

# **Dancing on the Mountain: Dance and the Significance of Place Contributing to Young Children's Sense of Belonging and Cultural Identity**

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## **Abstract**

This paper focuses on a specific pedagogical event situated in a local context (a Māori-medium early childhood center in Auckland, New Zealand), and the relationship between the children and teachers at the center with the nearby mountain. The connection between the mountain (maunga) and the teachers and children at the center creates a bond that is of historical and cultural significance. The teachers, children and family members visit the mountain on a regular basis and just as the mountain has become part of the center's life, the center has become part of the life on the mountain. Incorporated in this case study is one teacher's narrative from the early childhood center concerning the ways different approaches to pedagogy and assessment can contribute to a re-thinking of teaching and learning in the early years through the conduit of the arts, and, in this particular case, through dance, from an indigenous and bi-cultural perspective. The study is underpinned by two curriculum documents, the New Zealand early childhood curriculum *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996) and the Māori assessment framework *Te Whatu Pōkeka* (Ministry of Education, 2009). Ultimately, the purpose is to demonstrate how dance can connect to the significance of place and act as an empowering agent for both children and teachers in early childhood settings through promoting a sense of belonging and cultural identity.

*Keywords:* culture and community; early childhood; place and empowerment; belonging; identity

## **Introduction**

*Kia whakatōmuri te haere whakamua:*

*I walk backwards into the future with my eyes fixed on the past*

The content of this paper grew out a specific pedagogical event that occurred in a local setting. The focus concerns a Māori-medium early childhood center in Aotearoa, New

Zealand and the relationship between the teachers (kaiako), children (mokopuna / tamariki), and families (whānau) at the center and a nearby significant landmark, a majestic mountain (maunga). The pedagogical event was regular visits by the children, teachers and families (whānau) to the mountain.

This event occurred because the early childhood center sits nestled in the remnants of a historic volcanic crater, beneath the mountain (maunga). As the maunga looks down over the center, the mokopuna / tamariki (children) and kaiako (teachers) at the center look up at the maunga and, as if connected by a large stroke of a brush, a bond is formed between the maunga and their center, and between the past and the present. The connection between these two places however, is much more than just a view. The maunga is of historical and cultural significance to the teachers, children and their whānau (families and the wider community) in a way that marks a life of a people over a very long period of time. The maunga has become part of the center's life, just as the center has become part of the life on the maunga. The maunga bustles with mokopuna / tamariki and kaiako on a regular basis as the children and teachers visit the mountain in their fortnightly hikoi (walk) to the mountain's uppermost crater – a scar left long ago by volcanic action.

I became involved in the fortnightly visits to the maunga together with another colleague. As lecturers in the arts in a University based Initial Teacher Education program, we were interested in the ways in which connections between places of significance and, in this case, the art forms of dance and visual arts, might deepen the children's sense of belonging and cultural identity, particularly when connected to cultural epistemologies or indigenous ways of knowing. As a consequence of this interest we became witness to a range of artistic encounters the children experienced alongside the teachers and other adults while visiting the mountain. These experiences endorsed and were supported by the principles of the center, which drew on Māori beliefs and values.

### **The Principles of Kaupapa Māori**

Central to this story is one teacher's belief about the ways different approaches to pedagogy and assessment can contribute to a re-thinking of teaching and learning in the early years, especially from an indigenous and bi-cultural perspective. The early childhood center is founded upon the principles of kaupapa Māori, which draws on the New Zealand early childhood curriculum *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996) and the Māori assessment

framework *Te Whatu Pōkeka* (Ministry of Education, 2009). These two documents have a strong focus on Māori values and cultural epistemologies which, when viewed through the conduit of the arts, and, in this particular case, through dance, demonstrate how a curriculum, which is seen as bi-cultural, holistic and empowering, can act as a democratic and transformative agent for both children and teachers in early childhood settings for the purposes of promoting a sense of belonging and cultural identity.

From a kaupapa Māori perspective the image of the child is of special significance. The child (mokopuna / tamariki) is seen as a precious taonga (treasure) (Pere, 1994) and is honored and treated with respect—as a gift from the whānau/family. As mentioned by the teacher, the children come to the center bringing their ancestry—their heritage—where connections are made through their whakapapa (the genealogy of a person or taonga). The teachers know who the children are and where they come from—they are related to each other (whānaungatanga). These interrelationships are intensified through the daily ritual of greeting, where a mihi mihi with the children is shared each morning. These greetings (mihi mihi), which are expressions of each child's whakapapa, engender special connections between the teachers and children. In addition, for the tamariki and kaiako at the center, relationships with place are as important as relationships with people. The children share their pepehā (short statement) telling where they come from, where their mountain (maunga) is, their awa (river), their waka (canoe), and their marae (place of gathering). These principles are mirrored in the Māori version of *Te Whāriki* and often manifested through the arts.

