

CHAPTER
2

Ngā taonga tuku iho – Māori visual arts and cultural fusion: studying authentic engagement

Helen Wrightson and Yo Heta-Lensen

Toi te kupu, toi te mana, toi te whenua.

The permanence of the language, of prestige and land.

(Ihaka, 1957: 42)

Introduction

The visual arts engage our senses, capture our imaginations and record our memories across generations. What is evident to us is that visual arts have the potential to transform. As an example, there has been a transformation noticeable in the landscape of Aotearoa through the resurgence of Māori visual arts (Hindle, 2002). This resurgence reflects our shared histories and unique sociocultural fusion as a nation exploring our relationships with this land, its indigenous people and our place in it. This chapter examines the transformative possibilities of visual arts in *Te Whāriki*, the early childhood curriculum, as a lever for exploring our relationships with people, place, space and time (Ministry of Education, 1996). It highlights the relationship Māori have with the natural world and how this is reflected in Māori visual arts (ngā toi ataata) (Ministry of Education, 2000). The implications and possibilities for teachers are discussed in relation to current literature and research about the role of the teacher in supporting tamariki (children's) artistic endeavours in promoting ngā toi ataata and te reo Māori.

All cultures have a relationship with the arts. Tamariki are, in part, enculturated by the symbols they are exposed to in their intrapsychological development (Vygotsky, 1978). Visual arts have always been integral to Māori life. This is evident in the whare tūpuna (ancestral houses) which are carved monuments to the art of whakairo (carvings) (Harrison, Te Kanawa and Higgins, 2004: 116). The rich kōrero and whakapapa (narratives and histories) contained within Māori art are evident in the patterns and the rhythms created in the kōwhaiwhai rafters, whakairo carvings and tukutuku (lattice) panels (Hindle, 2002). Māori lived and live surrounded by and immersed in their art. This is evident not only in the whare tūpuna but in their clothing, korowai (feather cloak), piupiu (flax skirt) and tā moko (the art of facial tattoo) (Harrison et al., 2004).

Colonisation of Māori through assimilation policies resulted in language loss that disrupted the flow of knowledge from one generation to the next (Hokowhitu, 2004). The impact of colonisation was far-reaching in Māori identity, language and culture – and had an impact on their artwork. However, Māori people were also keen to benefit from the technologies that came with the new settlers to Aotearoa. Māori have found a way to adapt their culture and not only to thrive, but also to reclaim the landscapes and stories

of Aotearoa through the visual arts, showing that the visual arts have the potential to promote ‘cultural regeneration, kaupapa Māori philosophies’ and aspirations (Ministry of Education, 2010: 7).

Ngā toi ataata is the name given to visual arts in the curriculum document *Ngā Toi i Roto i te Marautanga* (Ministry of Education, 2000). The word ‘toi’ also means ‘source’ and is significant because the source of all inspiration for Māori visual arts can be traced back to Ranginui, the sky father, and Papa-tū-ā-nuku, the earth mother, from whom all other living things on this earth descend. The relationship that Māori have with the land is linked to their connection to Ranginui me Papa-tū-ā-nuku and their many tamariki who preside over the domains of the earth and sky. This relationship is expressed through their artwork. According to Hindle (2002: 6), all Māori art mediums invoke ‘wairua (spirit), mauri (life force), ihi (power), wehi (fear) and wana (authority)’. In this sense, visual arts can be viewed as whakawhānaungatanga, establishing a pattern of right relationship between people, place, space and time (Williams, cited in Heta-Lensen, 2005).

The visual arts in early childhood

Te Whāriki states that adults have a responsibility to promote ‘the use of the Māori language and creative arts’ and that staff should be supported to develop understandings of bilingual teaching and learning (Ministry of Education, 1996: 73). Young tamariki are informed, amused and delighted by visual arts experiences. Many tamariki under eight years delight in engaging in visual arts experiences and are at their most prolific. Wilson and Wilson (1997) found that drawing occurred spontaneously for tamariki aged two to eight years but their concern was the decline in interest that occurred for tamariki over eight years. Clearly then, early childhood provides an optimal time to commence visual arts experiences that can establish lifelong relationships with the visual arts promoting understandings of te reo Māori me ona tikanga (Māori language and custom practices). Appreciation, acceptance and understandings of te reo Māori me ona tikanga as a living and relevant taonga (treasure) are thus promoted.

Allen’s (2002) research emphasised drawing as an expressive form of literacy and a vital means of communication that can enrich the lives of tamariki and transform the way they experience the world. She focused on the representation of tamariki ideas through socio-dramatic play, drawings and language – both written and oral – and acknowledged their proficiency using symbols to convey understanding and feelings of situations and concepts. Of importance is the proactive role of adults in promoting multi-literacies that include verbal and written language, drawing and other visual arts, music and gesture. Researchers of tamariki visual art experiences in Aotearoa have also stressed the important role of the teacher in supporting tamariki understanding of their world and their abilities to express their thinking and learning through visual art experiences in socially mediated situations (Clark and de Lautour, 2007; Pohio, 2009; Richards, 2007; Terreni, 2010; Wrightson, 2008). This contrasts with a ‘hands-off’ view that sees children constructing their own knowledge independently as they engage in visual arts experiences with little or no engagement with their teachers in scaffolding their thinking and learning within the experience.

