

CHAPTER 5

Māori and Pacific Traditional Infant Caregiving Practices: Voices from the Community

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Abstract

Increasing numbers of Māori and Pacific infants are enrolled in early childhood services in Aotearoa/New Zealand. This phenomenon is part of a larger societal trend in which mothers return to the workforce within months of their infant's birth. This development has significant impacts on early childhood service provision, particularly in relation to addressing the cultural needs of infants. A major concern is that Māori and Pacific infants are at risk of cultural deprivation within these services. According to the research reported in this chapter, there is a call within Māori and Pacific communities for Māori and Pacific infants to be raised in culturally responsive ways in early childhood services where children's home language, culture and identity are promoted and maintained. In Aotearoa/New Zealand, infant caregiving theory is largely based on Western European theory and principles that promote individualism and independence, and this will be elaborated upon in the chapter. This chapter outlines findings from a nationwide Aotearoa/New Zealand online survey conducted with Māori and Polynesian Pacific "language nest" teachers on traditional cultural practices for Māori and Polynesian infants. The language nest philosophies and programmes promote culture, language and traditional practices. Respondents expressed the desire for autonomy in providing culturally authentic caregiving practices, and frustration with educational theory and government policies that did not align, or ran contrary to, modern cultural practice. Research findings revealed Māori and Polynesian Pacific traditional cultural values, beliefs and practices, and from this common base is an emerging Polynesian theoretical model of infant caregiving practices. It is anticipated that a Polynesian theory of infant caregiving will guide Aotearoa/New Zealand's early childhood education services and government policy, ensuring culturally responsive practices for Māori and Polynesian Pacific infants and their families.

Introduction

This chapter elaborates on research conducted with Māori and Polynesian Pacific teachers based in Māori and Pacific pre-school “language nests” (centres) in Aotearoa/New Zealand. The language nest movement emerged in the early 1980s when Māori and Pacific communities were increasingly concerned that their languages, cultures and identities were at risk and endangered, and measures were proposed within communities to stem this loss. These early childhood education services provided an alternative to mainstream services; they were community based and driven. Over the decades, however, the required adjustments to governing bodies, management structures, and government policy have encroached on the autonomy of the settings to a point where participant teachers expressed frustration at having to “justify to government departments why we do things that are our norm” and that “mono-cultural ECE regulations fail to recognise cultural dimensions of Māori.” Others felt that they were challenged by the Ministry of Education: they perceived that their service was “more than a preschool” – that is, more than an educational service provided by the Ministry of Education. Rather, it was a service to the whole community – *noku te whenua, noku te whare* translated as “my land, my house”, a place for the entire *whānau* (family).

The online survey sought guidance and feedback from teachers and community of the Māori language nest, *Kobanga Reo*, and Polynesian Pacific language nests including *A’oga Amata* (Samoan), *Te Pūmanga Reo* (Kuki Airani, Cook Islands), and *Akoga Amata* (Tokelau Islands). At the outset of the research, the teachers and community members expressed their appreciation of allowing their “voices to be heard.” We sought feedback on traditional caregiving practices that centres were either using or that Māori and Pacific staff at the centres could recall from their own childhoods. We were keen also to learn of any challenges to implementing traditional caregiving practices with the children or any enablers that assisted the groups. It is important to acknowledge the diversity that exists within Pacific and Māori cultural groups. We do not seek to homogenise, or detract from the uniqueness of cultural groups, but to explore connections found in our research between traditional caregiving practices within these two cultural groups (Māori and “Pacific”) which suggest common principles and practices and have provided the impetus to further explore these within the cultural communities. This chapter outlines the findings of our research and poses implications for future practice and provocations for consideration.

Background

The legends and stories of Oceania as well as historical and language research confirm the connection between Māori and Polynesian peoples (Mafile'o & Walsh-Tapiata, 2007). From this position of connectedness a collaborative research base is being established, which will enable researchers to harness shared understandings, build alliances, and strengthen positions for further development.

