

Teacher experiences and perceptions related to developing a culturally and linguistically responsive emergent bilingual literacy program in Aotearoa New Zealand: A collaborative case study

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In this article we discuss teachers' perceptions and experiences of a collaborative case study to adapt a literacy approach originally designed for an Aotearoa New Zealand English-medium context. The approach was adapted to meet the needs of learners in a school offering differing levels of bilingual education. Our collaboration included a facilitating researcher, supported by two researchers at a university (of Ngāi Tahu, Kati Mamoe, and Waitaha descent) and two classroom teachers of Māori descent from a small rural Māori community in Aotearoa New Zealand. We report findings from qualitative data collected from the two classroom teachers as part of the research process, analysed using a *wānanga* (safe spaces for sharing knowledge) approach. Findings suggested that developing a linguistically and culturally responsive literacy approach to foster emergent bilingual language development required *Kaupapa Māori* (by, with, and for Māori) approaches. These included *ako* (acknowledging the experiences and knowledge of the teacher and learner within shared learning experiences), the development of trust and quality relationships between the teachers and the facilitating researcher, and the ability of teachers to be agentic when implementing the approach. Teachers viewed responsiveness to culture and language as integral to developing an emergent bilingual literacy approach for children, which underpinned connections between teachers, children and families.

Keywords: bilingual education, indigenous languages, teacher pedagogy, bilingual children, teacher perceptions

Introduction

Many languages are experiencing decline in their use (UNESCO, 2003). For indigenous languages users, the likelihood of language loss, extinction or endangerment is significant because of the interaction between external (e.g., education, economics and culture) and internal forces (e.g., one's own or community-based beliefs) that align social position, including advantages or disadvantages, with cultural values and beliefs (UNESCO, 2003). Thus, languages may be retained or discarded, depending upon the perceived worth of the language to aspects such as social mobility, economic wellbeing, and cultural discrimination or assimilation, which may be further reinforced by practices and policies that reiterate external forces.

Language loss is closely related to the effects of colonisation (Hinton et al., 2018). Colonisation practices have actively sought to develop citizen practices that reinforce monolingualism; that is, the notion that one language is the norm for any given nation (Seals et al., 2019). Indigenous languages were viewed as problematic during colonisation. Policies were enacted to force a language shift that replaced indigenous languages with those considered to hold social privilege or status, including English (May, 2018; Skerrett, 2012). Early revitalisation practices related to minority language speakers claiming language rights (see Ruiz, 1984) led to the development of bilingual language practices; however, these practices often related to negotiating the right to use minority languages, rather than considering languages in their own right (Ruiz, 1984).

Contemporary approaches consider languages a resource or asset, with bilingual language practices the norm (Baker & Wright, 2017; Ruiz, 1984; Skerrett, 2012). García (2009) argues the current global climate of socio-linguistic mobility means all individuals should experience bilingual education. While languages can shape livelihoods and contribute to cultural, economic, intellectual and social resources (Baker & Wright, 2017), such statements are contentious. To indigenous language speakers whose languages remain endangered, disabling an exclusive indigenous language context and enabling the use of a dominant language, such as English, can be detrimental to the indigenous language (Seales et al., 2019). It is problematic to view language practices within isolation when revitalisation practices extend beyond the language to include other socio-cultural factors.

Bilingual education refers to learning two languages within the schooling context to develop fluency in both languages, including oral and written language (May et al., 2006). Bilingual education can be differentiated into different forms, including immersion education, where children are taught typically via a focus on the non-dominant languages that are less likely to be used outside of the school context. Immersion education is successful for language outcomes, academic success across the curriculum and intercultural responsiveness (Baker & Wright, 2017; Bialystok, 2018; May et al., 2006). However, success is dependent upon multiple factors, most notably the length of education in one's first language, which is an influential predictor of educational achievement in bilingual students, above socioeconomic status (Bright et al., 2013; May et al., 2006; Thomas & Collier, 2002). Other factors include language ideologies (Petrovic, 2010), the associated status of the non-dominant language and the degree to which shifts have occurred within the language (Hill, 2017). The benefits of bilingual education also influence long-term outcomes, including meta-linguistic and cognitive awareness, as well as economic and social factors (Baker & Wright, 2017).

