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Nurturing Authentic Indigenous Voices in Indigenous Children's and Young Adult Literature: An Aotearoa New Zealand Case Study

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Nurturing Authentic Indigenous Voices in Indigenous Children's and Young Adult Literature: An Aotearoa New Zealand Case Study

Nicola Daly, Julie Barbour, Darryn Joseph, Te Kani Price, Pania Tahau-Hodges, Kawata Teepa, Nic Vanderschantz, Eboni Waitere, and Bryony Walker

INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

At the heart of decision-making in children's literature is the publisher who decides whose stories are told and how (Enciso et al., 2010). There is some research on inclusivity practices in the children's literature that we see in libraries, homes, and publishing houses (Caple & Tian, 2022; Daly, Vanderschantz, Mitchell, & Blair, 2025; Daly, 2021; Stagg Peterson & Robinson, 2020). International research shows that there is limited cultural and linguistic diversity evident in children's picturebooks (Ka'ai-Mahuta, 2011; Centre for Literacy in Primary Education, 2022; Wissman, 2019). This lack of diversity has implications for literacy engagement and the perpetuation of social inequality (Caple & Tian, 2022; Adam, 2021; Tschida, Ryan, & Ticknor, 2014; Wissman, 2019).

There is, however, little work examining how the publishing process can contribute to increased diversity in children's picturebooks, particularly in relation to Indigenous languages and cultures. The importance of this is stated eloquently by Canadian researchers of Indigenous children's literature, Hanson, Kind, Phipps, and Spring (2020, p. 84) who explain that "[c]hildren's literature with a positive representation of Indigenous communities allows for hope and affirmation. Through a creative representation of traditions that are still alive today, these stories affirm identity that is strengthened by connections to the past while providing hope for the future."

There are few Indigenous publishers of children's literature around the world, and very limited research examining the publishing process in Indigenous contexts. Moreover, there is no empirical research to date exploring Indigenous publishing processes that ensure the representation of Indigenous language, culture, and identities in children's literature (Bradford, 2007; Sheehan-Bright, 2011; Stagg Peterson & Robinson, 2020). In this article, we hope to contribute to a deeper understanding of Indigenous Children's and Young Adult Literature (ICYAL) by sharing details and preliminary findings of our three-year New Zealand Royal Society, Marsden-funded research project. In this research and through a close collaboration with Huia Publishers, a multi-award-winning Indigenous publisher based in Pōneke (Wellington), New Zealand, we explore the ways in which Indigenous voices are and can be authentically represented in picturebooks.

CONTEXT

Te Reo Māori

Aotearoa New Zealand is home to te reo Māori, the Indigenous Māori language, which became severely endangered following European colonization, leading to an interruption in intergenerational language transmission (Ka'ai-Mahuta, 2011; Harlow, 2007). Concern for the future of the Māori language resulted in the presentation of the Māori Language Petition to parliament in 1972 (Parliamentary Library Te Pātaka Rangahau, 2022). Half a century on, there are gradual improvements in the numbers of speakers of Te Reo. Today, the language is spoken "as a first language" by 23 percent of the Māori population and "at least fairly well" by about 8 percent of the total population of Aotearoa. Of particular importance to

language revitalization efforts is the recognition that there are now many more young Māori who speak the language as both their first and second language than Māori people from older generations (Lane, 2024, p. 36).

Huia Publishers

Aotearoa's leading Indigenous publisher, Huia Publishers, was established in 1991 and has developed an extensive catalogue, including books in the Māori language along with Māori stories told for readers of English. As an Indigenous publisher, Huia explicitly seeks to “share stories that resonate with our people, that reflect our experiences and that value our culture and language” (Huia, 2023). Huia invests in Māori writers, illustrators, editors, designers, and language experts, aiming to create books that will inspire the next generation of language champions, social justice campaigners, and Māori leaders. The revitalization of Te Reo Māori is central to their publishing focus and they aim to ensure that Māori have sovereignty over their own stories.