A recent nationwide online survey involving Māori and Polynesian language nest communities showed a genuine desire to develop a shared culturally-based theoretical framework with a defined set of principles to guide and provide justification for teaching approaches and practice. Findings from this research and related literature emphasise the importance of cultural practices, values, and linguistic commonalities. This work adds to the field of Pacific education and the development of culturally-based principles and practices of caring for infants and toddlers in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Another compelling incentive for a shared approach is the increasing rates of Māori and Pacific children entering early childhood services. Teachers within both language nest and mainstream settings would benefit from increased knowledge and expertise to care for Māori and Pacific infants and toddlers in culturally responsive ways.

Research Method

This chapter draws from a research project conducted with our Māori and Pacific language nest communities in 2013. *Kaupapa* Māori (Pihama, et al., 2004) and Pacific methodologies, such as *Talanoa* (Halapua, 2005; Latu, 2009) formed a frame for the research process (Anae, Coxon, Mara, Wendt-Samu, & Finau, 2004). *Kaupapa* can be translated as a strategy, plan or philosophy and *Kaupapa* Māori locates Māori understandings as central to the research process and outcomes (Pihama et al., 2004). Alignments with Pacific values, beliefs, knowledge processes and practices are evident (Taufe'ulungaki, 2002). This research fits within a wider Oceanic view which promotes building networks, synergies and collaborations across parts of the Pacific, as well as strengthening related researchers and the systems (Sanga, 2012). Furthermore, strategic alliances and partnerships with Māori and other Indigenous peoples in the Pacific region will allow new indigenous world views and aspirations to unfold (Kidman, 2012).

A comprehensive review of literature was undertaken as part of the initial research process. Themes identified in the literature are included in the discussion. A nationwide online survey was the main data gathering device,

enabling staff in language nest settings to access and respond to the study. In keeping with Pacific research guidelines (Anae et al., 2004), the research process was enhanced by personal telephone calls and face-to-face discussions to complement the online survey responses. Participant communities included Māori, Samoan, Cook Island, Niuean, Tongan, Tokelauan and Fijian. The participant responses provided valuable data and comments to enhance our understandings.

The Contemporary Situation of Early Childhood Education in Aotearoa/New Zealand

Early childhood education has an important role in establishing strong learning foundations and providing children with the ability to develop as strong, confident learners. Increasing proportions of Pacific children are participating in early childhood services in Aotearoa. Between 2010 and 2013 enrolments for Māori children were 92.3% and Pacific children 88.6%. Numbers of enrolments for children under two years of age have also risen with an increase of 21% between 2007 and 2013 for this infant and toddler age group (Ministry of Education, 2014). Although this increase continues, little research has been conducted into the implications of this social and educational trend.

Generally, it is accepted that early childhood teachers in Aotearoa/New Zealand could further develop culturally and linguistically to work with Māori and Pacific children (Bevan-Brown, 2003). Teachers want the best for their students. However, achieving this aim is complex, particularly in regard to Māori and Pacific children in early childhood education. One of the reasons early childhood services may fail to meet the needs of Māori and Pacific children is that teachers are unaware of the role culture plays in learning, and consequently they lack understanding of how to teach in culturally responsive ways (Bevan-Brown, 2003; Mara & Marsters, 2009).

In the Aotearoa/New Zealand early childhood context the teaching force is comprised largely of Pākehā/palangi (Europeans). The Ministry of Education's (2013) statistical data revealed that 12,723 registered and non-registered teachers identified as Pākehā/European; 1,847 identified as Māori and 1,780 were of Pacific origin (Ministry of Education, 2016). Meeting the cultural needs of many Māori and Pacific children in early childhood education services is determined by the level of expertise that is often beyond the experience of mono-cultural speakers of English with little experience of Māori (Ritchie, 2003) and Pacific cultures (Mara & Marsters, 2009).

Families in Māori and Pacific communities seek to access services that will ensure that their cultural practices, values, and languages are included in Early Childhood Education. A quote from a respondent, in our survey, recognised that:

It is important to find out what the cultural parental practices are at home and how we can connect our teachers to practices such as spiritual [practices]. It is also important that we try and use the first language that parents and grandparents use at home.

