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Notions of wellbeing and interdependence embedded within ecologically sustainable early
childhood pedagogies in Aotearoa

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Abstract

Through the growing international concern regarding the impacts of environmental degradation and the depletion and exploitation of natural resources on our planet's wellbeing, we are being challenged as individuals and educators as to how we can change our practices and pedagogies in order to replenish and protect our planet. This can be seen to require a shift away from an individualistic paradigm to one which recognises our inter-subjectivity, interdependence, inter-connectedness and inter-relatedness as planetary beings, members of a shared woven universe (Marsden, 2003). This is a worldview that has been upheld by indigenous people despite the impacts of colonisation (Cardinal, 2001; Haig-Brown & Dannenmann, 2002; J. Patterson, 2000). For the Māori, the indigenous people of Aotearoa/New Zealand, "the spiritual unity of the child with the land, with its people, and with the Universe at large is as one" (Reedy, 1995). In Western discourses also there has been growing awareness of a need to prioritise an ethic of care based in recognition of the interdependent nature of individual and collective wellbeing within our academic and professional discourses and enactment (Foucault, 1997; Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1995; Rinaldi, 2006). This paper reports on a New Zealand study conducted during 2008-9, which employed a synthesis of narrative and kaupapa Māori methodologies (Clandinin, 2007; L. T. Smith, 1999) to illuminate transformative early childhood discourses and pedagogies that reflect both Māori and Western ecological understandings. The focus of this study has relevance towards enacting "an ethic of global caring" generated within early years education (Said, 1993, p. 21).

Introduction

The Western project has been founded on an assumption of a right to master and exploit the 'other' (be it women or indigenous peoples) along with the environment (Rose, 2004). Counter-narratives are thus required to provide a recuperative alternative to the potentially fatal destruction of our planet. Early childhood education in Aotearoa New Zealand has a strong progressive tradition, one of responsiveness to community needs and interests (May, 1997, 2001). In our current research, we are exploring ways in which some early childhood education services in our country are responding to the current environmental crisis, as expressed by the New Zealand Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment:

Our dominant value systems are at the very heart of unsustainable practices. Making progress towards better ways of living therefore needs to be a deeply social, cultural, philosophical and political process – not simply a technical or economic one. Technical and economic mechanisms will certainly be key parts of the process. However, they will not come into play unless we, as a society, are prepared to openly and honestly debate the ways that our desired qualities of life can be met. That is why there must be a vastly expanded focus on education for sustainability. (Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment, 2004)

Western positivistic thinking has exhibited an arrogance and sense of dislocation from non-Western others as well as the environment, employing ideologies such as that of “fatal impact” justifying exploitation as part of a natural order which ensures the survival of the fittest (Belich, 1996, p. 126). Urbanisation and an increasing dependence on technologies have increased our sense of displacement from the natural world. “As we have shifted our status to superspecies, our ancient understanding of the exquisite interconnectivity of all life has been shattered. We find it increasingly difficult to recognize the linkages that once gave us a sense of place and belonging” (Suzuki, McConnell, & Mason, 2007, p. 12).

Intersubjectivity and counter-narratives

In this section, early childhood education counter-narratives (Kaomea, 2009) honouring of our inter-connectedness with others and nature are positioned as a response to Western materialism, and the concomitant dislocation resulting from failure to recognise oneself in the other that has enabled the often uncritiqued exploitation of both indigenous peoples and nature.

Theorists such as Vygotsky, Rogoff, and Bruner have shifted our lens from a focus on the individual child to viewing children as interlocutors within their sociocultural contexts. Intersubjectivity, a sense of the other's feelings and perceptions, is enhanced when adults share a deep knowledge of that child's socio-cultural positioning (Bruner, 1990; Rogoff, 1990, 2003; Van der Veer & Valsiner, 1994). Nel Noddings (1995) has proposed an ethic of care as a pathway towards compassionate, caring ways of living. An ethic of care is founded in an understanding of people as relational beings, and can be seen as comprising three central components: conceptual and emotive understanding, deep respect for and recognition of the intrinsic worth of others, and a willingness to act for the other (Martin, 2007, p. 57). In the proposed counter-narratives, the 'Other' is inclusive of the natural world, our environment, the planet, atmosphere, earth, waterways, plants, animals and other living creatures.