METHOD

We are undertaking a bounded case study (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007) with Huia Publishers to explore the ways in which Indigenous voices can be authentically represented in picturebooks. Our multidisciplinary team brings together experienced researchers with expertise in Te Reo Māori and the study of Indigenous languages and cultures, in multilingual picturebook design, and in picturebook writing. We use a critical literacy lens (Freire, 2020) to draw on our collective experiences of researching, writing, and authoring for children in Te Reo Māori, along with interviews and interpretive analysis, research methodologies of interactive and dual-language picturebook design, and inductive language analysis with Indigenous communities.

Throughout our research, we are guided by a Kaupapa Māori Research approach (Berryman, 2013)—one based on Māori values—to ensure the appropriateness of our research processes and the validity of our findings. The approach includes whakawhanaungatanga (establishing relationships), tino rangatiratanga (self-determination), acknowledging taonga tuku iho (gifts handed down from ancestors). It also uses a tuakana-teina model, which is a key component of ako Māori (Māori learning and teaching). We elaborate on these aspects of the Kaupapa Māori approach here.

To begin the research process, the four members of the initial research team (Nicola Daly, Julie Barbour, Darryn Joseph, and Nic Vanderschantz) travelled to meet with the team at Huia Publishers to discuss the possibility of collaborating and power-sharing in this research endeavor. Whakawhanaungatanga (establishing relationships) was the key purpose of this visit. It was a time for Huia to learn more about us, and for us to learn more about Huia. This key research value, recognized at the foundation of our relationship, continues to shape our work together throughout the three-year project and beyond. At our initial meeting, we were introduced to the whānau mahi (work family) that is at the center of Huia's organization. We began to build on existing relationships and establish new relationships for our future work together. We also worked to gain a vision of our shared kaupapa (purpose). We asked Huia to share any particular areas of their publishing practice they would like researched, and carefully co-developed our research questions, agreeing on wording for the research proposal. We identified four areas of interest, based on our four areas of expertise:

What can Indigenous picturebook publishing look like?

1. What processes can be employed to create authentic Indigenous picturebook content?
2. What are the tensions and potentialities present in the versioning and reversioning (translation) of children's picturebooks?
3. What strategies can be used for increasing visibility and inclusion of Indigenous themes and people in picturebook design?

4. How can picturebooks be a vessel for language revitalization and education, as well as for entertainment?

By working closely with Huia, setting up regular meetings to discuss findings, and planning ahead, we aim to ensure that tino rangatiratanga (self-determination) is a key component of our research together. Taonga tuku iho (gifts handed down from ancestors) is evident in all of Huia's books, and is central to any research findings. In our research approach, we draw on the tuakana-teina model, which is a key component of ako Māori (Māori learning and teaching). Positioning ourselves as teina (younger sibling/learner), each of the four academics are teamed with a tuakana (older sibling/expert practitioner) from Huia, who serves as each teina's main point of contact over the life of the project. In consultation with the research leaders, each tuakana-teina pairing negotiates the best times and ways to collect data relevant to our research questions.

Our research spans a three-year program. The first year was a time for establishing tuakana-teina relationships and exploring initial data collection methods. The second year focuses on data collection, and the third year on analyzing findings, pursuing key themes, and sharing them in a variety of fora.

Our work is organized in relation to the four key areas of Huia's approach to publishing authentic Indigenous voices in their picturebooks: the publishing process, translation, design strategies, and language revitalization.

The Process of Indigenous Children's Picturebook Publishing

Our work with Huia Publishers aims to develop understandings of the process of Indigenous children's picturebook publishing and identifying key principles underpinning the decision-making that leads to the publication of Indigenous picturebooks. Documentation and analysis of an Indigenous picturebook publishing process for children has not previously been undertaken in Aotearoa.

Initial themes from conversations between Eboni Waitere, chief executive, and Nicola Daly, researcher in children's literature, indicate that the procedure followed by Huia to present authentic Māori voices in their picturebooks involves a layered process. It includes meeting with the storyteller and workshopping the story, developing and using detailed illustration briefs, making careful checks on mātauranga Māori (traditional Māori knowledge), seeking final approval from the storyteller, and holding a debriefing meeting with Huia staff to keep a record of lessons learned.

