

## *Understanding bilingualism and multilingualism in Aotearoa New Zealand*

Understanding the position of languages in New Zealand requires contextualisation in the history of the British colonisation of the Māori, the Indigenous peoples of Aotearoa (New Zealand). New Zealand's founding treaty document, te Tiriti o Waitangi, 1840, was signed between the representative of Queen Victoria of England (Captain William Hobson) and representatives of the Hapū (self-governing tribes) of Aotearoa/New Zealand (NZ) as an international partnership accord. It provided certain guarantees, one of which is the protection of Māori rights, including language. In July 1987 the Māori Language Act (1987) was passed into legislation, and on 14 April 2016, Te Ture mō Te Reo Māori 2016: Māori Language Act (2016) was passed into legislation repealing the old Act. Its stated purpose is

- (a) To affirm the status of the Māori language as
  - i. The Indigenous language of New Zealand
  - ii. A taonga of iwi and Māori
  - iii. A language valued by the nation
  - iv. An official language of New Zealand
- (b) To provide means to support and revitalize the Māori language (p. 29).

Whilst English does not have an English language act, it is the dominant language of our society and the curriculum. That is reflected in our national early childhood curriculum *Te Whāriki: he whāriki mātauranga mō ngā mokopuna o Aotearoa: early childhood curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2017) (Te Whāriki) which states "...Te Tiriti | the Treaty has implications for our education system...ensuring that te reo Māori [the Māori language] not only survives but thrives. Early childhood education has a crucial role to play here, by providing mokopuna [children] with culturally responsive environments that support their learning ..." (p. 3, emphasis added). However, nearly fifty years ago research indicated that the Indigenous Māori language had declined as an everyday language (Benton & Benton, 2001). There are fewer native speakers of te reo Māori than there were in previous generations, even fewer Māori language domains outside of some educational institutions and marae, a dearth of printed material available in te reo Māori in the education sector (Skerrett & Hunia, 2010) and a need to extend the vocabulary base of the language to meet the demands of the, albeit all too few, Māori language speakers and domains. This language shift away from te reo Māori being an everyday vernacular in Aotearoa has been facilitated by and is a consequence of: colonisation; unequal rates of social change, imbalances in political and economic power, the dominance of English as a colonising language and the fact that it is the only language officially supported in the curriculum.

## *Learning multiple languages*

In 1992 a draft New Zealand languages policy document highlighted the predominance of English language monolingualism in Aotearoa (New Zealand) and recommended that it would be advantageous for all New Zealand students to learn a second language, preferable te reo Māori (Waite, 1992). A quarter of a century later this policy is yet to be

enacted, and 80% of citizens remain monolingual in English (Major, 2018). Meanwhile, the changing demographics of superdiversity raise further challenges to the predominantly monolingual education system (Royal Society of New Zealand, 2013). Te Whāriki, the early childhood education curriculum, requires attention to te reo Māori, and provides a separate curriculum for Kōhanga Reo, immersion services, specific language teaching strategies are absent.

Furthermore, Te Whāriki 2017 acknowledges that:

"Increasingly, children are likely to be learning in and through more than one language. Besides English, te reo Māori and New Zealand Sign Language (NZSL), some 200 different languages are in use in New Zealand, with Samoan, Hindi, Northern Chinese, French and Yue (Cantonese) being the most common. Children more readily become bi- or multilingual and bi- or multiliterate when language learning in the education setting builds on their home languages.

It is desirable that children in ECE settings should also have the opportunity to learn NZSL, an official language of New Zealand, and to learn about Deaf culture. For some children, NZSL is their first language, and services have a responsibility to support its use and development" (p. 12).

It also acknowledges the importance of Pacific Islands languages to children's "identities, languages and cultural values" and states that "Language-specific guidelines and implementation advice are available for each of the main Pasifika populations" (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 9).

Specific language teaching strategies for second language learning are not however provided within the early childhood curriculum.

Whilst there may be a focus on te reo Māori facility as well as pedagogical approaches for facilitating second language acquisition in some pre-service teacher education programmes, there has been a paucity of in-service professional learning for early childhood teachers related to supporting children whose home languages are other than English.