Māori perceive Papatuanuku, the Earth Mother, and Ranginui, the Sky Father as their ancestors, a genealogical web which is shared with plants and fellow creatures. This represents another dimension of intersubjectivity, one which recognises that our destiny is intimately/ultimately bound up with the destiny of the Earth (Marsden, 2003). However, the hierarchical, adversarial and binary-dominated paradigm within Western culture tends to separate people from nature, rather than encompassing the interconnectivity and relationality implicit in indigenous conceptualisations. In Te Ao Māori (the Māori world), there is a high value placed upon manaakitanga (caring for others), a core value within kaupapa Māori (Māori philosophy), central to which, is “nurturing relationships. looking after people, and being very careful about how others are treated” (H. M. Mead, 2003, p. 29). Implicit within the structure of the word manaakitanga is reciprocity, “the idea that the giving and acceptance of kindness and hospitality bestows mana on both host and guest” (Benton, Frame, & Meredith, 2007, p. 186). Other constructs integral to a Māori world view include kaitiakitanga (stewardship over lands and resources), wairuatanga (spiritual interconnectedness), and aroha (reciprocal obligation to care for kin) (Benton, et al., 2007). This conceptualisation can be seen to encompass a sense of interdependence and inter-relatedness, which aligns with Noddings’ view of what she describes as our “moral interdependence”. She considers that “Our goodness and our growth are inextricably bound to that of others we encounter” (Noddings, 1995, p. 196), and suggests that we work towards “the generous gesture” of working out how we can protect and preserve “this place [which] means everything to us!” (Noddings, 2005, p. 58).

Eastern philosophers such as the Vietnamese Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh also highlight our fundamental interconnectedness with nature. Hanh (1991) utilises the term “interbeing” to describe how we are intrinsically connected to and dependent on nature:

If you are a poet, you will see clearly that there is a cloud floating in this sheet of paper. Without a cloud, there will be no rain; without rain, the tress cannot grow; and without trees, we cannot make paper. The cloud is essential for the paper to exist...If we look into this sheet of paper even more deeply, we can see the sunshine in it. Without sunshine, the forest cannot grow.... And if we continue to look, we can see the logger who cut the tree and brought it to the mill to be transformed into paper. And we see wheat. We know that the logger cannot exist without his daily bread, and therefore the wheat that became his bread is also in this sheet of paper. The logger’s father and mother are in it too... Looking even more deeply, we can see ourselves in this sheet of paper. This is not difficult to see, because when we look at a sheet of paper, it is part of our perception. Your mind is in here and my mind also. So we can say that everything is in here with this sheet of paper...time, space, the earth, rain, the minerals in the soil, the sunshine, the cloud, the river, the heat. Everything co-exists within this sheet of paper. That is why I think the word inter-be should be in the dictionary. (Hanh, 1991, p. 95-96)

Māori constructions of inter-relatedness similarly include a sense of interdependent interconnectedness with the environment which nurtures and sustains us. In the Māori language, the word ‘whenua’ has two meanings. One meaning is ‘placenta’, the source of our nurture and sustenance prior to birth, whilst the other meaning is ‘land’, the source of our ongoing sustenance. Similar recognition of interconnectedness with nature are implicit in the word ‘aroha’, an overarching notion encompassing reciprocal obligation between

people related through common ancestry; loyalty; obligation; commitment; an inbuilt support system; stability; self-sufficiency; and spiritual protection (John Patterson, 1992; Pere, 1982; Reedy, 1995). Aroha “conveys ideas of overwhelming feeling, pity, affectionate passionate yearning, personal warmth towards another, compassion and empathy, originally especially in the context of strong bonds to people and places... a sentiment tying people to place as well as to each other” (Benton, et al., 2007, p. 34).