Colonisation and language revitalisation in Aotearoa New Zealand

Early colonisation practices in Aotearoa New Zealand saw *te reo Māori* (the Māori language) and English hold bilingual status within education, trade, work and government activities. Early mission schools were Māori-medium, leading to high literacy achievement levels (May & Hill, 2018). However, subsequent educational policies contributed to reinforcing monolingualism and the dominance of English. The introduction of educational policies, including the Educational Ordinance of 1847, mandated English-only education (Ka'ai-Mahuta, 2011). The effects of such policies were profound. The use of *te reo Māori* was actively suppressed within the educational system, resulting in shifts and loss of *te reo Māori* over time. The denial of equal educational opportunities devalued and marginalised Māori culture and identity, while the ideals of colonisation or a *Pākehā* (New Zealander of European descent) lifestyle were promoted. The effects of colonisation were not viewed as a loss to Māori people, and the duress and social circumstances experienced by Māori meant that many stopped speaking *te reo Māori*, which Nettle and Romaine (2000) term as "a survival mechanism". This, combined with the urbanisation of Māori following World War II that resulted in the loss of 90% of Māori from rural communities where *te reo Māori* was prevalent, contributed to the identification of *te reo Māori* as nearing extinction in the 1970s (Benton, 1979; May & Hill, 2018).

The collective loss of language and culture for Māori has resulted in long-standing historical trauma across multiple generations. However, the threat of language loss actively spurred early Māori-led revitalisation practices, including the establishment of *kōhanga reo* (Māori-medium pre-school language nests) and the development of *kura kaupapa* (primary Māori-medium schools) and later *wharekura* (secondary schools) and *wānanga* (tertiary education facilities) (May & Hill, 2018). Recent strategies enacted within education, such as Ka Hikitia – Ka Hāpaitia: The Māori Education Strategy (Ministry of Education, 2021a) and Te Hurihanganui (Ministry of Education, 2021b), address racism and inequity to support achievement that reflects the importance of preserving and revitalising *te reo Māori* (Seals et al., 2019). Te Mātāwai strategy (2020) recognises the importance of *iwi* (tribal groups), *hapū* (sub-tribes), and *whānau* (extended family groups) in revitalising *te reo Māori* as a first language in communities and families and fostering intergenerational transmission.

In Aotearoa New Zealand, bilingual education in *te reo Māori* and English are state-funded and available to all students (May & Hill, 2018). However, children enter the New Zealand government-funded education system with different repertoires of language practices. Within the early years, prior to formal education, the repertoire of language practices and experiences in *te reo Māori* can be characterised by four groups of varying Māori and English language use (see Berryman & Woller, 2011), ranging from children who communicate proficiently (i) in *te reo Māori*, (ii) in *te reo Māori* and English, (iii) in English, and (iv) in neither *te reo Māori* nor English. In Aotearoa New Zealand, bilingual education occurs within two broad educational curricula that include Te Marautanga o Aotearoa (Ministry of Education, 2017), developed in conjunction with Māori educators (Hill, 2017) and the New Zealand Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007). Instruction in *te reo Māori* and English occurs across five levels that differ according to the targeted language. Māori-medium education occurs in Levels 1 and 2 with the outcome of being fluent in *te reo Māori* and English languages:

- Level 1 (Te Marautanga o Aotearoa) provides 81 to 100% of the classroom program in *te reo Māori* for communication and instruction.

- Level 2 (Te Marautanga o Aotearoa or the New Zealand Curriculum) provides 51 to 80% of classroom programs in te reo Māori. Te reo Māori is the accepted language of communication and instruction. However, instruction in te reo Māori often occurs incidentally (Hill, 2017).
- Levels 3 to 5 (New Zealand Curriculum) are culturally immersive and are not bilingual programs (Hill, 2017). Level 3 provides 31 to 50% of the classroom program in te reo Māori, with communication primarily in English, with basic level te reo Māori in terms of vocabulary, phrases or songs (Levels 4 and 5) (Ministry of Education, 2020).

