

# Tuākana/Tēina: Enhancing Children's Learning and Agency

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## Introduction

Human development is a cultural process, which defines and prepares participation within cultural groups and communities (Rogoff, 2003). Behaviours, information, and situations are interpreted through one's particular cultural lenses. These lenses operate mostly involuntarily, below the level of conscious awareness, making it seem that one's view is simply 'the way it is' (Delpit, 1995). Culture acts as a blueprint for the ways one makes sense of information and what importance we attach to the information (Mahuika, Berryman, & Bishop, 2011), including teaching and learning. Metge (1995) states that if the learner's culture is congruent with the culture of the learning environment they are able to make meaning of new ideas and information by building on existing cultural understandings and experiences. Key to providing culturally congruent early childhood education (ECE) provision for Māori learners, including infants and toddlers, is the need for practices and pedagogies to reflect Māori world views, identities, protocols and behavioural expectations.

## Communal caregiving

In traditional Māori communal settings, parenting was not the sole responsibility of the birth parents (Howard, 1970). Rather, the extended whānau and community shared child-rearing responsibilities (Metge, 1976; Patterson et al., 2006). Ritchie and Ritchie (1979) highlighted that one of the benefits of multiple parenting, where the child belongs to the wider family, is that it is a protective factor for positive outcomes for a child's wellbeing and development. Metge (2015) makes the point that communal child-rearing practices also assisted in the development and maintenance of the mana of the child. Tuākana/tēina is an aspect of traditional Māori kinship, and communal child-rearing practices that is able to support teaching and learning in contemporary ECE contexts.

## Tuākana/tēina

Tuākana/tēina is part of the traditional Māori kinship model, which reflected the whānau ethic of manaakitanga, or care (Morehu, 2005). The tuākana/tēina pairing can be traced back to the founding population of eastern Polynesia, and is the foundation of Polynesian social organisation through the process of repeatedly generating each society's chiefly hierar-

chy, rank, and leadership (Reilly, 2010). A tuākana, according to Williams (1985), is an "older brother of a male, an older sister of a female" (p. 445), and a tēina is "a younger brother of a male, a younger sister of a female" (p. 410). In contemporary education contexts, tuākana/tēina describes the practice of older or more knowledgeable children caring for and supporting younger, less knowledgeable children. It is a model of communal caregiving that highlights the importance of caregiving

roles and responsibilities involving sharing resources, time, knowledge, and understandings. The responsibility given to the older sibling demonstrates trust and acknowledgement of skills and abilities in the caregiving role that highlight confidence in the competency of the tuākana. A whānau member explains her role as tuākana, "My role was to make sure he was not hurt, he is not left alone, feed him

when he is hungry, put him to sleep and always pick him up and cuddle him when he is upset and cries" (Rameka & Glasgow, 2017). Tuākana were well versed in tikanga (practices) around safety, and were trusted in their roles. Parenting rights to scold or chastise children were shared with the tuākana, as were the responsibilities to care and protect (Metge, 1976). The tēina, in turn, recognised the role and skill of the older sibling in the caregiving relationship: acknowledging that responsibility for nurturing is a shared, collective endeavour. Another whānau member describes a tēina perspective, "My older sister also helped to raise me ... my older sister was my surrogate mother who I referred to as my mum" (Rameka & Glasgow, 2017). Traditionally the tuākana/tēina pairing was viewed as an essential vehicle to mediate and promote some of the most important cultural learning, messages and practices (White, O'Malley, Rockel, Stover, & Toso, 2008). In contemporary ECE contexts tuākana/tēina relationships can also mediate and promote important cultural learning, messages and practices, such as role modeling appropriate behaviours and practices, nurturing tēina, and supporting both tuākana and tēina learning and agency.

## Tuākana/tēina ECE practice

Fundamental to understanding children's agency in ECE is, understanding the cultural world views that frame ideas of agency and responsibility. Māori and Pasifika world views de-centre the adult's role in children's learning and move the adult from the starring role, central to children's learning, to a support role, a facilitator of learning. This often requires teachers to 'step



back' from situations, to provide opportunities for tuākana/tēina understanding and practices to develop, to trust in children's abilities, and to learn to care, support and be responsible through direct experiences with tēina. As one teacher puts it:

*We believe that our tamariki have the capacity to be active carers of others, but we had to step back as teachers and allow our tamariki to do what they naturally can do, i.e. let the tuakana help feed, carry, clean and love the tēina. We could see this loving, trusting relationship grow with the tēina fostering nurturing characteristics from the tuakana.*

Mixed-age provision is an important aspect of tuākana/tēina learning. The opportunity for tuākana and tēina to mix together in a safe, nurturing, encouraging and normalised space is critical. This is not often possible in age group settings where children have limited opportunities to interact with other age groups. Learning through relationships between older and younger children, encapsulated in the tuākana/tēina model of learning, needs to be considered and foregrounded in teaching practice and ECE as a whole.

In ECE the role tuākana play in tēina learning is easily understood. Tuākana can contribute to tēina learning and activities, through providing support and guidance when needed, initiating tēina learning, scaffolding, modeling, guiding, consoling and reprimanding when required. The learning for tuākana is less obvious; however, it is no less important. Tuākana learning includes learning to care, share, be responsible, take the lead and support others. Tuākana/tēina therefore is not just a culturally responsive pedagogical approach, it is a model for optimal tuākana and tēina learning and agency.

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