In order to challenge the Western drive to dominate the Other, including nature, by attempting to offer counter-narratives which recognise and validate our inter-connectedness, we must also be cautious of deeply held tendencies to replicate historical patterns of hierarchical dominance. Emmanuel Levinas complicates our view of the ‘Other’. Rather than seeking to romanticise our relationship with the Other, with its inherent tendency to subsume the Other through our will to dominate, he suggests instead that we recognise the unattainability of fully knowing (or possessing) the Other, recognising our intersubjectivity and its encumbent sense of responsibility for the Other. The relationship with the other is not an idyllic and harmonious relationship of communion, or a sympathy through which we put ourselves in the others place; we recognise the other as resembling us, but exterior to us; the relationship with the other is a relationship with a Mystery” (Emmanuel Levinas, 1987, p. 75).

In revisiting our relationship to the Other, we also question our conceptualisation of our ‘self’, revisiting our assumptions to return to a welcoming of the Other through a way of relating which “remains a relationship to the other as other, and not a reduction of the other to the same. It is transcendence” (Emmanuel Levinas, 1987, p. 115). For Levinas, the relationship with the Other represents a sacred journeying of embodied respect, involving a *thinking otherwise*, an inversion which requires relinquishment of the satisfaction of maintaining control. Instead, Levinas proposes an acceptance of “my responsibility for the other person, without concern for reciprocity, in my call to help him gratuitously, in the asymmetry of the relation of *one* to the *other*” (Emmanuel Levinas, 1988, p. 165). The ‘Other’ in our study’s conceptualisation, includes our environment, our planet and universe.

An ethic of care and connectivity thus embodies a sense of reciprocal responsibility, as seen in Māori conceptualisations such as manaakitanga and aroha. It further operates within a spiritual plane. As Mick Smith has explained, “The tangibility of the ethical is of a different kind, an intimacy, a proximity that is at once distinct from the exclusivity of erotic intimacy but nonetheless passionate. It is both corporeal and ‘spiritual’, physical and metaphysical” (2001, p. 184-5).

Spirituality and emotional connection

As we seek pathways to reconnect with nature, we may find that our implicit modernist assumptions are challenged. For Mick Smith, “taking nature seriously can and must have profound effects not just on the way we think (our theories) but on the way we live (our practices)” (M. Smith, 2001, p. 21). Theorists such as Levinas assist us to reconnect with our emotional and spiritual selves. “Human moods, such as guilt, fear, anxiety, joy, dread, are no longer considered as mere physiological sensations or psychological emotions, but are now recognized as the ontological ways in which we feel and find our being-in-the-world

(Emmanuel Levinas & Kearney, 1986, p. 15). Spirituality and emotional connectedness can be celebrated or enacted implicitly within daily rituals. Everyday spirituality embedded in our early childhood practices demonstrates respect for our reliance upon nature as our source of sustenance and wellbeing, thus offering a pathway for revalidating our interconnectedness and sense of caring for ourselves, others and our environment.

The Western project's emphasis on scientific rationalism is reflected in New Zealand where secular state education has been compulsory since the Education Act of 1877. The avoidance of religion within our education system has led to a corresponding invisibilising of spiritualities, along with their implicit recognition of interconnectedness, or *wairuatanga*. Jane Bone's (2005, 2007) doctoral research in early childhood centres in Aotearoa/New Zealand has been a step towards re-visibilising the practice of everyday spirituality within early childhood care and education. She offers the following explanation of spirituality, as:

a form of deep ecology (or connectedness) and a source of inspiration in daily life...
a means of connecting people to all things, to nature and the universe. Spirituality adds to my appreciation of the wonder and mystery in everyday life. It alerts me to the possibility for love, happiness, goodness, peace and compassion in the world.
(Bone, 2007, p. 2)

