

ICQI 2014

Committed Sapiential Circles

In her 1978 forward to a book written by my parents, Margaret Mead recognized the importance of a small nation such as New Zealand, in offering examples of hope for the future, derived from the illuminating of “long lineages and committed sapiential circles; for new ways in which the peoples of this planet, lost in an unrealised over-mechanical immensity, can again feel their feet firmly planted on some piece of loved earth, washed by the seven seas and under an over-arching atmosphere which they share with all the peoples of the world”.

In three recent studies (Ritchie et al., 2010; Ritchie & Rau, 2006, 2008), Cheryl Rau and I, along with co-directors and educator co-researchers, have endeavored to facilitate, through long-standing, connected relationships, the illumination of the potentialities for ‘*Tiriti* based’ pedagogies as signaled in *TeWhāriki. He whāriki mātauranga mō ngā mokopuna o Aotearoa: Early childhood curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 1996). These are pedagogies which validate a dual epistemological approach, honoring the promise of *Te Tiriti o Waitangi* to protect Māori resources and aspirations, by enacting Māori

language, values and cultural practices in an integrated, holistic way throughout the early childhood care and education program.

Both children and Indigenous peoples have a long history of having been treated as the objects of research studies, that is, having been ‘colonized’ by researchers for many years (Harwood, 2010; Smith, 1999). Central to our methodological approach has been a commitment to a counter-colonial approach, deeply committed to including the voices of children generally as well as those of Indigenous scholars, educators, families and children within the ‘sapiential circles’ of relationality within our projects. Developing possibilities for these relationships to be transformative (that is, for teachers and researchers to view themselves/each other and the relationships developed as having agency to bring about social, cultural, educational change) relies on an understanding of the complexities and multifaceted nature of these relationships - in relation to experiences encountered in the wider (local/global) world we live in; an approach Taylor (2008) refers to as “a planetary view” (p. 9).

In our three TLRI studies (Ritchie et al., 2010; Ritchie & Rau, 2006, 2008), Cheryl Rau and I, along with co-directors and educator co-researchers, have endeavored to facilitate, through long-standing, connected relationships, the illumination of the potentialities for ‘*Tiriti* based’ pedagogies as signaled in

TeWhāriki. He whāriki mātauranga mō ngā mokopuna o Aotearoa: Early childhood curriculum (Ministry of Education, 1996). These are pedagogies which validate a dual epistemological approach, honoring the promise of *Te Tiriti o Waitangi* to protect Māori resources and aspirations, by enacting Māori language, values and cultural practices in an integrated, holistic way throughout the early childhood care and education program.

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tamariki (children) and *whānau* (families) to elicit material, rather than imposing ourselves into the settings to obtain data directly from children.

We followed our educator co-researchers' strategies with interest, as some of them experimented with various ways of 'capturing' children's, often elusive, wisdom. Some of the methods that co-researchers employed were formal interviews with individual children; with the child and parent together; recording mat-time discussions; videoing children's activities; and gathering examples of children's art and accompanying narratives. We also learned from our co-researchers that we neednot take our pursuit of 'child voice' to be a search for an adult-determined mode of 'literacy'. When the teachers and *whānau* (families) of Belmont–Te Kupenga Kindergarten were invited by *Tainui kua* (elders of the Tainui tribe) to the commemorations on the anniversary of the death of the Māori Queen Te Arikinui Dame Te Atairangikaahu, the two teachers, Pera Paekau and Pat Leyland spent hours preparing the children (and parents) from this multicultural urban kindergarten for the experience of attending the formal *pōwhiri* (greeting ceremony). Photos they shared with us afterwards showed the children playing absorbedly with river-stones on the bank of the Waikato River. Here was a narrative that whilst not portraying 'literal' 'child voice', was imbued with deep layers of sentience and meaning.

Possibilities for Post/Counter-Colonial Research With Children

Early childhood care and education settings are sites of potentiality, of “immense possibility and power” (Batycky, 2008, p. 176), yet situated in contexts imbued with the historicity and legacy of colonization, racism, and cultural and economic inequities. Cannella and Viruru (2004) have explained the pervasive nature of colonialist thinking, and how the constructions of ‘child’ and ‘education’ are implicated within this. They challenge us to construct a ‘postcolonial disposition’ which problematizes the ‘will to power’, ‘othering’, and simplistic interpretations constructed by adults in the name of children (p. 155). This confronts us in regard to our commitment to perform post/counter-colonial research with children, and how we might conceive this research as praxis, that is “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (Freire, 1972, p. 28). In a counter-colonialist praxis-oriented research mode, “children would be encouraged to engage in continual critique of the situations within which we have placed them” (Cannella & Viruru, 2004, p. 155). Further, this ongoing praxis needs to engage with both “local and global community actions” as determined by the children themselves (p. 155).

When we view and relate to children as agentic and powerful, we recognize their *mana* (esteem, integrity) and *tinorangatiratanga* (self-determination). Our most recent project, *'Titiro Whakamuri, Hoki Whakamua. We are the future, the present and the past: caring for self, others and the environment in early years' teaching and learning'*(Ritchie et al., 2010), demonstrated children's agency, supported through the *kaupapa* (philosophy) of the research project as enacted and facilitated by committed educator co-researchers. Children demonstrated their empathy and compassion for Papatūanuku (Mother Earth) and Ranginui (Sky Father), and were actively and consciously pursuing practices that would protect Papatūanuku and Ranginui, such as recycling, beach and park clean-ups, tree-planting, gardening and so forth. Parents and communities were also drawn into these activities, demonstrating the catalytic potential of young children, supported by responsive, engaged adults, of revolutionary transformative praxis who were in service of our planet.

Eric Malewski(2005), in his epilogue to Soto and Swadener's edited collection *Power and Voice in Research with Young Children* (Soto & Swadener, 2005), has called for 'precocious methodologies' which resist and transcend traditional, formal modes of researching with children whereby "the authority invested in the investigator is one of omnipotence, of orchestrating research

protocols and delicately pulling already formulated thought from [children's] minds" (Malewski, 2005, p. 219). For Malewski:

Precociousness indicates an enacted nature, a symbiotic view of research as a foundation for participatory democratic education that integrates the belief that all people deserve high-quality, rigorous schooling with research and assessment that is culturally relevant...and methodologies that emerge from various subcultures, informed by the dispossessed and made relevant through nuanced understandings of voice...' (Malewski, 2005, p. 220-221).

He pātai anō. Some questions for further reflection.

This paper ends, in the spirit of *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996) with a series of 'questions for reflection'. We are always asking ourselves questions, especially those which focus on how we might conduct ourselves alongside our research cohort, of educator co-researchers, *tamariki* and *whānau*. One of the frameworks that we have found useful is that offered by Bishop (2005). A particular question arising from his work is: "How will those who contribute to this research project benefit from their participation?"

Further questions we might consider in future research endeavors are: How will the *kaupapa* (approach) of this study contribute to social, cultural and

environmental justice? How 'precocious' are we in our research design? How attentive are we in establishing our research foci, processes, and collectives, of embedding *Tiriti o Waitangi* based/decolonizing commitments? How do we, in our research design and processes simultaneously maintain responsiveness to the *taonga* (treasures) of the local Indigenous people, along with the richness of cultural diversity present in many early childhood care and education contexts? How can we ensure that we, and our educator co-researchers, maintain a strong ethical reflexivity (Phelan & Kinsella, 2013) throughout the research process? Finally, in what ways can we allow children to determine the research focus, in order that it follow a praxis orientation responsive to children's priorities, one that operates from a democratic, participatory paradigm?