A Heartfelt Kōrero

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The following heartfelt kōrero (narrative) was created during our ECE organisation's 50th anniversary celebration. I had the honour of presenting a speech which I have now turned into this narrative. The focus was on my vision for the future of ECE in Aotearoa New Zealand.

In this kōrero, I will draw from my experiences as an early childhood kaiako Māori (Māori teacher) and my own personal journey within te ao Māori (the Māori world), to confront the past, find promise in the present, and call us all together to fight for our futures together and for the future of Aotearoa, New Zealand. I am asking you to consider the past, how hard Māori have fought for the rights we have today and to ensure we as a nation don't go backwards.

The kōrero I share describes my personal journey as kaiako Māori, coming toreconnections with my whakapapa (genealogy), to feel valued, accepted and inspired for who I am as kaiako Māori. The experiences I share make me the perfect candidate to encourage others to effect change and stand together to create a future where no more whānau have to experience loss of their culture and language. The words for the future are unity and acceptance. This kōrero will conclude with visions for the future where kaiako are courageous enough to make changes. The key focus points will be on kotahitanga (unity), working together with Māori to honour *Te Tiriti o Waitangi*; whānaungatanga (relationships); the importance of relationships with people, places and things; and acknowledging our past and implementing Māori ideologies into our pedagogical practices and ECE organisations.

How do we as early childhood kaiako in Aotearoa New Zealand inspire optimism in what feels like impossible times? Currently in Aotearoa New Zealand, Māori are facing many challenges which threaten to take us backwards. In 1840 what is called *The Treaty of Waitangi/Te tiriti o Waitangi* was signed in an effort to create a partnership between the British Crown and Māori and is now considered Aotearoa's founding document. This document was written in both English and te reo Māori which caused issues due to incorrect translation. A lot of mistranslation came from the fact Māori did not understand the meaning of some words such as sovereignty or even believe in sovereignty as a context. From a Māori perspective each individual chief was the leader of their people and people do not own the land, they are merely there to be katiaki(guardians) and protect it for the next generation.

Translations like this caused and still cause many issues in Aotearoa today. In 2024 the Treaty Principles bill was introduced by a political party called ACT. This bill threatened to take away Māori input and undermine the rights of Māori nationwide. This bill set out to 'redefine' the treaty principles. Māori felt as though the changes set out to diminish their mana, re-write history and take away the rights they had fought so hard to get. It has been described by many New Zealanders as "anti-Māori." This intern created a massive uproar from New Zealanders and saw the country consumed by massive protest against this bill. It was said this bill managed to do the opposite and unite Māori in a way the country had not seen for years.

Ultimately it was stopped in its tracks and its original intentions to suppress Māori influences did the opposite. It brought Māori together to protest for our rights. Unfortunately, many Māori now have concerns about the government and their ideologies. Later in the year our education minister, Erika Stanford removed some common Māori kupu (words) from early learning books used across the nation. The removal of our language is another example coming directly from the government showing their prejudicial views. Māori feel as though our culture is under attack and that Aotearoa is taking a massive step backwards. "Māori experiences of both

historical and colonial trauma and current collective trauma (multiple forms of racism) have been ongoing for about 170 years" (Phihama et al, 2017,p.24,). Having a government who is not only supporting but pushing these suppressive acts encourages others to do the same and feels like we are travelling back in time, diminishing the many years of hard work put in by Māori to get to where we are today. This is why we as Māori feel as though we are battling through impossible times. How do we carry on moving forwards when everyone else wants to push us backwards?

Kia whakatōmuri te haere whakamua

I walk backwards into the future with my eyes fixed on my past. We know where we have been, we know where we are and we know where we want to be.

My heartfelt kōrero for the future

Māori people have faced many injustices at the hands of colonized education systems created to hinder their success. The devastation this has caused is still being felt to this day.

Intergenerational trauma is recognized and still prevalent in our society. Māori have fought hard to minimise this and create a more united Aotearoa. Modern day politics threaten to drive us backwards and undo all of this hard mahi(work). How do we as early childhood educators inspire optimism in what feels like impossible times? My answer to this would be, e hara tāku toa, e te toa takatahi, he toa takatini(my strength is not as an individual but as a collective).