Her study documented ways in which teachers, parents and children are involved in pedagogies that embrace awareness and enactment of spiritual practices such as that of baking bread (Bone, 2005). Such spiritual practices can be seen as countering the commodification of children as part of a materialistic culture, and foster in children an alternative awareness (as expressed by one teacher in her study) of 'nature, and themselves and others' (Bone, 2005, p. 310). For Māori, a similar awareness of spiritual interconnectedness is expressed through practices such as *karakia*, a ritual celebration of interconnectedness enacted at the beginning and end of the day and before meals are shared.

Te Whāriki and interdependent wellbeing

Early childhood educators in Aotearoa are privileged in that we work under the auspices of a socioculturally-framed curriculum, *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996), which is unique in its honouring of the indigeneity and diversity of children and their *whānau*/families, recognising the inter-relationships between children's cultural values, knowledges and learning validated as being integral to our collective wellbeing:

Children's learning and development are fostered if the well-being of their family and community is supported; if their family, culture, knowledge and community are respected; and if there is a strong connection and consistency among all the aspects of the child's world. The curriculum builds on what children bring to it and makes links with the everyday activities and special events of families, *whānau*, local communities, and cultures. Different cultures have different child-rearing patterns, beliefs, and traditions and may place value on different knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Culturally appropriate ways of communicating should be fostered, and participation in the early childhood education programme by *whānau*, parents, extended family, and elders in the community should be encouraged (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 42).

Te Whāriki recognises the role of communication in reinforcing the child's holistic self-understanding, "enhancing their recognition of their spiritual dimension and the contribution of their heritage and environment to their own lives" (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 72). Within its "Exploration" strand, Te Whāriki includes the following learning outcomes:

- familiarity with stories from different cultures about the living world, including myths and legends and oral, nonfictional, and fictional forms;
- working theories about Planet Earth and beyond;
- a knowledge of features of the land which are of local significance, such as the local river or mountain;
- theories about social relationships and social concepts, such as friendship, authority, and social rules and understandings;
- a relationship with the natural environment and a knowledge of their own place in the environment;
- respect and a developing sense of responsibility for the well-being of both the living and the non-living environment;
- working theories about the living world and knowledge of how to care for it (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 90).

These notions expressed within our national early childhood curriculum are consistent with those of place-based pedagogies as expressed by Māori educationalist Wally Penetito (2009) and Nel Noddings (2005). As Carlina Rinaldi (2006) has signalled, wellbeing should be viewed through a collective rather than individualistic lens, recognising our interconnectedness within communities, across cultures, and as planetary citizens.

Methodology

This study, occurring during 2008-9, drew upon qualitative research methodologies (Kincheloe, 1991) such as kaupapa Māori (Bishop & Glynn, 1999; L. T. T. R. Mead, 1996; L. T. Smith, 1999) and ethnographic modes which offer exploratory, naturalistic, holistic, multimodal, and interpretative approaches to the study of people and communities (Aubrey, David, Godfrey, & Thompson, 2000; Barnhardt, 1994; Schensul, 1985). Processes for data theorizing include dialogical negotiation of meaning (Siraj-Blatchford & Siraj-Blatchford, 1997) and collaborative storying (Bishop, 1996, 1997). Ten early childhood centres from across New Zealand participated. Data was gathered through a diverse range of strategies, incorporating audio and video-taped interviews and transcription, field notes, photographs, examples of children's art, and centre pedagogical documentation.

Research Questions

The following were the research questions underpinning the project:

- to focus on policies and practices that address the need for change towards more ecologically sustainable practices in early childhood centres. Each centre will already have practices and policies in place that can either be developed or modified.
- to identify how Māori ecological principles are informing and enhancing a kaupapa (philosophy) of ecological sustainability, as articulated by teachers, tamariki (children) and whānau (families).

