

Unknowing – on the incompleteness of theory, or the urgency of ‘Deeds not Words’

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Abstract

Our panel focus of ‘Imagining and crafting alternative childhood pathways: Wayfindings and provocations of RECE elders’ led me to reflect on how over the past 25 years my attendance at the RECE conference has enabled me to experience theoretical challenges along with solidarity in service of social justice. I considered how in seeking alternative pathways we must also unknow some of the deeply embedded premises that have limited our horizons

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I begin by acknowledging the mana whenua, those who hold the power and prestige due to being the original peoples and stewards of these lands, protecting them over time, along with the entanglements of histories and connections that bring us all here together at this moment. I also pay tribute to the ongoing legacies of our late colleagues Jeannette Rhedding-Jones and Liane Mozère.

My final acknowledgement is to the 2023 Reconceptualising Early Childhood Education (RECE) conference call inviting explorations of place, histories, politics and wayfinding of alternative trajectories, entitled: “Pathways: Where we’ve been, where we are, where we want to go.” The call acknowledged British empire-building as implicated in both capitalism and colonialism. It also identifies Manchester, the site of RECE 2023, as a site of multiple resistance movements including the Manchester radical abolitionist movement, fair-trade cooperatives, voting reform, Trade Union Marxism, women’s suffrage (whose motto was “Deeds not words”), queer rights, civil rights, anti-racism and environmental activism. So I also want to acknowledge our conference hosts and location, Manchester, with its long history of activist movements.

I consider that one of the keys to wayfinding in search of pathways for social, cultural and ecological justice, is a deliberate, conscious unknowing. An unknowing of the hegemonic embeddedness of our lives and scholarship within individual, hierarchical, racist, privileged ways of being and acting. This requires seeking ethical pathways beyond these familiar, deeply ingrained tracks.

Since my first RECE conference in 1998 in Honolulu, the RECE community has been a scholarly family for me, a home-base from which I have continued to work to unknow the presumptions of white privilege, and to seek ethical pathways within early childhood education and beyond. And within RECE I have experienced a community of people committed to challenging presumptions of ‘normality’ based in patriarchal, racist, universalising arrogance. Such counter-theorising supports our conscious unknowing, and thus works towards the un-doing of the status quo that has perpetuated social, cultural and ecological injustices.

In reminiscence as preparation for writing this paper I recalled the 2005 Hui Tōpū, a conference run for a number of years by the New Zealand Ministry of Education for the Aotearoa (New Zealand) early childhood professional learning provider community, whose role was to support early childhood teachers with regard to delivering *Te Whāriki, He whāriki mātauranga mō ngā mokopuna o Aotearoa: Early childhood curriculum*, the first national early childhood curriculum for Aotearoa New Zealand (Ministry of Education, 1996). My presentation, entitled “Knowing

and Unknowing’, challenged the attendees to reflect on assumptions they needed to ‘unknow’ in order to fully deliver on the intent of *Te Whāriki*, with regard to honouring commitments to Māori.

From 2004-2010 Cheryl Rau and I conducted a series of research projects and ran workshops for teachers using ‘wayfinding’ as a metaphor supporting early childhood educators to forge new pedagogical pathways using navigational tools such as *Te Whāriki* (Ritchie et al., 2010; Ritchie & Rau, 2006a, 2006b, 2008). We encouraged teachers to explore their pedagogical landscapes and landmarks from different, less comfortable vantage points, and to carefully climb over or tear down the barbed-wire fences of white arrogance, privilege and fragility, and build relationships with Māori families in order to include their aspirations in early childhood local programme decision-making, thereby more accurately and fully representing Māori language and knowledges within their teaching.

In response to the recent global pandemic, communities all around the world made drastic, immediate changes to their daily routines in order to save one another’s lives. This was a massive collective collaborative enterprise - whilst also acknowledging the complexities of racism and of mandate dissent influenced by deliberate disinformation propaganda spread largely through social media (Salman, 2023).

Yet, the lack of a similarly urgent response to the current climate emergency signals a literally burning need for counter-theorising and activism, to provide pathways beyond the denialism and entrenchment that is threatening the wellbeing of Papatūānuku (Earth Mother), and Ranginui (Sky Father), along with all beings residing in the space between them, the planetary biosphere.