Outside of these levels, schools may offer no education in te reo Māori. Unlike *Kura Kaupapa Māori* (i.e., schools that educate in te reo Māori and are underpinned by the success of by, with, and for Māori) that require proficiency in te reo Māori on enrolment, within the state-funded education system, admission cannot be regulated (Rau, 2005). Thus, whānau can choose to place their child within any level, regardless of their previous language experiences and proficiency levels. The levels above demonstrate the variation in exposure to te reo Māori that students receive in schools. Variation also exists concerning the amount of exposure to English that bilingual students receive, most notably for students within Māori-medium education. This is often associated with revitalisation aims and the desire to maximise exposure to te reo Māori within Level 1 programs (Hill, 2017; Rau, 2005), which has led to fewer hours of English instruction and restricted access to English within the early years of formal education (Hill, 2017). However, while 40% of Māori are involved in bilingual education, only 7% of students are engaged in Level 1 programs, suggesting many Māori students receive minimal exposure to te reo Māori in school (Hill, 2017). Such decisions may fail bilingual language development in students and restrict the recognition of effective approaches to bilingual language development, such as translanguaging (García, 2009), which refers to the use of one language to reinforce another language to increase understanding and use of both languages (Lewis et al., 2012).

In Aotearoa New Zealand, the research is clear that immersion and bilingual education in te reo Māori are beneficial to Māori achievement and do not come at the expense of the identity of students as indigenous people in Aotearoa New Zealand (see Alton-Lee, 2015). Data from the Tomorrow's Schools Review Independent Taskforce (2018) noted the upward trend of achievement in the National Certification of Educational Achievement (NCEA), with Māori students in immersion and bilingual education achieving higher than their Māori peers enrolled in English-medium education.

Overall, educational practices that value and affirm Māori language and culture matter in facilitating successful outcomes for students, particularly Māori. Debate exists (Rau, 2005) regarding when students within Māori-medium contexts should be introduced to English and what instruction should include. This debate appears to be influenced by the aims or goals of the bilingual education model adopted (see May, 2017). Debate also exists regarding the development of emergent bilingual literacy skills in te reo Māori and English within bilingual education. Caution must be extended when modifying English language methodologies grounded in Eurocentric worldviews (Te Aika, 1997). Such methodologies, Te Aika (1997) argues, can compromise and transform indigenous language and culture. The current research examines one such instance: the adaptation of an English approach grounded within an Aotearoa New Zealand context for developing early literacy and language skills in emergent bilingual learners in te reo Māori and English.

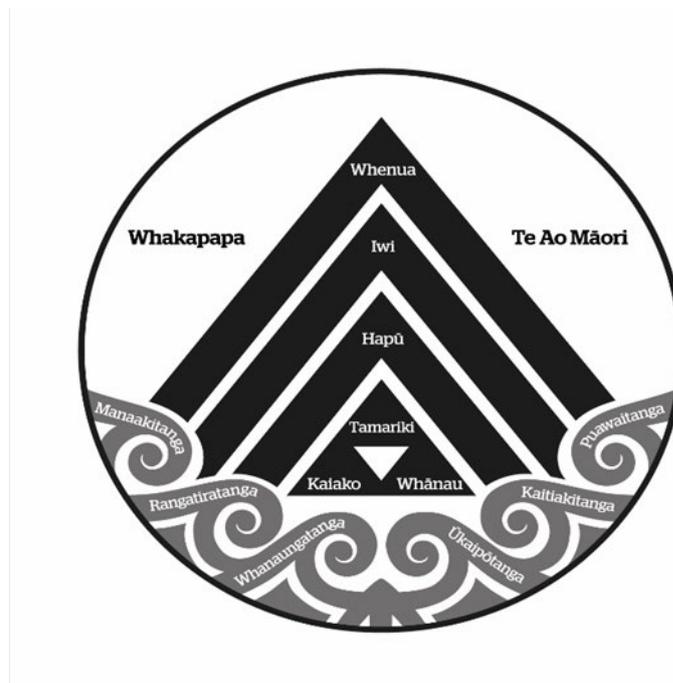
Conceptual frameworks that guided our work

Our research involved learners and teachers of te reo Māori and Māori culture. We drew on a *Kaupapa Māori* (by, with, and for Māori) framework to understand conceptual and theoretical assumptions and the relationship between culture and place, thus aligning with *te Tiriti o Waitangi*, the Māori version of Treaty of Waitangi, which acknowledges the *tāngata whenua* (indigenous people of New Zealand) status of Māori. Within a *Kaupapa Māori* framework, principles recognise the centrality and legitimacy of te reo Māori (Māori language), *tikanga* (culture and customs) and *mātauranga Māori* (Māori knowledge) (Smith, 1997).

