

Rangatiratanga

Rangatira is a term for 'leader' or 'chief'. Rangatiratanga can be translated as chieftenship and encapsulates many of the Māori virtues, aspirations and human possibilities including ideas of beauty, strength and courage (Patterson 1992). Within a Māori world-view, rangatiratanga includes a focus on individuals reaching their highest potential, expanding and deepening their talents and skills, thus strengthening and enhancing the whānau/family or collective (Macfarlane et al. 2005; Rameka 2007).

A further feature of a rangatira is their innate chiefly qualities, inherited from ancestors, qualities inherent in all Māori children. Rangatiratanga acknowledges the chiefly origins of children.

Rangatiratanga refers to the autonomy, power or authority that individuals have over their own lives and learning. It affirms their identity as a descendant of an ancestral whānau member and acknowledges the rights that accompany that status. The unique qualities of each and every individual are acknowledged and respected. (Macfarlane et al. 2005, 25)

Rangatiratanga in the context of Best of Both Worlds Bilingual Preschools assessment framing is a combination of an adventurous spirit, including taking advantage of opportunities; an ability to observe and plan; to work hard and learn; combined with a responsibility to nurture, mentor, share and be grateful.

The final two characteristics or traits, *whakatoī* and *tinihanga*, provide balance to the framework, reflecting the concept of opposing elements operating harmoniously and interdependently in the world, and that this oppositional positioning is both normal and desirable. It is also important to recognise the implications of this positioning not only in terms of metaphysical understandings but also in practice, for example teaching, learning and assessment theory and practice.

Whakatoī

Whakatoī can be translated as cheeky, annoying or teasing. These characteristics can be understood more clearly when we look at traditional Māori childrearing practices. In traditional Māori society children were the centre of attention and affection, often indulged, fed on demand, undisciplined and wilful (Walker 1996). Traditionally it was important for Māori that children assert themselves and the mana of their whānau (extended family). Keesing (1928) noted that 'the whole family and tribal training ensured that boys and girls were reared to maintain the aggressiveness, independence and prowess of the ancestral stock' (cited in Hemara 2000, 8). The spirited Māori child, the confident cheeky child, was therefore encouraged and chastisement was very rarely condoned.

Tinihanga

Māori myths and legends contain many examples of the use of deceit and trickery to attain important knowledge and skills. 'Deceit and trickery are acceptable if

socially acceptable desires are to be achieved' (Walker 1978, 22). Furthermore, the intention – whether good or bad – is not of importance, rather it depends on the result, the success of the enterprise. Patterson stated, 'If trickery and deceit are required then trickery and deceit are justified. The end – mana – justifies the means – trickery and deceit' (1992, 165).

Trickery was therefore valued and viewed as key to acquiring knowledge and the achievement of the desired goals and outcomes. It required that children develop qualities such as ingenuity, resourcefulness, lateral thinking and cunningness. These qualities indicate: depth of thinking and reflection, the ability to forward plan with an emphasis on possible and probable outcomes, an understanding of human nature including emotions and social conventions, strategic positioning and the ability to utilise resources.

Despite the child in the following story being under two years of age he demonstrates many of the *whakatoi*, *rangatiratanga* and *tinihanga* qualities described above.

Kane Escapes

Kane is always finding new and innovative ways to explore his environment. Last week he was trying to slide down the slide on a little trolley, but this week he has found a way to escape the under 2s room, by pushing the rocking horse up to the door, standing on it, and pulling the handle. As simple as that, and he's out! This boy really keeps me on my toes!!

Rangatiratanga: Kane demonstrates determination and persistence in his task. When Kane wants something he goes after it completely and is not easily deterred, a definite characteristic of a strong leader of tomorrow.

Whakatoi: Kane is a very strong-willed child, who pushes limits and boundaries and does not allow small issues such as a closed door to deter him.

Tinihanga: Kane is able to strategise and utilise resources to achieve his goal of escaping the U2s room.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the opening *whakataukī* makes reference to the Māori spiritual homeland *Rangiātea*, highlighting the importance of *whakapapa* to who one is and being Māori. It is crucial that Māori children develop a strong and secure sense of identity that emphasises their connectedness to their ancestors, the universe and everything in it, and the spirit world. Assessment by and for Māori must support the development of a strong Māori identity in children, through reflecting Māori perspectives of the child, his/her world, and her/his place in the world. Māori narratives such as *Māui Tikitiki a Taranga* can provide the basis for assessment tools that are grounded in Māori world-views. The idealised personality structures evident in the narratives presented highlight valued behaviours, traits and characteristics that can be emulated and encouraged in early childhood services. In this way assessment can not only be seen as a celebration of Māori ways of knowing, being and doing, but it also means we will never be lost for we are the seeds sown in *Rangiātea*.

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