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The Child's Acquisition of Culture

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The child in Maori society is seen as 'te kanohi ora' - the living face of the ancestors, the link that binds us from past, to present and into the future. The Montessori movement works alongside other early childhood services in Aotearoa-New Zealand, to reflect that understanding through the national curriculum Te Whāriki.

Introduction

Tena koutou, tena koutou, tena koutou katoa.

It is fitting that this address is situated in a regional conference for Australia and New Zealand as it gives an opportunity to reflect on the challenges facing Aotearoa/New Zealand and the next steps that we, in the Montessori movement, need to think about in terms of bi-cultural development. I will examine the notion that we cannot separate the question of cultural acquisition from the political framework in which it is embedded. It is possible that the experiences that I am going to share with you today may have some parallels for those of you who operate in the Australian and Pacific environment.

My adult students know that nothing happens in our classroom without reference to history - and so I will draw the same links for you. Our nation, Aotearoa-New Zealand, is guided by a Treaty - Te Tiriti o Waitangi. A treaty of understanding between tangata whenua (ie. the people of the land - the numerous tribes or iwi, that make up the indigenous people who are collectively known as Māori) and those who represented the British crown in 1840. The treaty promised a partnership in which power would be shared, and Article Two of the Treaty ceded to the Māori chiefs, "tino rangatiratanga or self-determination over their lands, forests and fisheries and all other taonga (treasures or resources)" (Glynn, 1998, p.3). In a history shared by all colonising nations, these promises were broken and policies of assimilation led to a marginalisation of Māori language, cultural aspirations and knowledge bases.

At the time of the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi, in 1840, Māori was the predominant language of Aotearoa. During the next decade, colonisation and growth in Pakeha immigrants meant that Māori quickly became a minority people, speaking a minority language in their own land. In 1867, the Government, through the Native Schools Act, decreed that English should be the only language used in the education of Māori children. They were intent on a policy of assimilation and the treaty of partnership was conveniently forgotten. In 1913, however, 90% of Māori school children were still native Māori speakers. A number of newspapers and other publications were published in Māori. During the 1940s, however, Māori urban migration began and housing policies led to the dispersal of Maori families within Pakeha communities. As a result, serious erosion of Māori community and language traditions occurred. In 1960, in a major report on the Department of Māori Affairs, the Hunn Report, Māori language was described as ‘a relic of ancient Maori life’. The solution at this juncture was seen to be found in “integration” of the two peoples and a remedying of the, so-called, “deficient cultural background” of Māori children” (Bishop & Glynn, 1999, p.38). By the early 1970s a national survey (NZCER, 1973-1978) concluded that the numbers of people who were fluent Māori speakers had dropped to 70,000 and most of this number were elderly. By the mid-eighties the figure had fallen to around 50,000. By 1995, a national language survey showed that the number of Maori adults fluent in Māori or Te Reo, had fallen even further to around 10,000, less than 5 percent of the population. (Māori Language Commission, 2003).

Something was severely wrong and two academics, Russell Bishop and Ted Glynn, writing in a book entitled, *Culture Counts*, (1999), sought to highlight the reason. They saw a dissonance between the beliefs and practices of Māori and the majority culture, where “individual achievement, competition and self discipline” (p.36) were primary values. By way of contrast, in Māori society, “group competition and cooperation were valued, and group achievement and peer solidarity were dominant...Socialisation of Maori children emphasised the interdependence of the group and the individual” (p.36). In their view, the problem lies with the many educational practitioners who continue to ignore culture as a central ingredient in educational interactions. Conflict is the outcome when one set of cultural traditions and expectations (the teacher’s) impinges upon another (their students’).

Beginning in the 1970s, however, developing alongside the protests against the Vietnam War and the growth of the women’s movement, there emerged a desire by young people such as the urban Māori, student group, Nga Tamatoa (the warriors), to confront New Zealanders regarding the ills of our own society. They highlighted the policies of assimilation and colonisation and sought to raise political consciousness of the plight of Māori. There were land marches and many other actions of protest. The particular initiative that I want to highlight today, however, occurred in 1982 when the first Kōhanga Reo (language nest) was established in Wainuiomata in Wellington. An initiative for the child in the first plane of development, the Kōhanga Reo was a flax roots attempt to regenerate lost language and culture for a whole people. It was based on a reciprocal learning process: Ako in which the teacher and the taught were understood to nurture each other with the teacher no longer regarded as the fountain of all knowledge. (Bishop, 2000). Parents were expected to take an active role in learning alongside their children but the particular difference in this setting was the support and guidance from the tūpuna - the grandparents or elders. Given that they were often the only fluent speakers, their role was vital. This, however, was not a new innovation.