In *te ao Māori* (Māori worldview), educational experiences that reflect key values, known as *ngā uara*, demonstrate respect for Māori culture, language, ethical decision-making, spirituality in educational experiences, and underpin *tikanga Māori* (culture and customs). These values reflect *tika* (what is true and just within te ao Māori) and *pono* (aligning with cultural ideals) of iwi Māori and underpin *Kaupapa Māori* practices. For the collaborating school, *ngā uara* were developed by iwi, hapū, whānau, and community and reflected the cultural ideas of the *rohe* (region). The values are provided below along with their basic English interpretation:

1. *Manaakitanga* – kindness, caring, and respect
2. *Kaitiakitanga* – environment preservation
3. *Whanaungatanga* – caring relationships
4. *Rangatiratanga* – leadership
5. *Ūkaipōtanga* – identity and belonging
6. *Puawaitanga* – personal potential.

Ngā uara guided our collaborative work with the school, teachers, children and whānau. Theoretically, our research was underpinned by a socio-cultural framework guided by *te ao Māori* (Macfarlane et al., 2015), and the *whakapapa* (genealogy) of iwi Māori, teachers, children, and whānau, and their deep connections with *whenua* (land) as a sustaining life force for those who follow. Figure 1 depicts the *Aramoana tāniko* weaving design that is a unique method of *whatu* (twining) used to weave the borders of garments (Te Papa Tongarewa, n.d.). This design represents the interconnected pathways of the *moana* (sea) and *ngā uara* to whakapapa, *whenua* and *pepeha* (tribal saying of the ancestors that connects iwi Māori to the *whenua*) that sustain life, as depicted within the *maunga* (mountain peak); thus, setting the foundation for holistic learning. *Ngā uara* are integral to the cultural values of Aotearoa New Zealand and are fundamental to empowering children (*tamariki*), Māori teachers (*kaiako*), and communities, including whānau, iwi, and hapū, towards transformational change through a collaborative relationship, rather than using colonising approaches when faced with identified differences.

Figure 1. Whenua papatipu-oranga tonutanga (sustenance of ancestral lands)

Methodology

The research context

The current collaborative case study occurred over the 2018–2019 period with a small rural school of approximately 140 children. The school was situated in a rural *marae* (meeting place of a specific hapū or sub-tribe) village in New Zealand. The school principal held existing working relationships with the two supporting researchers from this study. The principal was aware of an initiative to develop children’s early literacy skills in English called the Better Start Literacy Approach (BSLA) that had been previously trialled by the research team (the authors). The principal invited the supporting researchers into the school community to discuss the potential of adapting this approach for their school context. The facilitating researcher, who was known to one of the teachers, was introduced to the wider school community through *mihi whakatau* (speeches of welcome in Māori).

The teachers were from two classrooms that comprised children from years 0 to 2 (five to seven years old). In Aotearoa New Zealand, children enter school when they turn five years old and may take part in an initial part-year (year 0) before moving to year 1. At the participating school, te reo Māori and Māori culture underpin the learning of all children. Whānau of students select from Level 1 (81 to 100% of the classroom program in te reo Māori) or Level 3 education (31 to 50% of the classroom program in te reo Māori). In our case study, one teacher was from Level 1 with a classroom of 16 children, and one teacher was from Level 3 with a classroom of 12 students. The rangiratanga (self-determination) of the school was acknowledged as the driver of the collaborative research, and their epistemology was adopted that included engaging with the school, teachers, whānau and community to uphold their ngā uara and *mana* (authority and status) of whakapapa through ancestral connections and the actions and achievements in their lives (Kerekere, 2021). The study met the ethical requirements of the university involved.