Huia invests in Māori writers, illustrators, editors, designers, and language experts. Relationships within this community are very important, both with external illustrators and authors, as well as between colleagues in the publishing house itself. Huia strongly values and respects the voices of their authors, listening deeply to aspects of the story that may need to change to ensure a true voice is maintained. If advisors are consulted on aspects of a given story, Huia ensures that Māori voices are represented among the advisors. The weaving of mātauranga Māori, or traditional Māori knowledge, into a story is integral to the story itself; it is not merely a nonfiction exposition of ethnographic facts. Thus, the picturebook has, at its heart, mātauranga Māori.

The mātauranga at the heart of the picturebook is further enhanced by the illustrations. This is then enclosed in the design of the picturebook, which is in turn encased by a marketing strategy to enable the book to reach the intended audience(s) in a bookshop or library.

Translation of Children's Picturebooks

Despite its significance, the translation of children's literature is an area that has largely been under-researched and under-theorized. Picturebook translation research to date has focused on transnational translations, none of them involving Indigenous-colonial borders. Oittinen (2000) notes that translation

is never an “innocent act.” When texts are translated, ideology and power are in play; the ideologies and views of the translator inevitably influence the multiple points of decision-making in a translation. The translation of children’s literature is a complex activity with high stakes: “A bad translation can not only ruin a book—it can also ruin its reader’s motivation to enjoy literature. This is particularly important when discussing the very first books that children come across” (Oitinnen, Ketola, & Garavini, 2018).

Our research with Huia Publishers differs from previous international picturebook translation research (Lathey, 2006; Oitinnen, Ketola, & Garavini, 2018) in that the translation processes we are exploring are set in Aotearoa and involve translation between two languages within that context, one of which is the Indigenous Māori language. Our combined professional experience has revealed complexities in the translation process that non-Indigenous publishers do not necessarily encounter or consider, and which may not be present in other translation contexts. One complexity concerns the author’s sovereignty over their stories, and the importance of maintaining that sovereignty through the different language versions that are created. Another complexity concerns lexical choices and particular word and phrase usage, which arise from dialectal differences within Te Reo Māori. Both of these complexities are likely to arise within communities engaged in Indigenous language reclamation.

Initial findings based on interviews with Kawata Teepa, uia’s chief translator and award-winning author, and Darryn Joseph, award-winning author and university lecturer in Māori language, indicates that the translation process is iterative, collaborative, and draws on community expertise both past and present. This Indigenous approach to translation does not seek a word-for-word translation of a story, but aims instead to create a beautiful, re-versioned story in the target language. Every translated version of the text preserves Māori worldviews and honors the aspirations of the elders for younger generations. The musicality of the target language is a consideration at the heart of the language choices in every version.

Design Strategies for Increasing Visibility and Inclusion of Indigenous Content

There is growing recognition of the importance of the representation of diversity in children’s literature. Research to date has emphasized that picturebooks play a crucial role in shaping children’s understanding of the world and their own identities; children must be able to identify themselves in their reading material (Centre for Literacy in Primary Education, 2022; Koss, 2015; Wissman, 2019; Adam, 2021; Tschida, Ryan, & Ticknor, 2014; Daly, Vanderschantz, Mitchell & Blair, 2025). Research with children, families, and in classrooms has highlighted the role that content and design play in supporting language revitalization, language development, multilingualism, and diversity (Brouwer & Daly, 2022, 2023; Hadaway & Young, 2013, 2014). The inclusion of authentic content, themes, and visual communication by and with Indigenous authors, illustrators, and publishers and for Indigenous readers has the potential to support a richer and more diverse landscape of picturebooks both in Aotearoa and around the world.

Early indications from conversations between design researcher Nic Vanderschantz and Huia program manager Te Kani Price reinforce the findings that highlight the importance of Huia’s shared and collaborative approaches to producing picturebooks for children in Aotearoa. These conversations highlight how editors, translators, and designers collaborate on story development and design ideation, while working openly with authors and illustrators outside of Huia.

