



Whāia te iti kahurangi: A journey of pursuing aspirations for bilingual tamariki

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PAIA TAANI

Te Whare Wānanga o Otāgo | University of Otāgo

The title and basis of this reflection derives from the following whakataukī,

Whāia te iti kahurangi, ki te tūohu koe me he maunga teitei
*Pursue the highest ideals, if you must submit, let it be to a lofty
mountain.*

(Education Council Aotearoa New Zealand & Ministry of Education, 2011, Inside Cover).

This whakataukī encourages one to pursue aspirations, be persistent, and not allow obstacles to deter progress. My husband and I are parents of four beautiful bilingual tamariki. When our children started primary school, we chose the local school, which is very good but, at the time, the provision of te reo Māori and tikanga Māori was lacking. I am also a kaiako and academic within the realms of te reo Māori and tikanga Māori, particularly in the contexts of whānau and education. Informed by my dual role as parent and educator, this reflection shares some of our experiences throughout our children's primary school years. I also highlight the challenges we faced in the pursuit of our aspirations. Utilising the *Tātaiako: Cultural Competencies for Teachers of Māori Learners* framework, I discuss the progress and shifts in attitudes regarding bicultural and bilingual teaching and learning (Education Council Aotearoa New Zealand & Ministry of Education, 2011). I conclude by sharing my vision for my future mokopuna.

OUR JOURNEY

Nearly 14 years ago, our eldest child started primary school. Upon learning that our child was bilingual in Māori and English, the school expressed their support and informed us that plans to start a bilingual classroom had already begun. We soon discovered that although the teachers were fantastic and had the best intentions, most lacked the level of knowledge to be able to support our son's language and cultural needs. At the same time, a pilot programme called *Kā Puananī o te reo Māori (Kā Puananī)* was established. This programme was a full immersion te reo Māori programme which ran for one day per week with children attending from different schools around the city. The programme continued for about 10 years; so for our three older children, their school week

consisted of four days at their main school and one day at *Kā Puananī*. This programme, along with te reo Māori in the home, meant that our children's language, cultural and social needs were being met.

However, we soon encountered other challenges. These included teacher attitudes and beliefs about bilingualism and language acquisition, and perspectives about the potential impacts our choice could or will have on our children's learning. For example, one teacher believed that our children needed to first learn how to read and write in English, so claimed they shouldn't start *Kā Puananī* until their second year of school despite the fact that our children were already beginning to read and write in both languages by the time they began school. These outdated, deficit views of bilingualism and biliteracy have been disputed by research and literature for many years (see Flores et al., 1991; May et al., 2004; Rahman, 2013; Rublik, 2017). In fact, the research directly counters these perspectives by noting the increased likelihood of academic success for biliterate students (May et al., 2004). The benefits of bilingualism and multilingualism are recognised internationally with many overseas schools including other languages as part of their curriculum. In contrast, New Zealand is one of the only countries in the world to offer a monolingual education system (Manaia, 2018).

Another issue was teachers' concerns about our children 'missing out' on school events; an area we have staunchly challenged in our right to choose our children's educational pathway. For us, the benefits of a hybrid education model consisting of *Kā Puananī* and the local school far outweighed the perceived disadvantages. Our overarching whānau goal of raising bilingual tamariki was for our children to feel confident as Māori in both Māori and Pākehā contexts. These aligned with the goals of *Kā Puananī*, which included strengthening knowledge of te reo Māori and tikanga Māori and connecting with other Māori speaking whānau (Te Maihāroa, 2012). Furthermore, *Kā Puananī* offered a "quality te reo Māori immersion" programme which complemented our whānau language journey (Te Maihāroa, 2012, p. 46). Our mainstream school could not provide this at the time, so in our view, not attending *Kā Puananī* would be missing out on opportunities to further strengthen and nurture our children's language, culture, and identity.

Four years later, our second child started school and it felt a little like Groundhog Day as we were faced with the same challenges we experienced with our first child. Nevertheless, we remained committed to the educational pathway we had chosen, as it was proving to be a successful model in terms of language and cultural development. At this time, however, positive shifts started occurring in the school with the employment of a te reo Māori speaking teacher whose responsibility was to promote and encourage the use of te reo Māori in all classrooms. At the same time, the concept of a bilingual classroom was progressing with the provision of a short session once a week, and later extended to half a day. The main barrier to establishing a full-time classroom was the recruitment of teachers with the linguistic and cultural knowledge to teach a bilingual classroom.

Our third child started school two years later and frustratingly we found ourselves having the very same conversations that had occurred with our two older children. The bilingual class was still being offered and by the time our son reached his third year at school, it was thriving. Teachers were appointed and the class was now full-time. Our son had settled in well by this stage and had a strong

social group so was reluctant to move to a new classroom. We asked him to trial the bilingual class for a term and if he didn't like it, he could return to his other class. He stayed and we believe the fact that he was surrounded by his language and culture contributed to his sense of well-being and belonging.