Māori had always had a tradition of the first-born child of the next generation, being chosen by the grandparents to live with them, to be guided in the special knowledge of the elders (Pere, 1984). This child would become the repository of the taonga, the treasures of language and traditional knowledge, and was expected to pass this on to guide their peers and community. Many of the leaders of current Māori society have had this privileged upbringing.

And so it was that the Kōhanga Reo movement began, in a tradition that was embedded in Māori society, only this time it was for all children. Children were to be immersed in the language, the language that their parents had lost when they came to the cities, when they had attended the schools of the Pakeha, and had been discouraged, and sometimes forbidden, from speaking. The language nests multiplied, from one in 1982, to over 100 within the first year of operation. At first the plan had been to trial just five in the first year and to assess the experiment. Once the nurturing of culture and the regeneration of the language became the main impetus, however, the parents and children, whom the Government had been trying to draw to participate in the early childhood provision of the time, took matters into their own hands. Currently there are 562 Kōhanga (language immersion centres), catering for some 10,000 Māori children. Since 1982, the tide has turned and it is now estimated that there are 130,000 children and adults who can speak te reo Māori, with this figure expected to double in the next fifty years.

Now, just one more piece of history:

In the late 1980s, the whole of the New Zealand education system, including early childhood, was restructured. It is a long and complicated story which we don't have time for today. One of the results was the placing together of both the care and education arms of early childhood education, and this, in turn, was to highlight the need for a joint curriculum. The result was Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 1996). This is a unique document - which celebrates both Māori and Pakeha understanding and draws upon the wisdom of both cultures. It had separate authors for each cultural group: Tilly and Tamati Reedy for Māori, and Margaret Carr and Helen May for Pakeha. The result is a curriculum written from two perspectives within the same holistic framework. Each section is written in both Māori and English but although the framework is the same they are not expressed as direct translations. The aim is for each service within the early childhood sector, to draw from the framework and to weave their own whāriki - a place for their children to stand upon.

We are all aware of the wealth of research and tradition in European understanding about cultural transmission but in the short time available I will give you a taste of the knowledge that we can draw from traditions in Māori society and perhaps some links that can be drawn to Montessori:

Within Te Whāriki there are four basic principles, upon which, it is recognised, we all stand:

Whakamana - Empowerment

Kotahitanga - Holistic Development

Whānau Tangata - Family and Community

Ngā Hononga - Relationships

The strands weave between these:

Mana Whenua -Belonging,
Mana Atua - Wellbeing,
Mana Aotūroa - Exploration,
Mana Reo - Communication, and
Mana Tangata - Contribution.

Whakamana - Empowerment - Mana defines a child's prestige, self-esteem and position within communities. It is understood in terms of an inheritance from the tūpuna or ancestors and it places children within a cosmic order that streams back to past origins. Traditional Māori education helped to define a child's position both in terms of self and in the community's responsibility towards the child through constant recitation of whakapapa - genealogy; waiata - traditional songs and chants; and whakatauākī -proverbs. A story telling is another way of transmitting sophisticated and complex information on "whakapapa (genealogy), cosmology, geography and history. Stories of famous journeys by major ancestors might include the origins of place names, prominent landscape features, descriptions of tribal boundaries, location of key resources, and waiata and karakia as instructions for accessing or preserving those resources" (Glynn, 1998, p.7). We can see links to this tradition of narrative pedagogy in the Great Lessons; the stories we tell to children in order to connect them to the Montessori cosmic curriculum.

Kotahitanga - Holistic Development. Kotahi means one and the word kotahitanga "is most often used in the context of unity, either for working together towards a common goal or as protection against a common threat" (Hemara, 2000, p.72). One is reminded by Mario Montessori of the human need for defence and the tendencies to work and socialisation. (Montessori, 1956) Hemara talks about this principle, emphasising a unity of purpose in the way learning and teaching develops as an integrated whole. We might extrapolate connections to Montessori's notion of the child's role in social cohesion (1949/1988, cf. pp172ff and p.216) and also in the development of the totally integrated, cosmic curriculum.