Visual analysis of the illustrations, typography, and layout of Huia’s picturebooks reveals numerous themes of Māori culture, and tikanga (practices) woven throughout the books. Some of the themes are referenced explicitly within the text; others are found in the illustrations. These themes include the presence of key elements of Māori identity through space and time, such as mountains and rivers or bodies of water, ocean-going vessels, ancestors and communities of people, and homes.

Huia's illustrations clearly depict diversity and inclusion within the context of Aotearoa. Main characters, friends, and family members range in shape, size, skin tone, and creed. In contrast, localized nature and the environment are carefully represented in the books. The flora and fauna depicted in the illustrations are likely to be recognizable and identifiable to children and families who read the books. The visual elements of Indigenous picturebooks offer interesting questions to pursue as our project unfolds, particularly with regard to the changes that can be observed over the 30-year period of Huia's operations.

Picturebooks as a Vessel for Language Revitalization

There is limited research into the role of picturebooks in language revitalization (Brouwer & Daly, 2022, 2023; Fuimaono, Daly, & Kelly-Ware, 2023). Materials for language education and literacy in the targeted languages are, however, considered to be essential for maintaining and improving the vitality of a language (UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages, 2003). Picturebooks, both those written in Te Reo Māori and dual-language Māori-New Zealand English (NZE), provide readers with access to language and cultural content. In studying the linguistic context of Aotearoa New Zealand, researchers have described the interaction between Te Reo Māori and NZE as a process in which Māori "loanwords" are "borrowed" into NZE (Grant, 2012; Hay, MacLagan, & Gordon, 2008; Macalister, 2005). This loanword narrative persists beyond Aotearoa's borders, with the Oxford English Dictionary recording some 36 new borrowings of Māori origin into NZE in 2023 (Salazar, 2023). In our research with Huia, we are seeing an interaction between Te Reo Māori and NZE that challenges the loanword narrative. Rather than positioning Te Reo Māori as being borrowed into and subsumed by English, in Indigenous picturebooks the two languages thrive as separate linguistic systems (Barbour, Daly & Wessels, in press). Not only are there separate Māori and English versions of many Huia picturebooks, but in the English-medium versions, we see content creators proactively teaching Māori words and phrases to their non-Māori-speaking audience.

Text analysis of picturebooks published by Huia reveals a wealth of vocabulary and phrases from Te Reo Māori in the NZE versions. Far from being random, the Māori language clusters around semantic domains of relevance to life in Aotearoa. Māori vocabulary related to kinship, cultural practices, flora, and fauna sits alongside the Māori names of places, features of the landscape (notably mountains and rivers), significant people, and ancestral beings. Conversations between linguist Julie Barbour and editor Bryony Walker reveal multiple considerations in the use of Māori in Huia's English-language picturebooks. Māori words and phrases are not simply sprinkled through stories in an ad hoc manner. The use of Māori vocabulary, and the degree of comprehension support provided to readers, depends on the familiarity with individual words that can be assumed based on their currency in Aotearoa. Other factors in choosing to use and support (or not) the comprehension of Māori words include their importance to the storyline and the linguistic context in which they are used. While Māori words and phrases in dialogue are naturally supported through illustration, the comprehension of words and phrases in narration is more often supported by explicatory techniques in the surrounding text. There is no direct translation of each word or phrase; rather, attention is given to ensuring the reader can engage with and enjoy each story. Importantly, Huia picturebooks offer opportunities to the curious reader for cultural and linguistic learning beyond information provided on the page.

ENSURING AN INDIGENOUS PRESENCE IN ICYAL

There is much scope for research in the area of Indigenous children's literature, including how such resources can be used in educational contexts (Brouwer & Daly, 2023; Ibrahim, 2025). However, the focus of our research is on how authentic Indigenous picturebooks are being created by an award-winning Indigenous publisher in Aotearoa. In this article, we have presented the context for our three-year research program exploring representations of Indigenous voices in picturebooks published by

award-winning New Zealand publisher Huia. We have offered findings from the first year of our project concerning the broader processes involved in publishing Indigenous picturebooks, including the translation of these picturebooks, representations of continuity and diversity and the processes that generate these representations through time, and the use of the Indigenous Māori language in English-medium picturebooks as a proactive language revitalization strategy. We hope our preliminary findings contribute to a deeper understanding of how to ensure the presence of authentic Indigenous voices in ICYAL.