In describing the changing paradigms for teaching and learning about visual arts in Aotearoa, Terreni (2010) reminds teachers of their obligations to Te Tiriti o Waitangi and commitment to bicultural practice. She cites Reedy (2003: 6) who ‘suggests that for Māori tamariki visual art is seen as one of the vehicles for emotional expression, developing confidence, and helping create a sense of identity for Māori tamariki’. Rangimarie Rose Pere (1997) refers to tamariki as having many gifts, including creativity,

imagination, intuition and energy, which need to be nurtured. She identifies arts and crafts as Ngā mahi a Rongo or peaceful pursuits, whereby tamariki engage with resources located in their natural environment to create their artworks. She also promotes holistic development as therapeutic and 'healing of the heart, mind, spirit, and psyche' (Pere, 1997: 52). This is an example of the transformative possibilities of ngā toi ataata as a holistic framework for exploring te wairua, te mauri, te mana, te ihi, te wehi me te wana o te tamaiti (Ministry of Education, 2009).

Teachers are reminded that Māori approaches to the visual arts must include knowledge and an appreciation of the impact and influence of Ranginui me Papa-tū-ā-nuku on how Māori experience, interpret, appreciate and represent the world through visual arts. Inspiration must be drawn from connections and relationships with the environment (Hindle, 2002). Harrison et al. (2004) are clear that no pattern is created divorced from acknowledgement of the environment and the materials gathered from within. In this way, carvers leave behind an account of the evolution of the universe as well as accounts of human evolution. The carver utilises and draws on inspiration from the 'beauty, balance and symmetry' derived from the elements of Ranginui me Papa-tū-ā-nuku to give added meaning and strength to their work (Harrison et al., 2004: 118).

'The pūwerewere (spider-like designs), rauponga (bold spirals like fern leaves), koru (emerging fern frond design)', are examples given by Harrison et al. (2004: 118) of design elements inspired by Tāne of the forest. Links are also made to Tāwhiri-mātea, the wind and Tangaroa, the sea, seen in the swirls and spirals of the sea, sky and wind. Like Rangimarie Rose Pere (1997), Pakariki Harrison teaches us through his commentary and his own artworks that whakairo are taonga tuku iho (treasured gifts handed down from the ancestors) that constantly reinforce the presence of our ancestors and the deep reverence 'they had for the natural world and the sustenance derived from it' (Harrison et al., 2004: 121).

The implications for teachers when engaging tamariki in ngā toi ataata is the need to preserve that reverence as it plays out in tamariki interpretations of their world. Tamariki immersed in opportunities of experiencing the greatness of Ranginui me Papa-tū-ā-nuku can sense the spiralling winds of Tāwhiri-mātea and the rolling waves of Tangaroa. Authentic opportunities to view the unfurling koru observed in the great forests of Tāne, the intricate weavings of pūwerewere as seen in nature become the starting place in guiding tamariki to make the connection between the natural world and ngā toi ataata (Ka'ai and Higgins, 2004).

In this way, tamariki of Aotearoa can also appreciate the influence of Ranginui me Papa-tū-ā-nuku by expressing their experience, interpretation and representation of the world through visual arts. This is particularly relevant in a time when tamariki are spending more and more time in early childhood settings (Grey and Clark, 2010). It is becoming apparent that early childhood education can play a critical role in sustainable practices if tamariki are given opportunities to forge a relationship with the rhythms of nature and connections to the natural world. The case study on page 17 illustrates this connection.

KIA TIPU TE
WAIRUA
FOSTERING THE
CREATIVE
SPIRIT



Nature provides inspiration for many of the patterns found in Māori artwork. Consider where in nature such shapes are found.



Inspired by nature, the artist Bill Marsh shows how closely he observed nature to capture the unfurling fern frond in his art.

CASE STUDY

Willa, aged 13 months, explores the outdoor environment, demonstrating curiosity for the newly fallen autumn leaves. Fascination is evident on her face as she observes and handles the fine, brittle stalk which is just large enough for her to grip and manipulate.

Exploring nature provides Willa with an opportunity to make connections with Papa-tū-ā-nuku, Earth Mother, and will assist her to make sense of her environment. In time, she may well come to represent her understandings and representations of ideas she learns about from the environment in creative ways.

For now she is provided with many opportunities to explore felt-tip pens, crayons and other visual arts tools and she finds pleasure in creating early marks. She also enjoys numerous, varied experiences in the outdoors investigating the natural environment.



Willa makes connections with her outdoor environment

The teacher's role in supporting visual arts experiences

In early childhood education 'there should be a commitment to the recognition of Māori language – stories, symbols, arts and crafts – in the programme' (Ministry of Education, 1996: 72). This is a powerful mandate for teachers in early childhood settings. The critical role of the teacher in understanding transformations that can occur for tamariki in the way they view their world and the importance of enhancing this is well known and documented (Clark and de Lautour, 2007; Dyson, 2001; Pohio, 2009; Richards, 2007; Terreni, 2010; Wrightson, 2008). Dyson's (2001) research focused on connections between symbolic representations and moving towards understanding written language, where supporting tamariki in visual art experiences was identified as an important aspect of this transition. She stipulated that the teacher's role should include the following:

- The provision of interesting media to inspire tamariki creativity.
- Encouraging connections between print and symbolic representations.
- Engaging in dialogue with tamariki about their creations that encourage reflection on processes.
- Immersion in an environment of symbolic creations that stimulate creativity

Clearly when engaging tamariki in ngā toi ataata the connections to be made are between nature and symbolic representation. Further engaging tamariki in stories and histories of Aotearoa assists them to develop a kōrero toi ataata (Māori visual arts vocabulary) and

KIA TIH
WAIRU
FOSTERI
CREA
SPI