- to understand how teachers articulate and work with a pedagogy of place that emphasises the interrelationships between ethic of care for self, others and the environment. Within this project, the use of the term ‘pedagogies of place’ refers to the understanding that practices do not exist in isolation; they arise according to available knowledges and discourses in specific locations.
- to investigate how centres work with the local community in the process of producing sustainable practices, based on an ethic of care for the self, others and the environment.

Voices from data

As the narrative data gathered from across the ten early childhood centres is so rich, broad, and diverse, this paper will reflect on the journey undertaken by one participating early childhood centre, that of the educators, tamariki and whānau (children and families) of Richard Hudson Kindergarten in Dunedin. The teachers at this kindergarten began their research journey by reflecting on the many ways in which their practice already reflected a commitment to ecological sustainability, acknowledging at the same their feelings of inadequacy with regard to the second of the listed research aims. Despite their strong ongoing commitment to Tiriti-based practice (a model representing the two main cultures of Aotearoa: Māori and Pākehā- those of European ancestry), evident in their involvement in a previous study (Ritchie & Rau, 2008), they were unsure of how they might be placed in relation to the task of identifying “how Māori ecological principles are informing and enhancing a kaupapa of ecological sustainability” within their centre programme.

The teachers sought affirmation of their path from within our early childhood curriculum, Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 1996) noting that the curriculum requires the incorporation of Māori ways of knowing and making sense of the world and of respecting and appreciating the natural environment. The teachers reflected that “Our collective vision compares children to trees – with attentive gardeners (teachers and parents/other adults) to tend and nurture them” (RHK, 1). Their reflection led them to reformulate their own research question: “By learning about Rakinui/Ranginui and Papatuanuku can we inspire our children and whānau to consider making ecologically sustainable choices?” They reflected on their philosophical approach to implementing their study, writing that “The seed of this research has been planted, is being watered every day and is growing. Right from the start we decided that whatever direction we went in and whatever teaching and learning happened with the children, it had to be done gently and in a way that encouraged empowerment and positivity”(RHK, 1).

The next step in their journey was to introduce the Māori creation story at mat-times, followed by inviting Māori elder Huata Holmes to visit the centre and share his Southern Māori originary narratives, “as told to him as a child by his grandmothers and great grandmothers”. They noted that Huata’s “kōrero (talking) has supported our teaching of the importance of Papatuanuku in our lives” (RHK, 1). They were amazed at how quickly this was evident in the children’s play and learning, writing that “The research has had a ‘stone in the pond’ effect. It is becoming visible in many aspects of our everyday teaching and in the casual conversations of the children at play. They talk about “mother earth” and know that we need to care for her, and that we can!” (RHK, 2).

In their second set of data, the teachers wrote a narrative describing the children's growing sense of relatedness to both Ranginui and Papatuanuku. Children expressed agency in requesting plastic-free lunch-box wrapping, and opportunities to clean the local area. Through their introduction of the Māori construction personifying our Earth Mother and Sky Father, the teachers observed children's increased empathy transforming into agency. A parent reported how her daughter was concerned about the damage she saw occurring to Rangi and Papa, expressing her distaste for the rubbish being discarded onto Papatuanuku, and the smoke pouring forth into Ranginui's lungs. Here is an excerpt from the narrative written by the teachers:

P has used the information given to her at mat times to add depth and concern to what she knows of the world. She has spontaneously decided to pick up rubbish in her neighbourhood because of her concern for the earth mother. The personification has allowed her to deduce that the smoke from chimneys would not be beneficial to Rangi's lungs, making it hard for him to breathe. P is thinking further afield too. She wants to go to the beach and do a clean up with her family. She has thought a lot about these things. She has also talked about "Sad Wrap" at kindergarten recently, [saying as she considered her lunch wrapping] "I have sadwrap. This is not good for Mother Earth". (RHK, 2)

