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# Language Nests in New Zealand. Implications for the Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Context

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## Introduction

In the past ten years there has been an increasing interest in early childhood education in Aboriginal communities, particularly for 4-year-olds and under. The reasons for this are varied. One of the main reasons is the existence of the Community Development Employment Project (CDEP) where Aboriginal people in remote communities receive the equivalent of the unemployment benefit in exchange for work and training, usually four hours per day for five days. Other larger communities, for example Yuendumu or Maningrida in the Northern Territory, have considerable numbers of people studying, often at Batchelor College, and therefore some type of support is needed to take care of their young children. Increasingly Aboriginal people are taking on professional jobs in communities — teachers, health care workers and office administrators. All these factors are leading to a need to re-evaluate traditional forms of child care, which in these changing times is putting an unacceptable burden on older women and the extended family generally. Other pertinent reasons are the need for a more cohesive strategy to pass on cultural knowledge, to support language maintenance and language revival and support very young mothers who need the support of older women with more experience.<sup>1</sup>

During a conference in New Zealand last year I had the opportunity to visit both Maori and Pacific Islander early childhood language nests and discuss how these were developed and organised. This paper describes the New Zealand experience and discusses features which are of interest to remote Aboriginal communities.

## First Impressions

It is clear that Maori culture differs from Aboriginal cultures in significant ways, although it was also obvious there were many things the cultures have in common. One obvious difference is that the Maori population is approximately 15% of the New Zealand population (Douglas, 1992: 16) although the majority of Maori do live on the Northern part of the North Island. In Australia Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders constitute 3% of the population but in northern and central Australia the Indigenous population is approximately 30%. In New Zealand there is one Maori culture with regional variations, whereas in Australia we are dealing with an extensive Aboriginal multicultural population. There are many different Aboriginal cultures.

In New Zealand Maori is now recognised as the official language (Corson, 1990: 214) and although there are regional dialects there is one language spoken by Indigenous people. The situation in Australia is more complex. In remote Aboriginal communities in the northern and central part of Australia there are many languages spoken and often a number of different languages will be used in a single community; for example at Galiwin'ku

<sup>1</sup> Willsher and Clarke (1995) produced an excellent overview of these child care issues in *Talking Early Childhood*.

in the Northern Territory, with a population of over 1000, there are nineteen languages spoken. The first language is one of the Aboriginal languages with English as a second or sometimes third or fourth language. It is common for Aboriginal people to be multilingual and understand and use more than one Aboriginal language. The extent to which different languages are used varies enormously, and there is also considerable variation in the number of speakers of any one language. Some languages have only a few speakers, whereas others may have as many as 4000-5000 speakers.

It appears that often Maori and immigrant (second and third generation) Pacific Islanders have English as a first language. According to Corson (1990: 213-214) approximately 50,000 people in New Zealand speak Maori fluently with another 100,000 understanding the language, but there are 10,000 fewer speakers than there were ten years ago. Douglas (1990: 15) however, puts the number much lower, at 30,000-35,000 fluent speakers. The number of speakers of Aboriginal languages is also diminishing, with some languages becoming extinct. It seems then both in Maori and Aboriginal cultures the issue of language maintenance is an important one.

Another similarity is the deeply spiritual nature of the Indigenous and Pacific Islander immigrants. In New Zealand this spirituality is clearly reflected in protocol, exemplified in the traditional Maori welcoming and farewell ceremonies, carried out in Maori and English (for our benefit) which moved me deeply. It seemed a clear demonstration of a strong culture and a commitment by elders to carry out ancient tradition. In Aboriginal cultures spirituality manifests itself in less immediate ways. For outsiders it is more obvious once there is an understanding of the kinship system and Aboriginal relationship to land. There is a protocol in Aboriginal cultures, when discussions are held and decisions are made, but these subtle forms take a long time for outsiders to understand.

## The Language Nests

The Maori language nests (*kohanga reo*) were introduced in 1982 (Douglas, 1990) as a way to affirm Maori culture and language in danger from the dominant Pakeha (white) culture. There are now over 600 *kohanga reo*. There was a clear

decision to focus on the very young as a way to revive the use of Maori, although there are differing opinions on how well this strategy has worked. Douglas (1990) believes the strategy has not been completely successful and explains some of the reasons why. Corson (1990) on the other hand appears more optimistic and gives examples of how curriculum is being developed in a variety of ways to cater for minority group needs.