There is a noticeable gap in the literature on both Pacific knowledge and practice for early childhood educational provision (Chu, Glasgow, Rimoni, Hodis, & Meyer, 2012) and even less literature on Pacific perspectives of infant and toddler provision (Rameka & Walker, 2012). Educational services are failing to meet the academic, social and cultural needs of Pacific early childhood learners (Chu, et al., 2012; Education Review Office, 2010; Rameka & Walker, 2012).

Polynesian Theory

Embarking on this research led the researchers to explore the commonalities between traditional infant care practices for Māori and the main Polynesian Pacific groups represented in Aotearoa/New Zealand. A review of the literature and consultation with the communities of Samoa, Cook Islands, Niue, Tonga and Tokelau within the online survey, reveal that there is a set of Polynesian caregiving practices that are also espoused by Māori in Aotearoa. The scope of the “Polynesian triangle” includes the paths travelled by the Polynesian seafarers from Hawaii in the Northern Pacific to Tahiti in the East, Samoa in the West and Easter Island in the Southern latitudes. A common set of principles and practices around caring for infants has been identified in this triangle, and these principles have been retained throughout Polynesia (Ikupu & Glover, 2004; Vini, 2003), with Ritchie and Ritchie (1970) noting that the cultural practices and language of Māori were not lost during their migration to Aotearoa/New Zealand (see also Metge, 1995). This discussion reflects a Polynesian cultural worldview of raising infants and toddlers.

Western Theoretical Paradigms

Exposure to a Western education system has been a significantly disenfranchising and colonising experience for Polynesian communities across the Pacific, including Aotearoa (Berryman, 2008; Vai'imene, 2003). Education has been framed by a large assortment of Western theories to

provide justification for teaching approaches and pedagogy. Most have occurred within timeframes and for particular purposes that have not aligned with Polynesian worldviews and ways of being. This marginalisation process is evident within the field of infant caregiving practices.

Western perspectives of infants and toddlers are not universal “truths” and it is likely that there is a tension between those practices which have been espoused and normalised in mainstream early childhood centres, and traditional cultural practice. Whilst the discussion in this chapter is not intended to counter Western theory on infant caregiving, we aim to suggest another lens to guide practice, and promote an understanding of culturally located praxis so that Māori and Pacific infants will be cared for and educated in culturally and socially responsive ways when attending care and education settings. Thus, we “speak back” to prevailing Western European models of raising infants that are sometimes contradictory and marginalising for Māori and Pacific cultural worldviews.

One such Western model supports a respectful approach to children which encourages independence in infants. Those working with infants have embraced Resources for Infant Educators (RIE) principles motivated by the desire to work respectfully with children in their care (Dalli, Rockel, Duhn, Craw, & Doyle, 2011; Petrie & Owen, 2005). “Respect”, however, can be determined in many ways and should not be privileged by one theoretical or cultural model. Polynesian communities demonstrate many ways of showing respect for infants where a sense of collective identity and belonging is desired (Jenkins, Harte, & Ririki, 2011) that may not fit within an RIE philosophical framework.

A further example of such disconnection may be found in relation to ideas about child development. A Western model promoted in *Te Whāriki*, the current New Zealand early childhood curriculum, which although developed in 1996 continues to inform contemporary early childhood education practice, observes children progressing through clearly defined stages of development from infancy; these are birth until twelve to eighteen months, and then toddlerhood which occurs between twelve months and three and a half years (Ministry of Education, 1996). Polynesian children’s progress is monitored through a different set of criteria. For example, *Piripoho* is the practice of carrying infants until they are able to sit unaided (Rameka & Walker, 2012) and describes development in terms of the closeness when babies are held close to the heart or chest of another, and the progression of the newborn to the ability to sit independently. The term *ka nakimaku* (common to Māori and other Polynesian languages) describes the period when the child moves

from breast feeding to eating solid food. The process of *nakunakeri* is mincing or breaking down. Traditionally, the adult would chew the food before feeding it to the infant (Rameka & Walker, 2012). Children at this time are becoming increasingly mobile and developing verbal communication.