The Better Start Literacy Approach

The BSLA was developed for learners within an Aotearoa New Zealand learning context as part of the National Science Challenge program of research (*A Better Start – E tipu e rea*). The BSLA was based on Vision Mātauranga, a framework supported by the Ministry of Business, Innovation, and Employment to provide strategic direction to research relevant to Māori. Vision Mātauranga reflected the development of knowledge from Western and Indigenous sources, developed by Macfarlane et al. (2015). In the current study, activities to extend children's vocabulary development included *kupu* (words) in te reo Māori and English, and phonological awareness focused on te reo Māori. Vocabulary development was fostered by having sophisticated storybooks that aimed to hook readers in, maintain flow and enable follow up to occur after reading (McKenzie, 2016). These texts hold multiple layers of meaning and challenge the reader to engage with the text as they create meaning (National Library, n.d.). Vocabulary included Tier 2 words that are used by mature language users (Beck et al., 2002) from the text in English. Te reo Māori vocabulary focused on broader conceptual understandings that often sat often beyond the storybook content. Phonological awareness in te reo Māori involved explicit skill teaching, including phoneme identity, segmentation, blending, and manipulation that sought to foster understandings of phonemes in words and connections between phonemes and graphemes.

The wider approach included a response to teaching framework, within which the first phase of Tier 1 was designed to be teacher-led and implemented with all children over 10 weeks. Each week was structured around a new storybook containing targeted Tier 2 vocabulary and targeted phonemes and letters to foster the development of children's te reo Māori emergent bilingual literacy and language skills. For the first eight weeks of the approach, teachers were provided with three weekly lesson plans, with teachers responsible for planning the final lesson, as well as the final two weeks of lessons that were based on the needs and interests of the children. Each lesson ran for approximately 30 minutes duration. Children engaged in activities related to developing phonological skills, using target words cards reflecting the targeted phoneme as the basis for learning. The researcher facilitator supported the implementation of the approach with teachers, children and whānau in various ways, including modelling pedagogical strategies and instructional coaching to enable the approach to be adapted authentically for the children's learning context. Most notably, this ensured that the approach was based on the children and not simply a translation of the approach from the English-medium context (Glynn et al., 2009).

Our methodological approach

This article considers teachers' (of te reo Māori) experiences and perceptions of adapting the BSLA in a culturally and linguistically responsive manner. The adapted approach aimed to reflect te ao Māori and the linguistic and cultural backgrounds of the teachers and learners within a Māori-medium educational context. The teachers and university researchers adopted a collective reflexivity approach within a Kaupapa Māori framework (Nicholls, 2009) to actively reframe Eurocentric "notions of justice, empowerment, and participation within research" (p. 121). The research sought to acknowledge indigenous peoples by working within liminal spaces to challenge and critically consider the contribution of teachers within a collaborative indigenous research space (Nicholls, 2009).

According to Wilson (2001), a reflexive approach is not concerned about the validity or reliability of research but the fulfilment of roles within the collaborative relationship. Relational approaches within a Kaupapa Māori framework move beyond developing rapport with participants to developing trust (Bishop et al., 2014). This means that researchers are responsible to participants via a lens of criticality,

which enables meaningful engagement (Nicholls, 2009). Such engagement involves moving fluidly within liminal spaces, which requires a willingness by researchers to challenge Eurocentric notions of research that often places control with the research team (Nicholls, 2009). Underpinning the collective reflexivity approach was collaborative discussion, relating to the Kaupapa Māori principle of rangatiratanga (self-determination) of teachers and whether they viewed their involvement as transformative, affirmational, empowering or cathartic, including for the children and Māori and school community (Nicholls, 2009).

Data were gathered by engaging with teachers in wānanga, within a Kaupapa Māori framework. Wānanga are open and safe spaces for sharing knowledge and understandings that recognise the whakapapa of those involved and their relationships with others within their local iwi context (Mahuika & Mahuika, 2020). The gathering of narrative data occurred during each wānanga that lasted approximately 90 minutes, towards the end of the research process. The nature of wānanga means the transmission of narratives occurs throughout the process of sharing and reflection, leading to the formation of new knowledge, ideas and approaches (Mahuika & Mahuika, 2020). Wānanga were integral to ensuring that knowledge creation was not controlled by the external researchers and thereby reinforcing the position of indigenous peoples as others (Mohan, 1999). We present data based on new knowledge, in the form of themes, created during the wānanga by teachers that reflected their voices, and, as such, ownership and control of the data.