Children in this centre perceptively reframed the terminology of 'gladwrap' as 'sadwrap'. The resonance of the Māori creation stories soon became evident in the children's play, artwork and story-writing. P-C dictated the following story to explain her painting:

Papatuanuku had too much rubbish on her, because someone had dropped too much rubbish on her. I didn't know who dropped it on her. Rangi actually saved her, because he threw all the rubbish away in the rubbish bin. It was a really naughty person that dropped the rubbish on Papatuanuku – they didn't have a rubbish bin. The naughty person is in jail now. (RHK, 2)

Another child L wrote her own story to accompany her artwork, portraying the pain of Rangi and Papa's separation: "Rangi is at the top. He is really, really close to the children. You can't see the baby because he's in the ground with his mother. They pushed them apart. The earth mother wasn't close to Rangi anymore. So. So. So. So. Sad." (RHK, 3).

The teachers wrote of how their understanding of Māori cosmology enabled a 'personification' of earth and sky which appeared to be enhancing children's empathy towards the environment:

It gives them a personification of sky and earth to embrace and understand. It invites them to see the earth and sky through their own eyes and through their understanding of family. A mother, a father and some children – just like themselves. A family. A family who have had to face challenges and change, and who have new challenges to face and problems to solve. Perhaps, just like them. Knowledge of Rakinui/Ranginui and Papatuanuku also gives our tamariki (children) a seed of knowledge and concern about the vulnerability of our world. We must all do what we can to look after Mother Earth and Father Sky. By giving the young learners of our society ecological strategies in a realistic context, we are laying the foundations of a generation of earth users who know to care (RHK, 1).

Later in the year, the teachers revisited the kaupapa (topic) of Ranginui and Papatuanuku with the children, writing that “We began this period of data collection by revisiting the creation story of Aotearoa. Much of our shared understanding (the teachers and children) concerning this research project is centred around our responsibility to our earth mother, Papatuanuku” (RHK, 3). Again children’s individual interpretations were reflected in their contributions to this project:

This learning was revisited and reinforced through creating an area on our verandah that is a dramatisation of the creation story. The children helped to create it. K suggested plastic shopping bags could be clouds. T was keen to pass things up the ladder for Ranginui’s realm. O, M and S loved making the props through creative art work. Many children were interested, and watched as the area developed over about a week, giving suggestions, identifying parts and articulating their significance. Many of the children drew a child of Rangi and Papa on the poster on the wall, when invited to – many choosing to draw the baby, Ruaumoko – one baby was even on a ‘waterslide’ down the side of the volcano we had drawn! The children told what they knew of the story, and a combined RHK tamariki story was published for interested adults to read. (RHK, 3)

A student teacher on practicum in the centre at that time wrote the following reflection on this activity:

The children at Richard Hudson Kindergarten have been a part of an exciting journey of exploration into the myth of ‘Ranginui and Papatuanuku’. .. The ideology of this story has led us, as a community of learners, to create this amazing display on the veranda. Many children have offered valuable input and participated in creative learning experiences to put the pieces of the display together. An important disposition that has continued to develop as a result of this experience is the children’s knowledge skills and attitudes towards ecological awareness. All the creative media we used has been recycled and this remains a strong focus within RHK to date. The children have been immersed in learning about sharing ways, and participating in ways we can care for Papatuanuku. The children have developed a significant respect for Māori tikanga and te reo Māori. It has been so exciting to be a part of, and the children’s interest and empathy has been increasingly significant. They have explored working theories about Papatuanuku and developed a relationship with the natural environment as well as a sense of responsibility for the well being of Papatuanuku, and how we can care for it. (RHK, 3)

Along with this work, children in the centre were engaged with gardening, composting, recycling, caring for centre animals, and excursions for beach and park cleanups. These activities were linked through conversation with teachers to the notion of caring for Papatuanuku, as seen in the following: ‘When the children were asked about ways to look after Papatuanuku recently at mat time, they said “Pick up all the rubbish”, “recycle”, “reduce” and “reuse”’ (RHK, 3). Parents reported their children bringing these notions into their homes, as seen in this example: “T has been coming home talking a lot about Papatuanuku and the words reduce, re-use, recycle, which is great to hear. He also looks on packaging to see if he could see the recycle sign, and he helps put things into the recycle bin”. Newsletters were sent home, mostly electronically, informing parents of the latest centre sustainability practices, such as ‘litterless lunchboxes’. The teachers also decided to

send a letter to local schools explaining the centre's philosophy, in response to reports that some children who had graduated to primary schools had been unable to find the [non-existent] recycling bins.