Research Survey Processes and Findings

This section outlines findings from a 2013 Victoria University of Wellington Summer Scholarship programme that enabled a Māori summer scholar to gain research and writing experience. The research process involved conducting a comprehensive literature review on traditional infant caregiving practices. A nationwide online survey was sent to early childhood services that were identified by the Ministry of Education as providing Kohanga Reo, Immersion Māori or Bilingual services. The survey included respondents from Te Kohanga Reo, and Māori early childhood services, and from communities identifying with the Pacific Nations of Samoa, Cook Islands, Niue, Tonga and Tokelau.

There was a set of generic open response questions asked of each setting. Questions were modified according to whether the service catered for Māori or Pacific communities. Data were gathered on the type of service offered, such as immersion or bilingual language programmes. We enquired what languages were used and the percentage of language use. We asked whether the service catered for infants, toddlers and/or young children. We then investigated specific cultural practices as follows:

- How does the service embrace traditional Māori/Pacific cultural caregiving practices and pedagogies related to infant and toddler education, care routines, feeding, sleeping, comforting, shared caregiving, *tuakana/teina*, and other caregiving practices. We then asked for examples of these practices, and ideas and challenges they may experience in implementing them.
- What are the cultural practices and pedagogies around infant and toddler education and care-based teacher training, professional development, community involvement, networking, upbringing, influence of *kaumatua*/elders, *hapu/whānau*, readings and literature and other? Please give examples of these practices, ideas, and challenges.
- What are the barriers to implementing authentic cultural practices and pedagogies around infant and toddler education and care?
- What are the enablers to implementing authentic cultural practices and pedagogies around infant and toddler education and care?

There were follow-up phone calls if respondents sought further clarification or wished to discuss the research processes.

Online Survey Research Responses – Community Voices

Findings from the survey research with the language nest communities reveal a keen desire by these communities to contribute ideas and knowledge, to voice opinions and to participate in theory development. At the outset of the research, the teachers and community members expressed their appreciation for allowing their “voices to be heard.” Respondents from the online survey identified enablers and challenges to implementing authentic Polynesian programmes for Polynesian infants and toddlers. Examples of enablers and challenges are outlined here:

Traditional caregiving practices

Participants in the survey noted the tensions amongst what may be considered best practices for caregiving. Caregiving practices within a Polynesian curriculum are viewed as a collective endeavour in which *whānau*, *aiga* or extended family all play a role. Participant statements such as “It’s all about *fanau*” (Niuean community member), and “*Whakawhānau ngātanga*” (Māori), assert the importance of family involvement in caring for infants and toddlers. One respondent’s comment, “Effective relationships with whānau are integral to quality delivery” reinforced the pivotal place of family and community. *Aiga* guidance was considered central to delivering the principles of *fa’aloalo* (respect), *tautua* (service) and *alofa* (love).

Intergenerational care, including grandparents and elders

Intergenerational care, often involving grandparents or elders, was highly valued by the respondents: “We feel ‘reaffirmed’ by the presence of our Māori elders.” The guidance of *kamumatua* and elders was held in high regard to ensure the authenticity of the language nest programmes: “[we want] guidance from our elders, to ensure we are on the right track.” Grandparents and family elders were consulted on traditional caregiving, and teachers actively sought their advice. For example, a teacher approached a grandmother regarding her grandchild’s unsettled sleeping patterns and was informed: “My mokopuna likes to be wrapped up tightly, held and rocked to sleep.” Within the language nest, the elders with their traditional knowledge and wisdom are considered *taonga* (treasures) and *tuakana* (experts) for teachers who are frequently *teina* (novices), still learning about their culture, language and traditional knowledge.

Spirituality

Spirituality plays a prominent role in the delivery of Polynesian early childhood programmes. In particular, Christianity continues to influence early childhood language nest programmes. All Polynesian Pacific respondents discussed the central place of Christian practice and the ways in which it was woven into their programmes. Infants and toddlers were exposed daily to prayers, hymns and Christian practices. In part, this is a legacy of the origins of many of the language nests, which were established by the church. Christian philosophy continues to dominate programmes in contemporary Polynesian service provision. Spirituality was also a strong priority for our Māori respondents but not necessarily linked as strongly to Christianity.