By the time our youngest child began school six years later, we had noticed significant shifts school wide with a stronger understanding of bilingualism. He spent about half a year in the new entrant class for transitioning purposes, before moving into the bilingual class. The class had grown and now has a waiting list. Our son's learning and confidence continues to blossom and again we believe it is because he can see, feel, and hear his language and culture in his classroom and school.

Research and literature tell us that a positive sense of identity, belonging and well-being is enhanced if the education environment reflects students' cultures and languages (Bishop et al., 2007; Education Council of Aotearoa New Zealand & Ministry of Education, 2011; Rahman, 2013). All our tamariki experienced this to varying degrees with *Kā Puananī* and the bilingual classroom. However, in my observations, this is even more so for our two younger tamariki due to the efforts made to establish and develop the bilingual classroom where their language and culture is valued and celebrated.

PROGRESS

There has been positive and significant progress made within our local primary school. We have noticed a shift in attitudes about bilingualism and language acquisition. I now offer a brief overview of these changes using the *Tātaiako* framework (Education Council Aotearoa New Zealand & Ministry of Education, 2011). *Tātaiako* is centred around the goal of "Māori achieving educational success as Māori" and was developed to support teachers across all education sectors, at all levels, to become more culturally competent and responsive to Māori learners (Education Council & Ministry of Education, 2011, Inside Cover). *Tātaiako* recognises and acknowledges the significance of relationships, language, and culture, and the potential positive impacts on well-being, belonging, identity and educational outcomes (Education Council Aotearoa New Zealand & Ministry of Education, 2011). I have consciously opted to use this framework to monitor progress to reinforce and elevate the message that language and culture are key factors to ensuring a positive sense of identity, well-being and belonging. *Tātaiako* consists of five competencies which are: whanaungatanga, ako, tangata whenuatanga, manaakitanga and wānanga, and it is in this order the ensuing discussion is organised.

Whanaungatanga

Whanaungatanga in education is demonstrated when an educator "actively engages in respectful working relationships with Māori learners, parents and whānau, hapū, iwi and the Māori community" (Education Council Aotearoa New Zealand & Ministry of Education, 2011, p. 6). One of the shifts I have noticed throughout our children's schooling is an increase in teachers' and schools' engagement with whānau, where whānau input is sought and valued. For example, the bilingual classroom involves whānau in the planning and

development of the classroom. There are many opportunities for whānau to be involved such as, whānau hui and school events.

Ako

Our children are often viewed as experts in their language and culture and are regularly called upon to share their knowledge. This shift in attitudes and views of teacher and learner is reflective of ako, which means to teach and learn. There is no notion of hierarchy as teacher and learner roles interchange and are reciprocal. This is a huge shift from when our oldest child started school with the implicit message to put our language and culture to one side in favour of English.

Tangata whenuatanga

Tangata whenuatanga in education refers to the affirmation, celebration and nurturing of children's language, culture, and identity. A shift, I have noticed in some teachers, is their willingness to learn so they are able to teach in a way which affirms our children's cultural identity. For us, this means understanding our children as Māori who are also te reo Māori speakers. It means ensuring that our children's ways of knowing, being and doing are valued in all aspects of their education journey.

Manaakitanga

The shifts mentioned above are also reflective of manaakitanga which refers to one who "Demonstrates integrity, sincerity and respect towards Māori beliefs, language and culture" (Education Council Aotearoa New Zealand & Ministry of Education, 2011, p. 29). There are many examples of this occurring throughout our children's primary education although this has developed over time. In the beginning, it felt like lip service because teachers' actions and comments did not reflect integrity, sincerity and respect towards our children's language and culture. We have noticed a huge shift here, as not only are teachers trying to implement more te reo Māori and tikanga Māori into the classroom, but they are genuinely interested, willing and show respect for whānau knowledge.

Wānanga

Wānanga is demonstrated when one "Participates with learners and communities in robust dialogue for the benefit of Māori learners' achievement" (Education Council of Aotearoa New Zealand & Ministry of Education, 2011, p. 4). As noted, there is a stronger focus on whānau involvement. Engaging in wānanga is beneficial for all, as it helps to strengthen and establish whanaungatanga and is also reflective of manaakitanga and ako.

HE RĀ ANŌ KI TUA: MY VISION FOR MY MOKOPUNA

Much work has been done in the primary school our tamariki attended to ensure Māori children can see themselves in all aspects of the classroom and school. There is still work to be done; however, excellent progress has been made. When my mokopuna arrive, I envision a very different schooling system. My vision is one where schools and curricula are based on mātauranga Māori, and te reo Māori and tikanga Māori are the norm. All teachers will be bilingual, and every

school from primary to secondary will be vibrant with language and culture. I envision a future where my children do not have to fight for their children's right to their language and culture. My mokopuna will thrive in environments which truly reflect and value their ways of knowing, being and doing.

GLOSSARY

ako	to teach and learn
mātauranga Māori	Māori knowledge
mokopuna	grandchildren
tamariki	children
te reo Māori	the Māori language
tikanga Māori	Māori values, beliefs and customs
whakataukī	proverb
whānau	family

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