Findings and discussion

The importance of relationships

Both teachers viewed relationships as fundamental to effective collaboration within the research process. These relationships were multi-faceted and occurred on multiple levels. The existing relationships between teachers, children and whānau were positive and evident during initial collaboration with the research group. These relationships reflected the school's values in supporting a sense of belonging and connection, both within the school and the surrounding area (ūkaipōtanga). Interestingly, the teachers' approach to the research reflected Bishop's (2005) relational approach, underpinned by developing trust between individuals within the research process. Teachers commented that the early establishment of trust within the research process enabled relationships to be built faster and stronger and maintained over time; however, their comments also reflected a differential development of relationships between school and research team members.

The development of trust between the research facilitator and teachers, whānau and children was supported by the relationships that existed between the university researchers and the community, but was especially supported by the relationships of one of the researchers who was an insider within the community (Smith, 2012). The existing relationships of this researcher and the development of wider relationships with the facilitating researcher reflect a community-up approach to research with Māori (Smith, 2012). Within a community-up approach, researchers should be known and seen within the community they are researching. Cram (2018) emphasises that community-up approaches to research require *he kanohi kitea* (to be known and seen as researchers within the community), part of the collection of processes to ensure ethical conduct within indigenous research.

Teachers identified that the relationships between the school and other research team members differed within the delivery. Te Awēkotuku (1991, as cited in Smith, 2021) described cultural guidelines that

influence what is considered trustworthy and good, as part of an ethical and respectful relationship when researching with Māori communities. While relationships existed between members of the wider school community and other members of the research team, this engagement was less evident within the everyday functioning of the school community.

Differences in perceptions around relationships influenced the establishment of trust and respect between the school community and the research team. Teachers reported that some whānau within the research had commented on the differing researcher presence at the school throughout the project, suggesting the importance of understanding the significance of wider relationships and having clarity within a Māori research context. While a Kaupapa Māori framework underpinned the research process, differing relationships between the research team and collaborating school had the capacity to create shifts in the power structure within the research process (Smith, 2012). Without the presence of the researcher facilitator, who had been adequately funded to be actively engaged in the school community throughout the research process, the research group could have been placed in the role of expert other; thus, reinforcing Eurocentric notions of research and risking the marginalisation of Māori from within the research process (Smith, 2012). Such occurrences reinforce Eurocentric practices and knowledge that deny Māori their language and culture (Smith, 2012). Fundamental to the current research was moving beyond what Smith (2012) characterised as “showing face”, to developing relationships that contributed to producing knowledge around research involving Māori underpinned by trust between members of the research group.

Teachers reflected that developing their literacy pedagogical practices was underpinned and strengthened by the relationship between the teachers and research facilitator; thus, reflecting mutual trust as a central tenet of Kaupapa Māori approaches (Pipi et al., 2004). The strong relationships that developed over the course of the research process fostered the ability of the teachers and facilitator researcher to trust each other as they moved within the research space. This proved to be integral within the research process because the teachers viewed modelling of literacy pedagogical practices to be a key means to “upskill in order to implement and deliver the project” (Teacher 1). Teachers trusted researchers to maintain te ao Māori and ngā uara as they modelled activities to the children. Modelling emerged as a critical methodological tool for the researcher facilitator to develop their linguistic and cultural capabilities, although the purposes and outcomes varied between individuals. This reflected the teaching and learning approach of *ako* (acknowledging the knowledge and experiences of both teacher and learner within the shared learning experience).

Cultural and linguistic responsiveness

Implementing an approach underpinned by English language methodologies meant materials and the teaching process required adaptation to be culturally and linguistically responsive and align to Kaupapa Māori practices (see Smith, 2012). This differs from implementing the approach within Māori-medium contexts, where fluidity between two languages, te reo Māori and English, is commonly considered standard practice. Teachers noted that their ability to adapt materials to meet the needs of students were influenced by their fluency in te reo Māori and the teaching materials at hand. Teachers considered that their level of fluency in te reo Māori constrained or fostered their ability to be agentic. This suggests that the linguistic competencies of teachers in te reo Māori, inextricably linked to culture, are essential to the success of approaches seeking to foster bilingual language development. Without these competencies, approaches, regardless of their intent, may undermine developing linguistic competencies, including te reo Māori and associated cultural elements (Te Aika, 1997).

