

NESTING LANGUAGE AND CULTURE IN MĀORI FAMILY STRUCTURE: KEY TO A SUCCESSFUL BICULTURAL PROGRAMME

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ABSTRACT *Bilingual and bicultural education are important issues in New Zealand. This paper describes how one school established programmes to cater for Māori children. The development is seen through the eyes of a Canadian educator with extensive experience in schooling for indigenous people, and raises issues that need to be considered when developing programmes. It also comments on the underpinnings of the curriculum and how success might be assessed.*

INTRODUCTION

Are Māori culture and language in danger of extinction? Recent New Zealand evidence underlines some alarming trends. The *New Zealand Education Gazette* of 15 March 1991, highlighted language, culture and the educational structure as issues critical to Māori education. It reported:

- the Māori language is facing extinction;
- there is debate about whether mainstream education or separate structures offer the most promising solutions for improving achievement rate and retaining Māori language (cited in Irwin, 1992, p.7).

The New Zealand Ministry of Education responded to the issues with policies to provide resources supporting Māori language and culture initiatives at early childhood, primary, secondary and tertiary levels in immersion schools and bilingual classes (Irwin, 1992, p. 86). However, despite these actions, the *New Zealand Education Gazette* 19 February 1996, reported that the ratio of highly fluent adult Māori speakers in the total Māori population had dropped to 6% from 18% as measured in the 1970s.

Several educators have sounded the challenge for research and called for study of the ideas and methods of Māori culture (Metge, 1990) and asked for research to avoid entrenching educational disadvantage for Māori students (Wagemaker, 1987). The newly appointed University of Waikato Dean of Māori and Pacific Development (Waikato, 1996) stressed the need for research about the teaching and learning of Māori language.

In an attempt to reveal one school's response to indigenous people's concerns, this paper presents a case study showing how a primary school bicultural programme developed and operates. It details the perceptions of

parents, teachers, and support staff about their roles; and reports on the researcher's classroom observations of four bilingual classes. Biculturalism, in this context, stresses the equality of relationship between Pakeha¹ and Māori people through the equal use of organisation, curriculum and language of the two groups (adapted from Metge, 1990, p. 18).

BACKGROUND

Recently, parents, pupils, educators and politicians took action against loss of language, culture and the educational disadvantages that Māori students experienced in mainstream schools. Although the goal of giving children fluency in Māori was set in the 1970s, it was the late 1980s' development of language nest pre-schools (te Kohanga reo) that finally made the goal attainable.

The language nest schools were a community-initiated movement impelled and often staffed by parents. They wanted to give their fledgling pre-school children an experience in Māori total immersion to retrieve and support their vanishing language, culture and opportunity. These pre-schools have flourished, increasing in number by 41% from 1990 to 1995 (*New Zealand Education Gazette*, 1996).

By 1985, the government took steps to provide for the graduates of the language nests. The pre-schoolers were turning five and parents wanted immersion education to continue into the compulsory sector. The government introduced immersion and bicultural schooling initially for early primary students, later for intermediate and other levels of schooling. In 1989, as part of the reform of educational administration, the ministry also provided site-based management. This legislation increased flexibility in resource allocation. Specifically, it made it easier for schools to initiate and finance new approaches including bilingual classes.

Later, epistemological roots, beliefs and values were added to the focus of acquiring Māori language (Vercoe, 1996). The values highlighted included respect (Cazden, 1990); whanaungatanga (commitment to kinfolk), aroha (love), manaaki (care for others), utu (reciprocity), flexibility, co-operation and a family atmosphere (Metge, 1990, p. 7).

McCarthy (1990) cautioned against focusing on culture and values while ignoring structural inequality, while May (1993) sought to rectify Māori educational disadvantage by reconstituting the school environment. Smith (1995) proposed removing structural impediments by basing these programmes in the context of the Whānau (extended family), concluding that family structure would provide a cultural framework to mediate social, economic and cultural inequities for Māori students.

Glynn and Bishop (1995) sharpened the focus on the family and suggested that researchers looking at these school language programmes should use Whānau-centred research methods including listening, observing and determining the set of conditions for student learning. The present research uses interview and observation data to determine the conditions for student learning that relate to language, culture, values and structure.

METHOD

To determine the development and nature of a bicultural programme in a primary school, a single school case study was conducted. The city site, used as a bicultural class model, was nominated by university staff with field experience.