Maori language nests do differ in the way they are developed and run. A visit was made to the *kohanga* attached to Tawera School, about an hour from Rotorua. This *kohanga* caters for four-year-old children. It is a new building opposite the Maori school and it has a warm, welcoming atmosphere. The main building has a large open friendly room which is designed to be a comfortable meeting place for adults. This layout emphasises the importance of family for young Maori and the central role parents play in the education of their children. In another building close by, there are classrooms, resource rooms and a verandah where many of the activities take place.

The image of a nest is an important one. It symbolises a nurturing of young children, supported in their learning of culture, as part of a bigger family. Not only are parents involved but grandparents also play a very important part in organising and passing on their skills to the younger generation. This approach places young children at the centre, with family closely linked. This is opposite to an existing pre-school approach where often the institution of the school is the central consideration and the aim is to educate children into the school culture.

This theme of cultural education as a central tenet is reflected in the criteria for selecting staff. The most important factor for any *kohanga reo* is the staff's ability to speak Maori — this overrides everything, including professional training. The particular pre-school we visited has gone from a bilingual program to one of full immersion, which means the children are totally exposed to Maori for the time they are in the pre-school. The young children take part in all the important ceremonies which happen at the primary school, so there is a strong Maori link which carries on into the primary school.

There is a large Pacific Islander population now in New Zealand and there have been concerns that

the children from these cultural backgrounds were losing their cultural heritage. Pacific Island language nests have also recently been initiated in a bid to develop cultural and language exposure for children from a variety of Pacific Island backgrounds. The Te Ara Metua and St Luke's language nests were also visited. The children work in open classrooms and the families are also central to the work which goes on. Knowledge of the language is also the main requirement for staff in these nests.

One striking aspect of these Maori and Pacific Island language nests was their use of natural resources. In the Pacific Island language nest we visited, two full-time workers are employed to make resources and this seems the key to successful programs. A huge range of resources is made from flax and other materials, woven in creative and imaginative ways to create toys for the children. Parents are encouraged to use these natural resources and to learn weaving themselves. Many families are poor but with these skills their children never do without playthings. Other materials such as shells, seeds, barks and plant material are also used in a variety of ways and can replace Western-style equipment.

### Usefulness in an Aboriginal Context

Given the needs and interest in preserving and affirming language and culture, the idea of language nests is very useful for Aboriginal people setting up early childhood places.<sup>2</sup> Particularly pertinent is the requirement for workers to speak Aboriginal languages. In New Zealand this has overrun the need to license an early childhood place. In other words, Maori have preferred to run a service on a shoestring rather than give up the requirement for workers to have Maori language.<sup>3</sup> To ensure that cultural knowledge is central to any program it will be necessary for a committee of local Aboriginal people to be involved with every stage of an early childhood place—in the management, organisation and day-to-day running. Certainly, the language nests have this type of community input at the various levels. Corson sees other advantages, too:

Where the minority groups themselves in a community have a major hand in policy making and in the schooling process itself the entire programme of schooling is directed towards elevating the status of the community and questioning the role of schooling in that process (1990: 233).

In Australia early childhood places would have to be multi-purpose. According to Willsher and Clarke (1995), as more employment and training is made available in communities there is a need to look at alternative child care arrangements other than the extended family. In many communities in the Northern Territory there is also a common need to have somewhere for very young mothers to go and feel comfortable about learning ways to bring up their children (Willsher and Clarke, 1995). If this is part of the reason for an early childhood place in a community there must be strong representation from older women and grandmothers who can support the younger mothers. Some communities needed a service which provides care for children while parents are involved in domestic or ceremonial duties. While passing on of cultural knowledge remains a high priority, clearly other considerations are also involved in the requests for early childhood places on communities.

The language nests in New Zealand seem to be mainly aimed at four-year-olds, with the specific purpose of encouraging the learning of Maori language and culture. In Australia there is a need for early childhood education for children who are much younger and therefore there is a broader set of issues to consider. The need for workers familiar with language and cultures would be even more critical and the relationship with parents and the community also a particularly close one. The image of nurturing here would be emphasised and certainly values, attitudes and mores within an early childhood place would need to reflect those of the child-rearing practices within the home.

