

Introduction

Using the metaphor of weaving baskets of knowledge this project aimed to create new knowledge about teaching and learning through exploring how Māori and Pasifika cultural knowledge could support the development of culturally responsive theory and teaching practice for the care of infants and toddlers in contemporary early childhood settings. This involved firstly reclaiming traditional Māori and Pasifika cultural knowledge, values and understandings of infants and toddlers care and education; secondly, reframing the reclaimed knowledge and understandings for contemporary early childhood contexts, and finally, working to realise the reframed knowledge and understandings through implementing local early childhood contexts.

Why is this research important?

Early childhood has an important role in building strong learning foundations to support the development of competent and confident learners. Early childhood services however continue to fail to meet the needs of Māori and Pasifika children including infants and toddlers (ERO, 2010). Key to educational success for all children is the acknowledgement that children are culturally located and the recognition that effective education must embrace culture.

What we did

The research involved six case studies of early childhood services. Firstly we collected pūrākau/stories of infant and toddler care from their whānau and communities. The pūrākau were then analysed to develop service research questions which were addressed through implementation of their research strategies utilising an action research approach. Grounded Theory provided the data gathering and analysis frame. It involved simultaneous data gathering and analysis in an iterative process, developing increasingly abstract ideas about meanings, actions, and worlds and refining, and check these emerging conceptual understandings. Data gathered included: pūrākau, teacher reflections and evaluations, whānau feedback, children's feedback, photos, children's assessments and interviews.

Key findings

Culturally responsive theory and practice for Maori/Pasifika infants requires relationships with, and understandings of te Ao, te tamaiti and te whānau Maori/Pasifika. Reclaiming, reframing and realizing Māori and Pasifika cultural knowledges in contemporary early childhood contexts, is critical to the development of these relationships and understandings. The research highlighted the importance of reclaiming cultural knowledges including valued skills, knowledge and attitudes, and identity markers. Reframing these knowledges required that kaiako draw upon cultural tools/practices/artefacts to support valued traits, competencies and relationships. When realised cultural knowledges; reflected teacher's understandings of valued learnings, were underpinned identity and belong within communities, and empowered Māori and Pasifika infants and toddlers.

Implications for practice

Currently most Māori and Pasifika infants and toddlers are cared for by early childhood services teachers who use predominantly western theoretical lenses. Culturally responsive provision for infants and toddlers requires that Māori and Pasifika:

- cultural knowledges and competencies be foregrounded in Initial Teacher Education;
- cultural tools, practices and artefacts be authentically and meaningfully implemented in early childhood services;
- cultural knowledges, values and beliefs be modelled, encouraged and valued.

Traditional Māori and Pasifika caregiving practices and beliefs for infants and toddlers offer an important alternative to dominant western theory and practice, prevalent in current early childhood provision. This alternative highlights that:

- cultural worldviews are located within specific community contexts;
- whānau/community contributions are fundamental to culturally located practices;
- kaiako must seek cultural expertise from the community.

Maori and Pasifika constructs of infants and toddlers differ in kind and emphasis from the western constructs, espoused and normalized in early childhood theory and practice. Key implications include recognition that:

- infants and toddlers are competent no matter their age;
- culture is critical to identity development and children's sense of belonging;
- tuākana/tēina partnerships are essential for optimal teina/tuākana learning;
- kaiako foster tuākana/tēina relationships, by stepping back;
- mixed age early childhood settings are compatible with tuākana/tēina practices;
- tuakana/teina learning is a culturally responsive pedagogical approach.

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