The principal, two parents, and two mainstream bilingual teachers, two language aides, and two mainstream teachers were interviewed by the present researcher. The principal and one bilingual teacher were male and all others were female. Teaching experience ranged from 1 to 15 years.

The principal supplied information for 2.5 hours while all other interviews lasted approximately one hour. The interviews with the principal, parents, trustee and mainstream teachers were designed to establish their perceptions of the evolution and status of the programme. Interviews with the language aides and four bilingual teachers gathered similar programme data. These participants also responded to questions generated from class observation notes. The researcher had observed these participants teaching Māori language and culture components.

All data were transcribed from audio tape or field notes to computer disc. The material was separated into thought units, numbered, collated under emerging themes, shared in draft form with informants, internally audited for cultural accuracy (Payton, 1990), edited, then written in final form. University lecturers teaching courses in bicultural education, who were of Māori origin, provided the internal audit.

FINDINGS

The findings from this study are subsumed under two themes: how the programme developed, and what it looked like in practice.

Development of the Bicultural Programme

The programme at this lower socio-economic school was initiated in direct response to the immediate and ongoing needs of the parents. They wanted a bilingual rather than an immersion programme. They included English because they were not fluent Māori speakers themselves and they thought that English would achieve career options for their children. (This continues to be a highly controversial debate in bilingual/immersion education.) Māori language and culture were selected, to increase their children's sense of identity and eventual achievement.

The principal recalled the questions that had to be considered before setting up the first bilingual class in the school.

We had to go through a whole raft of issues. Not just assigning a class and getting it underway, but ... What did parents want: What did they expect? Was the school able to provide it? Did we have to establish a separate classroom? Could we provide it in our general classrooms? Even the issue of having classrooms with Māori children in them ... we were creating culturally identified groups. This presented issues for

the other groups in the school. We also had to work out some anti minority responses in the community (Principal interview, 202).

First, the school authorities had to deal with assigning the class to a teacher but there was no vacancy, although fortunately one of the staff who spoke a little Māori agreed to take the bilingual class.

Another issue was to understand what parents wanted. The school needed to increase parent involvement, but this continues to be a challenge. However, the school was able to attract a few parents who through personal contact got other parents actively involved in the school community. Dedicated parents explained what they found inviting:

Homey feeling, teachers welcoming, like they had open arms for everybody, and we were part of a family (Parent interview 165).

The school is our extended family and the staff room is our parents' meeting place (Trustee interview 127).

These parents also explained their desires and expectations for bilingual classes. They wanted their children to be able to understand their grandparents and retain the family wisdom of their elders. They wished that their children would be taught by both Pakeha and Māori teachers. They pledged to support their child's learning in Māori, learn Māori themselves, and gain the best of both worlds. However, it is not clear how widespread these views were among other parents and caregivers.

The staff chose a two-celled open classroom in the centre of the school to show that it was at the heart of the school and not on the fringes. To overcome any sense of exclusion, the staff decided to regularly combine some 'mainstream' and bilingual classes for lessons. Bilingual and mainstream teachers also teamed for subject planning.

All teachers, pupils, and parents were encouraged to take responsibility for the success of the whole school. The mainstream staff had to learn what the Māori parents wanted and they had to convince each other that learning from a Māori language and cultural perspective would bring social, educational, and world success for their pupils. The staff and parents also had to understand that there are limitations upon what any school can do in a child's life-long learning. Therefore, they also discussed learning support provided in the community and wider environment. Community pot-luck suppers, involvement of elders, and excursions to other Marae (Māori meeting places) were planned to extend student learning and to follow Māori social patterns.

A pilot class began, guided by a staff member with a limited command of Māori. The other staff members committed support to this venture. They agreed to sacrifice some of their own funding and time to launch the class.

Parent and pupil interest and commitment grew. The school added a second class in the next year. When some staff transferred out, the board hired new teachers and aides with greater fluency in Māori. These added their conversation, music and knowledge of Māori culture to the school curriculum. The experienced bilingual students from the pilot group regularly joined the newcomers to act as peer tutors and models. There was a natural spill-over of Māori in conversations

and music between sections of the open classrooms. Social gains prevented the expected high turnover of students in this community from occurring. Instead, student enrolment in these classes became stable. The community continued to want more bilingual classes. Some parents explained their reasons as follow:

I want them to go to this school for their own enjoyment. The teachers are fantastic and I have helped as a parent for four years (Parent interview 153).