Our research continues, and our aim is to share future findings in order to contribute to the development of Indigenous children's picturebooks in Aotearoa and beyond.

NOTES

¹ This research has been assessed and approved by the University of Waikato, Division of Education ethics committee (FEDU006/24).

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Nicola Daly is a sociolinguist and associate professor in the Division of Education at the University of Waikato, where she teaches children's literature. She is the principal investigator of a three-year Marsden funded project, working with Huia Publishers and other colleagues to explore Indigenous voices in picturebooks. She leads the Postgraduate Certificate in Children's and Young Adult Literature and co-directs the Waikato Picturebook Research Unit. She was a Fulbright New Zealand Scholar at the University of Arizona in 2019-20.



Julie Barbour is a senior lecturer in Linguistics at Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato, the University of Waikato in Kirikiriroa, Hamilton. Julie specializes in the documentation and analysis of Indigenous Pacific languages, particularly the languages of Malekula Island in Vanuatu. While primarily a grammarian, Julie also works in the areas of social/anthropological, historical, and educational linguistics. She is an advocate for Indigenous languages, with a strong interest in the role of children's literature in language reclamation and revitalization initiatives.



Dr. Darryn Joseph, from the Ngāti Maniapoto and Ngāti Rereahu tribes, is an award-winning children's writer and translator, and resides in the North Island of Aotearoa, New Zealand. He sits on the book council board, Read NZ Te Pou Muramura, to encourage all New Zealanders to read more. He is currently working with colleagues from the University of Waikato on picture book research.



Te Kani Price designer and programme manager, Ngāti Tūwharetoa, Te Whakatōhea, is an award-winning graphic designer and creative director. His practice covers the broad spectrum of genres and media that HUIA produces, with particular interest in the pairing of text and image to tell a nuanced story. He has worked across multiple design disciplines in Aotearoa and Australia. Te Kani works alongside clients directly to develop stories that engage audiences in both general and culturally specific contexts.



Pania Tahau-Hodges (Ngāti Tūwharetoa, Ngāi Tūhoe) is a director of Huia Publishers, an award-winning Māori-owned publishing house in Aotearoa, New Zealand. Her work as both publisher and author centers on amplifying Indigenous voices in children's literature and supporting diverse, culturally grounded narratives. Her publications ensure that Māori children and whānau see their language, culture, and world reflected in stories, while her publishing leadership advances Indigenous storytelling within national and international contexts. She is particularly interested in the role of children's literature in cultural revitalization, representation, and education.



Kawata Teepa (Ngāi Tūhoe, Te Whakatōhea) is an award-winning author, translator, and content developer and is the Pou Tikanga (Lead Cultural Advisor) at Huia Publishers. Kawata works on conceptualizing projects, translating picture books, providing cultural guidance on print and digital projects, developing educational resources, and more. Kawata brings to his work a passion for imparting his knowledge to the younger generations of tamariki (children).



Dr. Nicholas (Nic) Vanderschantz is a senior lecturer at Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato investigating the design of human-centered solutions to information-seeking and information-use problems. He has investigated individual and collaborative use of pBooks, eBooks, picturebooks, libraries, mobile and desktop apps, and the Internet. Nic's research focuses on the presentation and visualisation of information using typography in single language and bilingual contexts.



Eboni Waitere (Ngāti Kahungunu, Rangitāne) is a director of Huia Publishers, a pioneering Indigenous publishing house based in Aotearoa New Zealand. She is also the president of the Publishers' Association of New Zealand, Te Rau o Tākupu (PANZ). With a background deeply rooted in her Indigenous heritage, Eboni approaches her role as a publisher with a quiet determination to amplify Indigenous voices and narratives.



Bryony Walker is an English-language editor at Huia Publishers and works on commercial books across all genres.