Whānau Tangata - encompasses the wider world of family and community. Hemara (2000) again describes for us that:

The interactions between an individual and the natural and metaphysical world, and their interdependency, were understood to be a natural phenomenon that prescribed the intersecting relationships of everything that exists...Knowledge of the interconnectedness of all things reinforced a cosmic order while opening panoramas of visions and opportunities (p.74).

Cosmic curriculum again...and more recently, the connections drawn for us by people such as Brian Swimme (1998) and Thomas Berry (1998) when relating quantum physics to cosmology which serve to reinforce a more ancient understanding.

· Ngā Hononga - has to do with the way children learn through responsive and reciprocal relationships with people, places and things using the concept of Ako. In the Montessori approach we can relate this principle to the role of the teacher as both guide and researcher who learns as much from the children as she imparts. We can also see Ako in the mixed-age grouping of a Montessori setting where children collaborate with each other and older or more skilled children take responsibility to hand on knowledge they have learnt to younger children and the younger children seek the support of the older ones.

Learning through exposure - a naturalistic strategy in early language teaching and learning - but in the Māori world, active listening, looking and learning is expected in such contexts as powhiri (welcome ceremony) and tangihanga (funeral proceedings). The type of transmission that teachers in the Montessori approach use in the presentation of new material to the child in the period of the absorbent mind has a parallel to this strategy.

Glynn (1998) also points out that a high value is placed on the accurate memorisation of knowledge. In order to protect certain knowledge, this learning must be both complex and deep, and, may take many years to acquire in full. The Montessori tradition of an oral transmission to teachers in their training has certain parallels with this practice.

Children learn first that through family relationships, the bonds of kinship, they can feel safe and a sense of belonging. They gradually learn, as do Montessori children, that there are obligations of reciprocity that operate alongside these relationships to people, the environment and the creatures and elements within that environment that feed their continual development.

You will recognise that this is a quite different way of looking at curriculum, and yet, if we had more time to unpack it, you would see that it speaks to all the human needs and tendencies that we recognise in Montessori terms.

The focus of this talk is the child's acquisition of culture. In Dr Montessori's terms, the child was pivotal for both the continuation of culture and for the change that she saw as necessary if we were to have a new and peaceful, world order. Montessori used a similar metaphor to that of Te Whāriki in *The Absorbent Mind*, where you will remember that she related the process of spinning and weaving cotton to the child's role in attaining and shaping our cultural heritage.

"In the period from three to six, the cloth itself is woven and perfected. Hence the period under six is decisive. Whatever abilities the child constructs then will remain incarnate in him for life" (Montessori, 1949, p.165).

You will recall that Montessori also said in *The Absorbent Mind*:

Adults admire their environment, they can remember it and think about it; but the child absorbs it. The things he sees, are not just remembered; they form part of his soul. He incarnates in himself all in the world about him that his eyes see and his ears hear. In us the same things produce no change, but the child is transformed by them (p.56).

And then, Montessori explains to what purpose we can turn her insight:

Today, therefore, the child must be considered as a point of union, a link joining the different epochs of history, the different levels of civilization. Infancy is a period of true importance, because, when we want to infuse new ideas, to modify or better the habits and customs of a people to breathe new vigour into its national traits, we must use the child as our vehicle; for little can be accomplished with adults. If we really aspire to better things, at spreading the light of civilization more widely in a given populace, it is to the children we must turn to achieve these ends (p.60).

The parallels with Te Whāriki are obvious, and yet I would issue a word of warning, for this is such a powerful insight, such a powerful tool. In the hands of the politicians it can destroy a people and their community, their language, their understanding and unique human contribution. In the hands of a teacher who has an incomplete understanding of Dr Montessori's vision, and wishes to impose her own version of civilisation, it has the potential to destroy a child's connection to family and community.

Using a different metaphor, Pere (1982) says,

We each have to draw on our separate tap roots, our separate tradition...many of us see ourselves symbolising the awe inspiring beauty of the Urewera bush - a domain that is made up of different families of trees from the young to the ancient with their roots deeply entrenched in Papatūānuku (p.99).

Regarding the role of teacher and child's cultural heritage, she says,

In particular this approach affects the teacher. The teacher cannot be short-sighted over cultural diversity and towards the significance to any child in their are of the value to that child of her unique cultural heritage. (Pere, p.100)

And that is the thought I wish to leave with you today, as I share with you a brief extract of the video Te rere o te amokura - which shows the reflections that a group of teachers have as they evaluate the learning that results from experience in one, particular, Kōhanga Reo.

[Video followed.]

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