### *Language and identity*

In 1993 Raiha Serjeant, a foundation member of the Māori Women's Welfare League, talked about her desire for Māori children to learn te reo Māori to restore the sociocultural disruption caused by colonisation. This was so that the children's identity and wellbeing remained intact, and they could be equally competent in their Māori worlds as their English-speaking worlds (Szasy, 1993). She was instrumental in supporting the establishment of a small, home-based Kōhanga Reo (Māori language nest). The family members involved recognised the centrality of the language-shaping-identity practices. Research showed that it was a 'haven' for Māori children and te reo Māori, where children were positioned as powerful, creative thinkers (in a wider monolingual context which was often hostile)

(Skerrett, 2003). In addition, the connection between language, culture and Māori identity were articulated. One of the major themes was the outcome of bilingualism, stating

*The study demonstrated how children were encouraged to participate in conversations about language and identity, to sing songs about language and identity, to participate in activities about language and identity and to reflect on their own language learning pathways and identity. It was demonstrated how, in Te Amokura, it was central to the philosophy to help children become aware of the importance of their language development. Discussions among children, and between children and adults, were included in the analysis as they compared and contrasted te reo Māori and English (p. 265-6).*

The results showed the benefits of bilingualism, through a total immersion Māori language programme, including the ability to think more creatively and laterally, an appreciation of differing world views, a stronger sense of self and cultural identity, and the capacity to move competently and confidently in their Māori worlds, and in their other worlds. The liberating power of the Māori language to free the Māori mind from the language and thinking of the coloniser is what is inherent in Kōhanga Reo (Skerrett, 2017). However, it has not been easy as anti-Māori and anti-Māori language sentiments abound in the wider society, discussed below.

#### *Key challenges of promoting bilingualism and multilingualism within early childhood education*

As outlined above there are very strong reasons as to why all citizens of Aotearoa (New Zealand) should be bilingual in Māori and English. In the two centuries since the imposition of colonisation in Aotearoa (New Zealand), the presumption of British sovereignty and the resultant monolingual English language education system have been challenged by Māori but assumed to be normal by the clear majority of those of European descent. The racist insidiousness of the assumption of white superiority continues to permeate society, including early childhood education settings and teacher education programmes. A New Zealand study demonstrated that “Māori children became acutely aware at a young age of the negative social implications of being Māori” (Bruce, Curtis & Johnston, 1998, as cited in Blank, Houkamau, & Kingi, 2016, p. 28). The low status and comparative invisibility in education of the Māori language is a contributing factor to this situation.

The Māori language, whilst required to be used in early childhood services since 1996, is not a core subject of the primary or secondary school system. This means that few of those who are studying to become early childhood teachers have a background of fluency in te reo Māori. It is difficult to achieve even a reasonable degree of fluency within a three-year early childhood teaching qualification and even less likely during a one-year programme.

Without their teachers providing excellent modelling of te reo Māori it is difficult for young children to become fluent in the language that is unique to Aotearoa.

Furthermore, the recent rapid influx of immigrants means that many children have a home language that is neither English nor Māori. Whilst many immigrant families are keen for their children to learn English, seeing this as the key to future success, the acquisition of English need not come at the expense of their ancestral linguistic and cultural funds of knowledge. Research has demonstrated the importance of the maintenance of home languages in relation to affirming children's identities and to academic achievement (Cummins, Hu, Markus, & Kristiina Montero, 2015). Furthermore:

*Researchers and community activists have highlighted the necessity for schools to challenge the legacies of oppressive policies by decolonizing curriculum and instruction. A decolonized pedagogy would bring all students' worldviews; ways of knowing; and cultural, linguistic, and spiritual traditions to the centre of the school curriculum. (Cummins et al., 2015, p. 565)*

The delivery of multimodal, multilingual pedagogical strategies that are delivered by fluent speakers of the relevant languages (Māori, English, and other home languages) is an important aspiration for early childhood care and education settings (Harvey & Myint, 2014).

As sea-levels rise due to climate change, threatening the viability of life on many small Pacific Islands, there are likely to be successive waves of climate-change refugee resettlement, and this will pose challenges for language and cultural maintenance when many of the geographical features underpinning these cultural narratives no longer exist. Monolingual nations such as New Zealand should be challenged to recognise the rich diversity and storehouses of knowledges contained within the linguistic and cultural traditions of Indigenous peoples around the world (McLeod, Verdon, & Bennetts Kneebone, 2014). The bilingual platform of pedagogical strategies for effective inclusion of te reo Māori would be an ideal foundation for extension to the multilingual, culturally diverse early childhood care and education programmes of the future. [552 words]

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