The status of Aboriginal languages differ in various communities, therefore the language needs will be different in different communities. Where languages are in crisis, with few speakers remaining, the language program would be one of renewal and the linguistic needs would be different.

<sup>2</sup> I have steered away from referring to a 'child care centre' because this may pre-empt what an early childhood place might look like. We need to keep our options wide open as to the nature of early childhood places in the Aboriginal context.

<sup>3</sup> Licensing requirements dictate the need for qualified staff and in Australia as in New Zealand there is a critical shortage of early childhood qualified staff.

In other communities where a language has a large number of fluent speakers, the program may be a language-maintenance one, and therefore have a different emphasis. Communities must decide if children are to speak only their mother tongue in an early childhood place or a combination of English and an Aboriginal language. One obvious difficulty is that most communities have more than one language. In this instance the community must decide which languages will be spoken. If it is necessary to have all the languages represented, then it will be vital to involve parents heavily in the program and to have representative speakers of all languages in the early childhood place.

A common element in Maori, Pacific Island and Aboriginal cultures is the central role of music, art and dance as a reflection of traditional spiritual beliefs and the importance of the relationship to the surrounding environment. In many schools these important aspects are often not reflected in the day-to-day program, particularly in those schools with high numbers of non-Aboriginal staff. At present most preschoolers in Aboriginal communities are part of the primary school. Programs follow a mainstream curriculum and are resourced as such. One way to remind us of the cultural environment is to use natural resources in the classroom and early childhood place. At Galiwin'ku for example, there are bush materials for making bags and baskets, spears and canoes. There are also many shells, seeds, bark and leaves which could be used for a variety of activities. There will be local language names for these natural materials, so there is an added bonus of traditional language use. Furthermore, these types of materials can be used for many other activities — sorting, classifying, naming of colours — and it is possible to distinguish ways that materials are sorted according to traditional criteria rather than based on Western attributes.<sup>4</sup> In many communities children and adults use natural materials to make toys, and in some communities there is a revival of this practice. There is good documentary evidence available describing the many Aboriginal toys made in communities (Haagen, 1994). The use of natural materials not only brings relevant cultural elements into the

education and care of young children in a tangible way, but it is also a highly cost-effective alternative or supplement to purchased materials.

When communities are given seeding grants to help set up early childhood places, it may be more useful to spend money on tools and raw materials so toys can be made. This provides a further role for parents and others in communities. Parents' skills and knowledge are valued and they make a very meaningful contribution to resourcing the early childhood facility. In some language nests in New Zealand, resource production is the key to a successful cultural program. At the moment it is not a central consideration in the development of Aboriginal early childhood places.

Once the purposes of an early childhood place have been clearly discussed and agreed upon by community members, some time must be spent on thinking about the design of the building. Often this is not done. In New Zealand the design of buildings is explicitly fitted to the needs of that group. Communities therefore need to decide not only on the location of the building, but also its design. It will include more than just rooms for the little children. It must be a friendly, inviting place where families will feel comfortable. The building must fit into the surrounding landscape and reflect what the children have already experienced, rather than a Western model where the children and adults might be alienated.

According to *Tu Tangata* (1986) it is better to take the initiative and not wait for government funding. It is more likely funding will occur once a program is already functioning and some demonstrated commitment is evident. One problem encountered in New Zealand was that once Maori children leave the *kohanga reo* there is often not a school with a strong enough Maori program to consolidate what they have already learned. There are now strong lobby groups to develop more Maori programs in mainstream schools and to develop Maori schools.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps in the Aboriginal context a strong Aboriginal program at the very early childhood level will act as motivation for stronger representation of Aboriginal cultural and language programs in the school system.

<sup>4</sup> Western-style education tends to emphasise attributes such as regular shape, colour and size. Perhaps in Aboriginal contexts attributes based on use may be more appropriate, for example tucker, medicine or location.

<sup>5</sup> For a description of the development of Maori schools, see Benton (1988).

## Conclusion

Any model from overseas needs careful examination for its applicability in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander contexts. However, it is useful to examine models which are tackling similar issues. This could be more productive than looking at mainstream models which already exist in Australia and attempting to modify them for an Indigenous context. What tends to happen is little more than mainstreaming and the structure, philosophy and curriculum of the dominant culture usually remain very much in place.

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