The early childhood curriculum *Te Whāriki: He Whāriki Matauranga mō ngā Mokopuna o Aotearoa* (Ministry of Education, 1996) is the first codified early childhood curriculum in Aotearoa, New Zealand. The development of *Te Whāriki* occurred concomitantly alongside other significant developments in early childhood education. These significant developments included the recognition of Māori culture, tradition and customs (tikanga Māori) and the importance of revitalizing the Māori language (te reo Māori). The Ministry of Education made this clear when noting that “all children should be given the opportunity to develop knowledge and an understanding of the cultural heritage of both partners to Te Tiriti o Waitangi” (1996, p. 9) and that the early childhood curriculum reflects this partnership in its composition. The curriculum is underpinned by the principles of holistic development (kotahitanga), empowerment (whakamana), relationships (whānau tangata), and family and community (ngā hononga), which are interwoven with the strands of

well-being (mana atua), belonging (mana whenua), contribution (mana tangata), communication (mana reo), and exploration (mana aotūroa) (MoE, 1996).

Because the teacher in this story adopts a philosophy for the center based on the principles of kaupapa Māori these principles encourage mokopuna (the young children) to become active learners using te reo Māori (language) and tikanga Māori (protocols and customs). In other words, the children engage in holistic learning about the wider world in which they live, in this case, the Pākehā / tauīwi world, or, the world of the dominant European race or visitors that inhabit Aotearoa, New Zealand. The principles of kaupapa Māori include an adherence to whānaungatanga (responsibility and reciprocal obligations towards others), manaaki (respectful relationships), tuakana / teina (to look after each other), and mana tangata (to be able to stand confidently in both worlds). Te reo Māori (the Māori language) and tikanga Māori (Māori protocols and customs), which include gatherings at the marae (meeting place) and attending greeting ceremonies (powhiri), are incorporated into the children's everyday play because the children witness these events as part of their lives and culture.

### **The Significance of Place**

Looking at things from a kaupapa Māori perspective, the relationship between the center and the mountain raises some interesting questions. Why is this mountain important? How do regular visits to the mountain reflect the philosophical underpinning of the early childhood center? How might engagement in arts experiences such as dance while visiting the mountain contribute to the children's sense of belonging and cultural identity?

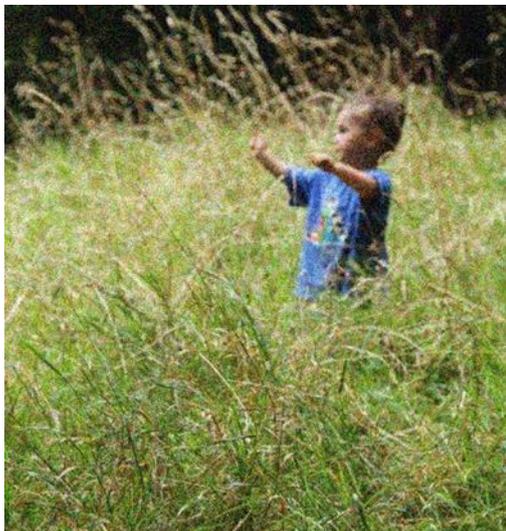
For Māori place or locality has special meaning. Because of the physical relationship between the locality of the center, and the volcanic mountain that sits next door, a different form of relationship developed that was more than just a physical relationship. The maunga was to become a protector and a guardian of the center. From a Māori perspective, the land (whenua), including its mountains (maunga), rivers (awa), lakes (roto), oceans (moana), forests and trees (ngahere), native bush and flax (harakeke), are invested with a spiritual meaning (wairua), or energy (ihi) and life (ora), or life force (mauri). This life force cannot be disconnected from those who live on and with the land.

The visits to the maunga invite an active engagement through the arts because of the interconnections between the perceived spirit and life force invested in the land over eons of time and the ever present energy and life that is exhibited by the children and teachers during

their visits, which brings past and present together. The arts act as a form of expression of one's place, culture and identity. This notion is manifest in seeing the maunga as an 'atelier' (arts space), a place where children (and adults) dig with their bodies, hands and minds to find meaning of their experiences (Gandini, 2005). These regular trips to the mountain provide the opportunity for the children to develop a connection with the mountain over time, so that they come to see it as their mountain. The children are at one with the mountain, and enjoy an embodied relationship with its terrain.

### **Dancing on the Mountain: Embodied Engagement**

Dance experiences for the children came in the form of getting in touch with the landscape. The children would create shapes with their bodies to replicate the various landmarks that could be seen from the mountain. The children also found dance among the various grasses and vegetation that grew on the mountain and would find ways to physically engage with the environment. This resulted in running, skipping, twirling and leaping through the terrain. Some children would mimic the energy of the wind, whether softly blowing through the grasses or briskly buffeting the edges of the hillside. They would navigate the various inclines experimenting with a myriad of ways to move their bodies using all the energy they could muster.



Young child dancing among the long grass on the mountain, Auckland, Aotearoa, New Zealand, 2015  
Photographer: Ruanui Nicholson

These embodied experiences became embedded in the children's bodies and re-materialized spontaneously on consequent ventures to the mountain. The children interpreted their surroundings through their bodies, their voices, and through their physical and spiritual

connection to the land. The children also performed their interpretations of Māori cultural dance forms such as the haka, poi and taiaha (mimicking the wielding and turning of a spear), learned from experiences they shared with their families and whānau. These cultural dance experiences further generate an attachment between the people and the place.