As part of their data collection for this study, one of the teachers talked with a Māori parent, S, about his perceptions of his son's involvement in these activities. Teacher A reported on her discussion with S:

When S heard the overview of our kindergarten's te ao Māori research focus on Ranginui, and particularly Papatuanuku, he stated that he sees Papatuanuku as a living being. She is of utmost importance to him because we come from our mother, then go back to Papa. Further, he stated that Papatuanuku is "the most beautiful person in the world" and that looking after her is, without a doubt, the right thing to do. S believes that we not only need to look after Papa, but that caring for "Tane's turf" was very important too. "It just doesn't look nice", he said of rubbish in our environment. (RHK, 3)

This teacher then reflected on the significance of what S had shared with her, considering his perception of respect for Papatuanuku, and also for Tane-Mahuta's domain (of the children of Ranginui and Papatuanuku) to be one that had been a life-long orientation as opposed to her more recent efforts to engage with this worldview:

The interview with S. has really helped the depth of my understandings of the place of Papatuanuku in our lives. S's words and wisdom have helped deepen and fine tune my appreciation and awareness of her significance in our country. S articulates his understandings of Papa so passionately, so genuinely and in such a heartfelt manner. The difference in S's conception, connection and sensitivity to the story is probably that his has been learned aurally, over a lifetime, taught to him by people who have also learnt it passionately as a 'fact of life', an absolute reality, and shared it with their next generation. My knowledge has been learnt; as an adult, mainly from books, then by adding bits to the body of knowledge over time. Mine lacks the aroha, empathy, true identity, connection, whakawhanaungatanga and scope of the tangata whenua. This provides some challenge when, as a Pakeha teacher in Aotearoa/New Zealand, I share the creation story with the children I teach. But challenge is good! (RHK, 3)

Discussion

The teachers at Richard Hudson Kindergarten, despite their initial trepidation in relation to the research question exploring Māori perspectives in relation to ecological sustainability, have demonstrated that they were prepared to challenge themselves and deepen their own understandings around their practice, at the convergence of early childhood pedagogy, kaupapa Māori, and ecological sustainability. Their reframing of the research question to be focused on caring for Papatuanuku enabled them to view ecologically sustainable practice as caring for our environment and planet through Māori cosmology, generating a sense of relatedness. Inviting the participation of local elder, Huata Holmes, to introduce authentic indigenous narratives, brought authenticity to their curriculum in line with Wally Penetito's call for place-based pedagogies (Penetito, 2009). For Penetito, a sense of place is a

fundamental human need which embodies a sense of relationship between people and their environments.

Teachers, in reaching out to parents and their centre community, were willing to become advocates for a process of social and cultural change towards more ecologically sustainable lifestyles, through incorporating kaupapa Māori perspectives. They led this process in a gently inclusive manner, with children sharing this advocacy. These teachers were undoubtedly fortunate in that they had the support of the local kaumātua (Māori elder), in the initial stages of the project. However, it appears that it was their own commitment that was crucial to the children's receptiveness and responsiveness to the focus that the teachers had chosen. Through endeavouring to understand the perspectives of parents, the teachers were also challenged to extend their own views, gaining more respect for Māori conceptualisations in doing so. The teachers were sensitive to their role as Pākehā (New Zealanders of European descent) stepping into the domain of Te Ao Māori (the Māori world), cautiously doing their own research and consultation with Māori before introducing new concepts and material.