The late theologian and scholar of traditional Māori knowledges, the Reverend Māori Marsden (2003), recalled a conversation in his tribal whare wānanga (house of higher learning) on his return from serving in World War II:

One of the elders who had of course heard of the atom bomb asked me to explain the difference between the atom bomb and an explosive bomb. I took the word ‘hihiri’ which in Māoridom means ‘pure energy’. Here I recalled Einstein’s concept of the real world behind the natural world as being comprised of ‘rhythmical patterns of pure energy’ and said to him this was essentially the same concept. He then exclaimed, “Do you mean to tell me that the Pākehā scientists have managed to rend the fabric (kahu) of the universe?” I said “Yes”...“But do they know how to sew (tuitui) it back together again?” (p. 57)

And when Māori Marsden replied that no, this was not the case, the response of the kaumatua (elder) referred to the abuse by people disrespectful of tapu (sacred, spiritually powerful) knowledge caused by them meddling in such dangerous matters.

The climate crisis is accelerating. The United Nations’ Secretary-General António Guterres stated in July, 2023 that: The era of global warming has ended; the era of global boiling has arrived... Leaders must lead. No more hesitancy. No more excuses. No more waiting for others to move first. There is simply no more time for that. It is still possible to limit global temperature rise to 1.5 degrees Celsius and avoid the very worst of climate change. But only with dramatic, immediate climate action.

Earth has just experienced the hottest three-month period on record, with unprecedented sea surface temperatures and much extreme weather (World Meteorological Organisation, 2023). This includes for example the severe wildfires raging recently on Maui in the islands of Hawai’i, in Canada, Southern Europe and North Africa (up-to-date global wildfire information is available at <https://stories.ecmwf.int/tracking-global-wildfires/index.html>). And simultaneously we have experienced massive flooding in Greece, Spain, Turkey, Bulgaria and Brasil

(for recent flood events, please see <http://floodlist.com/>). Many communities here in Aotearoa as well in the islands of Vanuatu have this year experienced multiple devastating cyclones causing loss of lives, homes, livelihoods (Kirkness, 2023; Rovoï, 2023).

Huge inequities exist, in that countries which have contributed the least to global warming, such as those on the African continent (World Meteorological Organisation, 2023) and Pacific Islands (The Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme, 2023), are experiencing the worst impacts. These affect not just human communities – terrestrial biodiversity is also devastated by droughts and flooding, and ocean ecosystems are collapsing as oceans heat up and become acidified. Meanwhile, the fast pace of climate change means that the conditions within species’ habitats are altering too fast for species to co-evolve in order to survive.

The Committee that oversees the work related to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child has just published General Comment #26, updating the Convention with regard to the urgent need to address anthropogenic climate crisis and environmental degradation. The development of this Comment was informed by Indigenous Peoples’ organisations and collaboration with over 16,000 children from 121 different countries, particularly ensuring the inclusion of children from communities facing impacts of environmental and climate crises (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2023). Comment #26 affirms the fundamental right of children to live in clean, healthy and sustainable environments. It states that governments need to provide remedies for environmental discrimination, and emphasises the need to preserve the traditional lands of Indigenous children. The recent report from the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) (Pörtner et al., 2022) identified that colonisation has contributed to the climate crisis, and that Indigenous values and knowledges are crucial in our wayfinding beyond this crisis (Pörtner et al., 2022). I therefore consider these UN documents to be useful navigational levers supporting the changes we need to enact.

The late Māori legal scholar, Dr. Moana Jackson (2020), called for an ethics of restoration that reflects the values of place, tikanga (Māori values and correct practices), community, belonging, of balance and harmony in all relationships including those with our more-than-human cohabitants, and of conciliation to restore the sovereignty of Indigenous peoples. Despite the genocidal onslaughts of colonisation, Indigenous peoples have steadfastly over millennia maintained their obligation to care for the lands, rivers, mountains, forests, wetlands and oceans of Earth, our only home (Gordon et al., 2023). We can learn from such examples of ancient imaginaries that signal wayfinding of pathways of hope and survival.

Meanwhile, young people around the globe are concerned about climate devastation, biodiversity loss, and the ongoing pillaging of the environment. They have called for support in addressing the climate crisis, for a focus on “Deeds not Words”, collaboratively enacting pathways for restoration of the wellbeing of our biosphere. So my provocation is, what have you unknown, what else can you unknow, and what are your wayfinding pathways towards Deeds not Words?

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