

Renewing participatory democracy

Walking with young children to story and read the land



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Intro / Project description

Participatory democracy provides the value base and conceptual frame for this project. We explored the ways in which walking, reading and storying the land with whānau, iwi, and community members, enable young children to experience and learn about their local area (its stories, geology, biodiversity and cultural meanings), and envision democratic socio-ecological futures. A participatory design research process supported two kindergartens and a kōhanga reo to develop and analyse pedagogical strategies that promote valued learning and dispositions of being ready, willing, and able to actively participate in Aotearoa New Zealand and as “citizens of the world”. In the kindergartens, we researched the development over time of children’s working theories across the curriculum and children’s efforts to learn and participate with others, as they walk, story, and read the land. In the kōhanga reo, our focus was on development over time of the child’s mana and identity as being Māori.

Aims

Our research questions ask:

1. What does it mean for young children to act as critical democratic participants within their early childhood settings and kōhanga reo?
2. How can educational practices based on walking, reading, and storying the land:
 - Elicit and build on the funds of knowledge of children, families/whānau, iwi and communities?
 - Foster and integrate learning across the curriculum?
 - Foster children’s capacity, inclination and sensitivity for democratic participation.

Why is this research important?

Walking, reading, and storying the land has been embedded in indigenous ways of knowing for generations. Through these activities, children can develop whanaungatanga ki te whenua; whanaungatanga ki te tangata; whanaungatanga ki te taia, te aotūroa—connectedness with whenua or place; with people; with the environment and natural world. These are fostered through learning the stories of the people and being able to retell them to children and families and how to engage with and nurture the natural and social environments. Walking with others can generate understandings about history and science and make connections with literature, art, music, and dance.

Key findings

1. Pepeha, haerenga, and wānanga strengthen connections for tamariki and whānau with people, with histories and with ancestral whenua, hapū, and iwi.
2. New learning is created and passed on through inquiring teachers researching and making meaningful connections with land and with people.
3. Sustained access and deep observation of the land provide a platform for the development of curriculum knowledge.
4. Haerenga and waiata empower tamariki and foster relationships with Mana Whenua, Mana Atua, Mana Tangata, Mana Reo, and Mana Aotūroa.
5. Listening to children as active contributors in co-producing curriculum enhances their agency, sense of ownership and understanding.

Democratic citizenship and mana as overall outcomes

1. Children are proud of who they are and knowledgeable about their identity.
2. Children look out for and take care of each other.
3. Children take on leadership roles with respect to others and the land.
4. Children have agency. They make their views known and listen to others.
5. Children engage with big issues of our time and advocate for a world that is more equitable and environmentally sustainable.

Implications for practice

These implications are written as messages that practitioners may wish to consider for operationalising in their own way to suit their context.

- Walking, reading, and storying the land with children, whānau, iwi, and community members supports children to make enduring relationships with land and with people and come to belong. Our research found the importance of walking the same pathway, carrying out the same practices, and revisiting the same things regularly over time. Participants need to make connections with the land in terms of its past and present, to make their own story about what the land is about.
- Connecting with funds of knowledge of whānau, iwi, and community members create productive relationships and broaden the knowledge base for all participants.
- Processes of preparation and follow-up are as important as the haerenga/excursions for helping children/tamariki retain and expand knowledge and understanding.
- Teachers/kaiako research their own practice individually and with others. The opening up of discussion of experiences of haerenga/excursions and documentation within whānau wānanga and teams contribute to growing understanding of how participants might support positive impacts for the individual and the collective. These processes supported intentional teaching.

Our partners:

Maunganui Kindergarten: Catherine Rolleston, Abbey Collins, Karen Attrill, Letitia McFarlane, Sam Owen, Nicola Jones (teachers). Pakuranga Baptist Kindergarten: Jacqui Lees (director), Nilma Abeyratne, Danielle Rollo, Olivia Kwok Yee Ng (teachers). Te Kōhanga Reo ki Rotokawa: Tiria Shaw, Heather Patu (kaiako).

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