I belong to a support group made up of parents, language assistants, and teachers. We voice our opinions and try to help each other. We feel, all one, ... all equal (Parent interview 163).

By 1995, additional Māori speaking staff were hired. By then four bilingual classes were operating. The four bilingual teachers added the following objectives for parents, pupils, and themselves to the evolving programme:

Use community adults and elders as positive resources to inform, inspire and support (Teacher interview 425).

Give students pride, honour and self esteem (Teacher interview 359).

Practice Māori customs. Role model my speech, dress, accessibility, life skills and dual language fluency (Teacher interview 360).

Interview and observation data revealed that the principal, teachers, language aides and parents were consistent in identifying Māori language and culture as the chief means of overcoming barriers to Māori student success. Forty-nine references were made by those interviewed to the use and understanding of Māori language as a crucial academic aim of the bilingual classrooms. Classroom observations showed that Māori was used for all cultural and regular morning teaching, except when the students showed confusion or uncertainty. Then the teacher would switch to English.

Culture was mentioned in interviews 22 times. Informants highlighted biculturalism. It was claimed to be the best choice for parents, the answer for children lost in the system, the bridge to lost culture, the means of achieving positive inter-school relations, and the road to academic success.

Group singing, frequently, carried the values, heritage and rhythms of the culture. Recounting personal genealogies gave each adult and child opportunities for individual expression of personal ancestry. In addition, art work, flax weaving and dance showed observable aspects of Māori culture. There was, however, no evidence about attainment in other subjects such as mathematics, science and reading.

Informants designated language and culture as ways to reclaim lost identities and self-esteem. They suggested that Māori language, culture, and self-esteem all contained a common core of Māori family values. Reiterating Cazden (1990), their values included respect, support, and caring for all within an extended family structure. One parent explained:

Our children are the binding agents that hold us all together. In this school I feel that all the children are mine. I have a feeling for them, Aroha [love] (Parent interview 161).

This echoes Metge's (1990) emphasis on commitment, caring, reciprocity and love as bicultural values (p. 7). A growing student waiting list indicates the flourishing community interest in the bilingual classes.

In summary, the programme evolved through a planning and growth phase. Planners identified the issues and appropriate actions. For example, to support student learning, they suggested that parents, teachers and other adults should establish ongoing means of mutually communicating their wants and expectations. This reinforces other research on parental involvement which has called for unconstrained communication where all participants can approach each other as equals (Moss, 1994).

The growth phase was a slow, small gain-process involving changes to the usual school structure. These changes required an adaptable, amenable staff able to commit themselves to the enhancement of the whole school as well as bilingual programmes founded on Māori values.

Observations of a Bilingual Class

The following text illustrates how the researcher observed language, culture, and family structure in the four bilingual classes.

Provide language and cultural artefacts: To my left as I enter the class, a frieze of children's art borders the space below the ceiling. Red and black swirls of colour trace the unfolding fiddle head of a tree fern frond. I learn the design stands for renewal and new life. To my right, a similarly placed set of cards shows the 15 letters and names of the Māori alphabet. Calendars and other objects are labelled with Māori words. Māori song lyrics are printed on a flip chart.

Support family structure with multi-age grouping: The home class of five and six year old children sitting on the rug is joined by a class of eight and nine year old children. The visiting teacher tuning her guitar enters the shared space. She sits opposite the home teacher. Two parents, on their way to work, slip quietly onto small chairs near an outer wall.

Māori aide supports shy children: A chord is strummed. Murmuring conversation fades out. The warm-up song ends. The language aide, respected for her Māori wisdom and experience, guides a small girl to a place in the circle. The aide sits with a comforting arm and supportive leg behind the girl, who now lowers her fists covering her eyes. Later the woman explains, 'The girl was afraid of the group. She was stretched out on the footpath until I brought her to class.'

Use Māori language and family relationship: Māori is used for all communication that follows. They join hands and say morning prayers. They welcome each adult with a Māori class greeting. Like the other adults, the children greet me with a kinship title (father or parent). Roll is called. Each child responds with a

comment in Māori to the teacher. Then the teachers ask each child to give a personal history.