Teachers reported that collaboration with the facilitating researcher regarding the inclusion of sophisticated storybooks was essential. One teacher viewed that it enabled texts to be selected that reflected the essence of te ao Māori. Children could relate to the chosen storybooks because they could compare their environments with their rohe (area) and their whakapapa (lineage or genealogy) with the text. This collaboration enabled the activities to implicitly acknowledge the interests of children and contribute to their motivation and aspirations as Māori. According to Penetito (2019), education has long been a contestable space where Māori learners, as individuals, have been viewed as problematic within the system. Penetito (2019) highlighted the need for a nuanced approach and that consideration of the identities of Māori learners was essential to creating spaces where both language and culture matters.

Considerations around language and culture were also influential to how teachers approached incorporating the explicit teaching of phonological awareness and vocabulary into their wider classroom program. Teachers engaged children by using their *kete* (baskets of knowledge) as a bridge between current knowledge (te reo Māori vocabulary) and the new knowledge (phonological structures of te reo Māori vocabulary) for children. Children engaged in learning “because it was fun” (Teacher 1), which further contributed to building their kete, which fostered the teachers’ ability to “build within their kete the school’s values within their *mahi* [work]” (Teacher 1). Teachers did not implement the approach in a conformist or Eurocentric manner, meaning that Māori teachers exerted rangatiratanga (authority and control) over the children’s learning and their learning (Penetito, 2019). The approach was designed to be implemented across 10 weeks of four 30-minute sessions each week. In this case study, teachers integrated the approach over 15 weeks. Teachers noted that this enabled them to uphold the values of the school and their commitments with local iwi. Implementing the approach over an extended period enabled teachers to foster developing their skills and the children’s skills by adjusting activities or even repeating activities at their discretion, based on their knowledge of the students. There was an explicit allowance for children to “grow at their own pace” (Teacher 1). Teachers controlled the research process within an indigenous space through rangatiratanga, reflecting a Kaupapa Māori framework. This was extremely important to the teachers, because it enabled them to acknowledge the children’s linguistic and cultural experiences, recognising that children did not fit within a one-size-fits-all model of language and literacy development. The pedagogical decision-making of teachers supported children’s language development as a heterogeneous group, which, according to Baker and Wright (2017), is often absent within mainstream education. Both teachers were clear that children brought their own linguistic and cultural ways of being into the educational context, but that children were not characterised as having strengths and weaknesses in either te reo Māori or English. This meant that teachers “adapted the [approach] to how they knew the kids [and] not what they expected them to be” (Teacher 1). Such views reflect a translanguaging process where bilingual children have a single linguistic repertoire that they access on a flexible basis to participate in learning events (Ascenzi-Moreno, 2018; Duarte, 2019). Understanding the link between culture and language, and the associated nuances, acknowledges the practices and experiences of bilingual children. According to Zapata and Laman (2016), this is essential to children developing meaning, which is integral to successfully integrating literacy approaches within immersion and bilingual contexts.

Connections to oneself

Teachers viewed that the approach’s effectiveness was influenced by the ability of the teachers and children to make connections between the teaching materials and their world. This suggests that culturally and linguistically responsive practices are essential when developing approaches targeting literacy and language development in te reo Māori “that allow Māori to be Māori” (Teacher 1) within immersion and bilingual contexts. However, this requires teachers to know and understand mātauranga

Māori (Māori knowledges) that enable teachers to understand the inner experiences and values that accompany Māori children into the classroom (Penetito, 2019). This differed with the current case study because the likelihood of connections occurring could be compromised by the approach that was developed within an English language framework from a Eurocentric perspective. To mediate this complexity and broker the Māori and English cultural contexts (Penetito, 2019), the research group recognised Kaupapa Māori practices and the expertise of teachers and whānau in the knowledge they held about their children and the school community, and their direct connections with the local marae and iwi. The responsiveness to both place and people is crucial (Penetito, 2019), suggesting that aligning the responsiveness to the context in which learning is occurring is integral.