Children demonstrated through their conversations, sociodrama, story-writing and artwork, their empathy for Papatuanuku and Ranginui. In a contextually responsive manner, teachers had introduced the notion of rāhui (protective prohibition) in order to prevent flowers from being [over]-picked. The notion of people serving as kaitiaki, or guardians of our local places and waterways, is one that other teachers in Aotearoa New Zealand might consider introducing to children in the future. Other kaupapa Māori notions could also be incorporated by these and other teachers. The term manaakitanga could well be used with children in order to describe the practices of caring for each other and the environment that are being enacted.

A reflexive cycle became evident: as the teachers became more passionate and excited by the children's responsiveness, the focus on Papatuanuku and Ranginui became embedded as part of everyday practice, extending into homes, and into the wider community through communications initiated by the centre. The teachers reported a 'stone in the pond' effect, as ripples of responses emanated beyond the initial context. Environmentally-focussed changes were initiated by children not only within the centre and their homes, but also reaching into local schools. This effect was also seen in a recent New Zealand study focussing on environmental competence in an early childhood centre (Vaealiki & Mackey, 2008). This research reported that "children's articulate and confident responses to their parents suggest that as the children's knowledge about the environment increased, so too did the belief that they could influence their families' actions" (Vaealiki & Mackey, 2008, p. 9).

Vaealiki and Mackey (2008) identify advocacy on behalf of the environment as an aspirational environmental competency (Andrzejewski, Baltodano, & Symcox, 2009), which is in accord with the recently promulgated New Zealand school curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007). This document contains the vision that children in our schools be "connected to land and environment" (p. 9) and uphold a value of "ecological sustainability, which includes care for the environment" (p. 10). The document further outlines the key competency of "participating and contributing" which involves the importance of balancing

rights, roles, and responsibilities and of contributing to the quality and sustainability of social, cultural, physical, and economic environments” (p. 13). The brief overview of data provided here from just one of the ten early childhood centres in our study outlines the potential of early childhood programmes to elicit environmentally engaged curriculum implementation in line with this vision. Key to the process at this kindergarten has been the positioning of kaupapa Māori conceptualisations at the heart of the programme. The work of these teachers and tamariki demonstrates the re-narrativising potential of an early childhood programme, whereby generating stories of relatedness which emanate an ethic of care and manaakitanga offer transformative potential for contemporary communities, future generations, and the planet itself.

Ingrid Pramling Samuelsson and Yoshie Kaga have recently written of the important role of early childhood education, since “our societies urgently require new kinds of education that can help prevent further degradation of our planet, and that foster caring and responsible citizens genuinely concerned with and capable of contributing to a just and peaceful world” (2008, p. 9). Furthermore, the data provide evidence of both the embeddedness of an ethic of care within the everyday practices of the centre (Davis, 2008), and of children’s advocacy and initiative in taking steps to care for Papatuanuku, the Earth Mother, reflecting a Māori conceptualisation of our inter-connectedness with our planet’s wellbeing.

Conclusion

Western colonisation has had devastating impacts on both indigenous peoples and the environment – the ‘natives’ and ‘nature’. Whilst there must inevitably be multiple pathways towards de-colonisation, each organic to their local contexts and histories, this paper has argued that any de-colonisation project needs to involve generating counter-narratives respectful of indigenous views regarding nature, that is, incorporating a fundamental and central recognition of our inter-connectedness and inter-dependence with our environment. This requires a paradigm shift away from western positivistic secularity and individualistic endorsement of egocentrism, moving away from capitalistic demands for monetary gratification and transactionality. A failure within the individualistic Western construct, to recognise ourself in the Other, is a dislocatedness that has allowed the exploitation of our planet. This study has demonstrated that early childhood pedagogies can provide counter-narratives which redefine our sense of wellbeing to involve not only caring for ourselves, but also for others and our environment.

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