Establish personal identity: Each child tells where he or she came from, naming the river, mountain or sea coast of the home tribe and the name of the canoe and leader of the original tribal group. As the mothers leave, one near me explains, 'It gives them confidence, makes them proud of who they are and where they came from.'

Use of sibling and teacher support: One new five-year-old student is unable to contribute. Her brother bends over whispering the needed Māori phrases in her ear. The girl quietly repeats the family history to the group. An eight-year-old hesitates. Tears glisten on his cheeks. The host teacher takes her guests' two hands in hers and facing him, mouths the Māori for him. Then still holding his hands, she turns him back to the group. He repeats his history.

Reinforce traditional gender roles in Māori singing: The guitar-playing teacher announces an action song. Smiles burst on the faces of the children, now expectantly forming into concentric circles. All join in the action song, their left arms at right angles to their opposite arms, fingers fluttering in welcome. The boys whooping, grimacing, and slapping their chests converge to the centre. The girls singing, swaying their hips, rolling their eyes, undulating their arms at eye level, circle clockwise in counterpoint to the boys. The action and volume intensify and diminish as the students perform the passage of the Māori Queen through the land. The younger children follow the modelling of their older peers. I note that the dance patterns and music are akin to those of their adult counterparts seen during Māori cultural performances at the Auckland Museum and elsewhere.

Foster reciprocal community/school relationships: As the guests depart and the host class begins math drill, two women, gaining work experience with the community task force, slip in. They use the class computer and printer to prepare class assignments for the teacher. Later another adult, head framed by a faded ball cap and a patchy blonde beard, bobs at a window. He scrapes at scaling paint below. I learn it is a young offender, completing his community service. I reflect on how the school provides service to the community as well as receiving it.

Provide resources to practice Māori language and culture: Upon returning from a run and aerobics workout, the children work at projects, weaving flax, translating from English to Māori. One girl speaking Māori, tells her companion a story linked to the tri-layered puzzle that she deconstructs from a dress to reveal underclothing, and a cutaway baby in a Māori mother's stomach. The aide hands me the Māori *Legend of the Warrior Mountains*. It illustrates the traditional Māori use of nature personification to teach geography. Legend establishes the violent formation and physical location of the mountains. As the children prepare for recess, I reflect on key features of the development and practice of this bicultural programme.

DISCUSSION

From the above description there are two themes that need to be highlighted: language and culture, and organising the school as an extended family. There is also the issue of how to appraise the programme. How successful is the programme?

Language and Culture

The classroom observations illustrated how Māori language, culture, and family structure, are demonstrated in the bilingual classes. Oral language is practised by students and staff in the morning greetings, singing, and recitations of personal histories. New vocabulary is introduced or demonstrated by peers and adults. Written Māori is displayed in object labels, charts and books.

Māori culture is seen in the spiral motifs and colour choice of children's art, and in the movement patterns of the action songs. It is heard in the melodic singing, and genealogy recitations. It is felt in the patterned texture of flax weaving.

The unique difference of these bilingual classes, observed and discussed in interviews, however, is experienced in the changing power relationships taken by the participants in these classrooms. Anyone, adult or child, can take the role of teacher or learner. Parents, siblings and other adults are partners in this school community. All children have more opportunity for individual attention and experiential learning because everyone in this school shares responsibility for education through kinship ties to an extended family.

Organising the School as an Extended Family

The value in using the Māori notion of the family as a structure for social change is the major finding of this study. This finding supports similar conclusions reached by Metge, (1990), Smith, (1995) and Vercoe, (1996).

The bilingual classes in this school differ in organisational structure from many mainstream classes in my Canadian experience. They vary in the metaphor of a school, the grouping of children, and the division and instruction of the curriculum. Unlike a Canadian mainstream metaphor of school as a factory with students as products, this programme operates the school as an extended family with pupils and adults as relatives. One teacher summarised the notion by describing his:

classroom as a *Whare* (home);
teachers as *Whaea* (parents or aunts); and
the school as a *Whānau* (family) (Teacher interview 420).

This interconnectedness of family and school seems to have roots in traditional Māori culture (Smith, 1995; Tauroa & Tauroa, 1993). For example, an Auckland museum guide stated that their *Whare tipuna* (ancestral house) was a church, hall, library (carvings trace tribal history), and school (elders telling the young the legends and history of their group). She also illustrated the web of extended family relationships, explaining that by entering the ancestral house a person was

entering the body of the ancestor and that the centre support pole connected Sky Father and Earth Mother.