Language

Predictably, the ability of the teachers to speak Polynesian language/s as fluently as a native language speaker was viewed as the most advantageous and valued skill within the language nest. This, coupled with knowledge of authentic traditional cultural practice, was the most sought after skill when recruiting staff members and teachers in these services. This was particularly emphasised by staff in a Cook Islands early childhood centre who asserted that cultural learning occurred between *tuakana* and *teina* and that learning should take place “together, under one roof, without barriers or walls, rather than parcelling them (the infants) off into age groups.” Respondents from a Samoan centre noted the importance of staff “welcoming and greeting children and *aiga* (families) in appropriate Samoan language and that respectful *gagana* (practices) are delivered with friendliness and respect.”

Barriers

Feedback from the surveyed communities reveals a desire to work autonomously and independently, and not be unduly constrained by government policy that is not congruent with the cultural worldviews of the community. Māori and Pacific communities strongly voiced the need for a “Government educational policy review to address the incongruence of two cultural worldviews”; that is, the views of each centre’s community and that of the government policy developers in early childhood education.

Current mainstream teacher training provision was seen as not preparing student teacher trainees to work in culturally responsive ways. Participants informed researchers that, to be able to work in authentic cultural ways with infants, they had had to unlearn some of the formal training they had received. A participant felt that in her experience:

Mainstream training is a barrier as it individualises the *kaiako* (teacher), hence their professional knowledge, professional practice and professional relationships are monocultural. I speak from experience, for when I came to work in [this] Centre (a language nest) I found it difficult as I had become familiar with working as an individual (in a mainstream setting) rather than working in a team. The sharing of expertise was something new for me in my role as *kaiako* (teacher) but not new to me as Māori, thus it was necessary to pull my mainstream *potae* (hat) off and go back to how I was raised.

Implications Arising from this Research

Māori and Pacific communities are rapidly growing within Aotearoa/ New Zealand. Within these groups, the number of infants and toddlers entering formal educational or care settings continues to increase (Ministry of Education, 2014). This calls for planning and preparation that is based on sound research, *and* collaboration and close consultation with communities.

It is the right of Māori and Pacific infants and toddlers to be raised in culturally and linguistically responsive communities, to enable them to become enculturated with the traditional practices, values, knowledge and – very importantly – the language, to ensure that the children will be raised knowing their identity (Glasgow, 2012). Currently, however, most Māori and Pacific infants in care and education settings in Aotearoa are disadvantaged; they are cared for by teachers who use a predominantly Western theoretical and principled framework in caring for children. Furthermore, teachers of infants are constrained by a lack of knowledge of culturally responsive caregiving practice and theory.

The wealth of traditional knowledge within the cultural Māori and Pacific language nest communities is invaluable and needs to be foregrounded in developing culturally responsive pedagogy for Māori and Pacific infants. The potential within these culturally located settings requires further investigation and collaboration with Māori and Pacific language nest communities. The survey research revealed a desire by language nest communities to contribute ideas and knowledge to guide this process, and to enable key theoretical principles around Māori and Pacific traditional, cultural infant caregiving practice to emerge.

Guided Reflection

This paper has emphasised the need for context-specific approaches to Early Childhood education and care. It argues that planning and preparation for the provision of culturally responsive Early Childhood education and care needs to be based on sound research, as well as collaboration and close consultation with communities. In a rapidly changing world, this “new” approach becomes even more imperative.

Reflecting on your own context:

- Identify/discuss ways in which Early Childhood services incorporate, or could incorporate, traditional cultural caregiving practices and pedagogies related to infant and toddler education and care routines such as feeding, sleeping, comforting, shared caregiving, and *tuakana/teina* relationships.
- [In what ways] are such cultural practices and pedagogies reflected in Early Childhood teacher training and professional development?
- What are the barriers to implementing authentic cultural practices and pedagogies around infant and toddler education and care?
- What are the enablers to implementing authentic cultural practices and pedagogies around infant and toddler education and care?

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