My journey into early childhood education and my organisation started out as a tamaiti (child) at Pioneers Kōputai, where I then did my high school Gateway experience and my final-long term university student teaching placement. So it's fair to say that Pioneers is very near and dear to my heart, and I truly believe in the work we do here. Pioneers is a non-for-profit organisation that highly values kaiako and Māori culture through their constant dedication to not only including Māori culture in the curriculum but also to strengthening their relationship with the local iwi and always having the best interests of Māori at the forefront of every and any decision they make. My cultural journey to understanding my own whakapapa(genealogy) also started when I was a new graduate teacher. I grew up experiencing those generational traumas firsthand. Our whānau(family) lost our culture as a direct result of the Native Schools act of 1867. This was introduced into Aotearoa (New Zealand) as a way to not only ban Māori from speaking their native language at schools but also to assimilate and colonize Māori. This was a devastating time not only in my whānau (family's) history but for so many Māori, some of which have never recovered. This created a massive loss of language, culture, and on a much deeper level, an unjust education system designed to make Māori fail. My story is similar to so many others within Aotearoa. Once that culture was gone it was never recovered. I had no understanding of my own culture and no desire to learn more. It was almost as if our culture was something to be ashamed of and never acknowledged. On the other side of that comes the shame of not knowing and not being "Māori enough." For me personally I grew up experiencing a massive feeling of disconnect between who I was as a person, and I never felt a sense of harmony deep within myself.

That was until I started working for Pioneers. The passion I have seen from our Pākehā kaiako uplifts my mana and gives me that strong passion you see here today. So not only do I owe Pioneers for my education, but I have a next level of appreciation for helping me to discover myself. I was surrounded by people who let me go through this identity crisis at my own pace. Who always provided a safe space for me to learn, grow, and express my culture. Most importantly the director of my company who was my head teacher as I began my teaching always listened. She inspired me to go on this personal journey to discover who I really am. Within Māori culture we have a term called wairua which translates to spirituality but is not about religion. Wairua is seen as one's connectedness to themselves; it enables you "to feel

at home in the universe," (Lin, 2014, p.16)". Throughout my time at Pioneers, because of the support I have felt, I have been able to connect to myself spiritually, uplifting my wairua, and developing a strong sense of self wholeness and stability.

Every child in Aotearoa has this right, to not only be themselves but experience this beautiful culture we are so lucky to have. As kaiako in Aotearoa it's our responsibility to be partners to *Te Tiriti o Waitangi* and to ensure all tamariki have access to this beautiful culture. Māori culture is also a key part of Aotearoa not only historically but who we, as New Zealanders, all are. "Māori-English bilingualism helps children to understand and develop their identity as New Zealanders and develop a sense of belonging to Aotearoa" (Skerrett, 2022, para.1).

Using Māori ideology around important issues we will face in our future, like being kaitiaki (guardians) of our environment, is how we will succeed. Ko mātou te taiao ko te taiao ko mātou (We are the environment and the environment is us). Māori have a deep sense of connectedness to the environment and our turangawaewae (place where you stand). Along with this comes strict tikanga (customs) around how to protect and nurture the land. This is another way in which we can harness our culture and inspire optimism in what feels like impossible times. We know the severity of global warming and how this is affecting our planet. If we could just whakarongo (listen) to Māori who base their practices off the understanding that resources are a taonga (treasure) and we want to preserve and protect for our future generations, we could start learning how to and caring for our land. Māori believe that everything has a mauri (life force). That is why their connection to the environment is so deep and profound. "All living things, lakes, rivers, the sea, the bush and buildings have a mauri that should be appreciated and respected. It helps one to relate and care for everyone and everything across the universe" (Turuku Pere, 1991, p.12). Imagine a future where we respect everyone and everything individually and our environment is respected and cared for in the way it deserves.

So how do we inspire optimism in what feels like impossible times? We keep looking forward. We focus on the future and work together as a collective to create a better future not only for ourselves but for our tamariki (children), for our mokopuna (grandchildren) and for Aotearoa (New Zealand). In my future, my tamariki get to experience a learning community thriving in te ao Māori. No shame is felt due to their culture, and they are proud to be Māori. They grow up proud of their whakapapa (genealogy) with kaiako (teachers) who inspire them and uplift their mana, ensuring more Māori whānau don't face the same challenges so many of us did. Our culture is never again lost, nor hidden or banned. It is interwoven throughout the country in a way that is not only respectful but also has great meaning.

We have come too far to go backwards. The key words for the future are unity and acceptance. Accepting where we are now and being united moving forwards. We are proud of where we have come from. We accept where we are now, and we are courageous enough to make changes moving forward. All of this kaupapa reminds us, what's good for Māori is good for all (Ministry of Education Te Tāhuhu o te Mātauranga, n.d).*Kō ka tahu ā ō tapuwai ina-na-hi, hei tau-ira mō āpōpō.*

The footsteps laid down by our ancestors create the paving stones upon which we stand.

No reira, tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou, katoa.

References

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Rawinia Mihaka is a teacher at Pioneers, Dunedin Community Childcare Association. Her work focuses on the importance of protecting indigenous Māori knowledge. Specifically ensuring Māori are able to achieve educational success as Māori. This is applied through Early childhood education practices. Touching on her own families history which is a a very common story for many Māori family within Aotearoa New Zealand.