My Canadian experience of mainstream programmes is that they frequently separate children into age/grade classrooms sealed from siblings, other children, parents, family and community. Contact with parents and other adults is infrequent, and often limited to report card notations, or negative phone calls. Moreover, parents and other adults often view teachers with suspicion.

By contrast, all bilingual pupils are placed in family-like, split-grade groupings with frequent cross-age connections. As observed in the classes, the beginners share the open classroom space with the adjoining class each day. The new entrants also hold regularly scheduled morning meetings with another class of more experienced peers. Siblings from neighbouring classrooms or toddlers at their mothers' sides were observed making brief contact with the children. The vertical (Whānau) grouping with siblings in the same class is a significant grouping difference. Teachers, language aides, parents, and other adults were seen flowing in and out of the classrooms and staff room. Community and school adults regularly share coffee and ideas in the staff room. Moreover, the adults in this school community are perceived by the children to act 'in loco parentis.' Adults are called parents and they fulfil that role when needed.

In the bilingual classes the curriculum appeared to be based upon holistic principles. It radiates out from a hub of Māori values and culture using Māori language and family structures as conduits of meaning. For example, music, genealogy, geography, and legend are thematically interconnected. Children may sing, illustrate, explain, or write about their own personal origins. They are also connected through Māori customs, gender roles, and working relationships.

In addition, in these bilingual classes, and others reported by May (1994), the curriculum is transacted by peers, parents, language aides and teachers who assume family roles acting as models, coaches or instructors of the children.

How Successful is the Programme?

Except for an apparent limited curriculum the programme appears to be successful. In each of the four observed classes and a language nest preschool, the teacher focused on the genealogy of each student as the main curriculum topic. However, when I investigated this further, I discovered that a full curriculum in other subjects was followed, which was adapted to the Māori perspective. Additionally, the bicultural offerings emphasised using Māori language and a Māori values-based system such as how to behave with each other. A grandmother explained that the Māori culture is experienced in the interactions of people, not specified in books.

This bicultural programme reduces negative social statistics. The principal reported that in the bilingual classes there was less lateness, higher attendance rates, fewer dropouts and fewer transient students than in comparable mainstream classes. Issues of discipline had decreased. These factors are probably attributable to the parental commitment, and also schools tend not to place short term stayers into their bilingual programmes. For whatever reason, bilingual students are becoming a stable group who attend rather than avoid classes.

Long term benefit to life chances and academic achievement for these students is still problematic. Similarly, enhanced skill in both languages will also need evaluation over time. However, Benton (1985) concluded in a review of similar bilingual programmes that instruction in two languages does not adversely affect achievement levels in any aspects of the regular curriculum. Moreover, American research on parent involvement in early education concludes that child literacy is enhanced when teachers are responsive to the child's culture and when parents are actively engaged in the child's educational activities (Delgade-Gaitan, 1991; Edwards, 1991). Because this programme uses the child's culture and active parental involvement, it may enhance literacy.

Also, the present researcher found that during the first two years in this programme English skills are assessed and remedied, if needed. A Reading Recovery programme which greatly reduces the risk of student reading failure operates in the school. Māori was actively used, continually assessed, and supported by cultural values and the extended family structure.

CONCLUSION

Do the family structured bilingual classrooms bring desired social change? The evidence from this school case study indicates that they do. The students in the bilingual classes had more prolonged enrolment than comparable students in mainstream classes. Moreover, the informants perceived the students as comfortable, happy with themselves and not academically disadvantaged. Students appeared to flourish in a school structure that incorporated their culture.

It is too soon to know if the programme has halted the erosion of Māori language and culture, but the programme provides a setting where the traditions of the family-based Māori culture are seen by students as normal. The bilingual classes build on and support Māori cultural values such as caring and mutual responsibility for the learning of others. Māori language flows naturally as a needed and complete expression of cultural traditions. Because the classes affirm the validity of Māori language and culture, the programme gives Māori students more opportunities for self determination, sharing of power, and enhancement of self esteem. Because it is holistic in its interconnections between curriculum, teaching, social grouping and community, it provides a needed alternative model to other forms of schooling.

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NOTES

1. Pakeha refers to a person of European descent.

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