Bronwyn Davies (2000) talks about the human connection with the earth, suggesting that we are “embodied beings not separated from the earth but of it” (p. 185). She describes this state of existence as “the subterranean possibilities earthed in the human body as a result of experiencing life—in(*terre*)conscious: *between earth and consciousness*” (Davies, 2000, p. 185) [emphasis in the original], which is something akin to the young children’s and teachers’ embodied connectedness to the earth during their excursions to the mountain and the dance experiences in which they become engaged. Their bodies are, in a sense, inseparable from the landscape they inhabit and all that has occupied that space over time.

As Ann Pelo (2013, p. 123) proposes: “embodied, sensual encounters with the natural world matter” because it not only expands how we know where we live, but it also engenders a sense of caring for where we live. In addition, Brian Wattchow and Michael Brown (2011) suggest that the concept of a sense of place should be considered as “a personal, intimate and embodied encounter” (p. 72). Consequently, “body and place are inextricably linked” (Wattchow & Brown, 2011, p. 72) and our identities become connected to the place we “claim as ours” (Gentry, 2006, p. 13, as cited in Wattchow & Brown, 2011, p. 66).

In accordance, these excursions to the mountain have associations with *Te Whatu Pōkeka* (MoE, 2009), the Māori assessment framework. A whatu pōkeka is a baby blanket made of muka (fiber) from the harakeke (flax) plant. Albatross feathers are carefully woven into the inside of the blanket to provide warmth, comfort, security, and refuge from the elements. The pōkeka takes the shape of the child as it learns and grows. It is a metaphor for these dance experiences, where the development of what occurs is determined and shaped by the child. The principal focus of *Te Whatu Pōkeka*, is the assessment from a Māori perspective of children’s ways of knowing specifically when positioned within a Māori-medium early childhood setting. This approach ensures that the children’s voices are heard and their cultural capital is acknowledged. Embedded within *Te Whatu Pōkeka* are the Māori principles of *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 1996). One key principle— whānau tangata—acknowledges the relationships children have with place and their cultural and historical inheritances.

The interplay between space and place, self and other, places and bodies (Duhn, 2010) produce knowledges that can be situated or, as sometimes referred to, provide “a pedagogy of place” (Callejo Perez, Fain, & Slater, 2004, cited in Duhn, 2010, p. 313). Cultural identities are validated, and people’s lives and ways of being and doing become the genesis of authentic grassroots knowledge.

### **Conclusion**

The arts are “not separated from the life world of Māori kaupapa (cultural customs and protocol) and Māori tikanga (cultural values and beliefs) (Pere, 1994; Ritchie, 2008)” (Sansom, 2013, p. 35). The arts are integral to daily life and are shared through meaningful experiences alongside others (tamariki and kaiako) in the spirit of ako, which is the Māori concept for reciprocity between teacher and learner, history and culture, place and people (Pere, 1994). This form of reciprocity reflects “the Māori value of manaakitanga, the obligation to care for others” (Ritchie, 2008, p. 205) in all its forms. The encounters between the mountain and the children and teachers through the conduit of the arts, and in this case, through dance, provide an example of the significance of place, history, culture and identity, and how this is enacted from a kaupapa Māori perspective.

Both the real and the spiritual ways of being, connect to indigenous ways of knowing that signify an educational setting that is different — a setting that honors the capacities and strengths young children bring to the center on a daily basis. This cultural capital, embedded in Māori customs, traditions and protocols, using tikanga Māori and te reo Māori, underpinned by whanaungatanga (responsibility and reciprocal obligations towards others), manaaki (respectful relationships), tuakana/teina (to look after each other), and mana tangata (to be able to stand confidently in both worlds), support the concept of tino rangatiratanga (self-governance or self-determination) and echo a pedagogy of equity and social justice.

An educational setting such as the center in this story, epitomizes a space, indeed, “a living, breathing curriculum of humanity” (Sansom, 2011, p. 111) that is both democratic and transformational for all who enter its doors; the tamariki, kaiako and whānau. It is a place where everyone can stand—a space that is democratic and acts as a transformative agent for children and teachers, where the curriculum is not only place, but also the children and the teachers (Pinar, 1994, 2004; Sellers, 2013). As Wattchow and Brown (2011, pp. ix–x) explain: “Our experience of place is always a combination of a specific physical location, and our embodied encounter and cultural ideas that influence the interpretations that we make of

the experience”. Equally David Sobel reminds us it is worth remembering that “if we want children to flourish, to become truly empowered, then let us allow them to love the earth before we ask them to save it” (Sobel, 1999, p. 39). The art form of dance is one of the avenues that give children the opportunity to engage with the physical, spiritual and emotional dimensions of the places where they live and belong.

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Māori Whakatauki retrieved from <http://natswb.wikispaces.com/Whakatauki>

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