One of the most significant connections between the children and teaching material related to the targeted vocabulary and words. Teachers noted that children “linked beyond the [approach] but in their way of being” (Teacher 1); thus demonstrating stronger connections with vocabulary that reflected their cultural and linguistic identities. These connections enabled the activities to be transferred to the children’s broader context, reflecting the rohe (area) of the school. Children often actively adapted activities within their environments, supporting them to broker between English and te reo Māori language spaces, enabling them to “know the world in terms of their own operations upon it” (Glynn et al., 2009, p. 3). This suggests that teaching material supported the cultural and linguistic diversity that children brought into the learning environment (Baker & Wright, 2107), thus, providing children with opportunities to be agentic in transferring their developing bilingual skills between contexts. Fostering agency in children reflects transformational pedagogies, where the construction of knowledge occurs through the sharing of experiences (Cummins, 2000; Glynn et al., 2009), which extended beyond the school context. The use of vocabulary and activities within the children’s environments provided guardianship of te reo Māori by fostering its use and contributing to children’s identity as Māori. The engagement in activities offered additional learning opportunities to further develop bilingual literacy and language skills. In the current case study, the use of te reo Māori within other contexts fostered the reciprocal development of language skills and provided children with the opportunity to define their own spaces for learning, reflecting the principles for effective intercultural teaching (Newton et al., 2010) and the values of the school.

However, some aspects of the approach led to the loss of connections for both teachers and children. The approach, which focused on developing te reo Māori, occurred in a school where children could learn within differing levels of te reo Māori, as well as entering either level of learning without any prior experiences in the language. In the current case study, the children ranged from having little experience with te reo Māori and te ao Māori, to being raised within te ao Māori. Differential experiences influenced the connections children could make with aspects of the approach, especially vocabulary. This was also experienced by the second teacher of Māori heritage, who was raised within a Pākehā community. This teacher acknowledged that while fully engaged in the research process, it was “a squandered opportunity” because of their limited experience in teaching in a bilingual context. However, they reflected that participating in the approach provided valuable experiences in developing pedagogical practices, including explicit teaching and scaffolding techniques that they integrated into their current structured literacy approach. The teacher noted that “identity matters” and this was influential to successfully incorporating the approach aimed at fostering te reo Māori language development in Māori-medium settings. The teacher further noted that conflict in one’s identity may challenge wellbeing, language and culture. Thus, identity is an essential means by which teachers connect with students, contributing to positive educational outcomes for teachers and children (see Mhuru, 2020).

Bringing together and moving forward

The current case study, underpinned by a Kaupapa Māori framework, examined the experiences and perceptions of two teachers of Māori descent who collaborated closely with university researchers to adapt the BLSA in English to te reo Māori. Findings suggested that the teachers perceived developing strong relationships with the facilitating researcher as integral to the research process and this supported the fostering of new spaces for language identities. The relational approach was underpinned by the development of trust (Bishop et al., 2014) between individuals. Teachers viewed that “relationships are key [and that] trust builds faster” (Teacher 1), fostering their ability to fluidly move within the language space, contributing to furthering their understandings and the understandings of the children. The reciprocal nature of relationships fostered learning among individuals and highlighted the importance of teaching and learning from each other, known as *ako*. Agency was one of the most important aspects of affirming an approach that empowered te ao Māori, especially for children (Glynn et al., 2009), and was apparent in how children chose to demonstrate their developing language and cultural identities through their connections with teaching materials.

Language and culture, and the connections between place and space, are essential aspects of Māori culture. Approaches underpinned by English language methodologies and Eurocentric implementation criteria risk silencing te ao Māori within its surrounding environment. Collaboration within a Kaupapa Māori framework throughout the research process with teachers and children required the cultural contexts of English and Māori to be bridged (Penetito, 2019). Explicit attention to culture, language and identity fostered the development of pedagogical practices and contributed to adapting the BSLA to the teaching and learning context, as well as growth in language and identity for individuals; although, at times, this was not without conflict for teachers and children. This suggests that identity must be carefully considered when developing literacy and language approaches. One notable limitation to the present research was how narrowly the approach embraced the spirituality (*wairuatanga*) of te ao Māori, which has expansive interpretations of literacy and language. This would make an interesting future case study. Overall, consideration of the identified factors is of vital importance when developing approaches aimed at fostering literacy and language identities to ensure that children and teachers see themselves within the literacy context and the research process.

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