

YEAR TWO OF TEACHING - NOT WHAT I'D PLANNED

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Having decided that she wanted to work part time in her second year of teaching, Heeni Turinui, in term two, was persuaded to take on a full time job with a class of challenging children.

Heeni continues the story, begun in volume 6 of Teachers and Curriculum, of how she became a confident teacher.

Heeni describes how using culturally appropriate and responsive pedagogy (Bishop & Glynn, 1999; Bishop & Glynn 2000) developed her confidence and success as a teacher, and provides more helpful ideas for beginning teachers.

I had decided that in my second year of teaching I would work part time, but before term one of my second year was out, I had a phone call from a friend, a teacher who had graduated the year before I did. She wanted me to apply for a position at the school where she was teaching, and teach the senior children in the bilingual unit with her. I told her that I felt committed to my part time schools, and needed time to continue to absorb all I had learned, and that teaching part-time allowed me to do just that and more. She rang me a few more times and then she got her principal to ring - then I felt obliged to apply, even after sharing with him the way that I felt. I agreed to be interviewed, and was completely open about my shortcomings as a teacher, thinking I could not possibly get the job.

To my surprise, I did get the job. I thought hard about whether I was ready to tackle full time teaching again. Would it be as challenging and as demanding as it was last year? It actually came down to how the staff, parents and board of trustees members had made me feel during the interview, and the knowledge that I really was ready to take on the kinds of challenges this school would bring. I also had a hunch that it might be too easy for me to settle myself into a comfortable groove and happily stay there. I needed to be where I was needed.

SETTING UP MY NEW CLASSROOM

Again, it was pure pleasure setting up the classroom and preparing everything for the class. Two weeks was not long enough for me to get everything into place, so prioritising the things that needed to be done helped to organise things in their order of importance.

While I was setting up the classroom, a few of my soon to be students came in to see who their new teacher was going to be, and to find out what I was like. They were about as rough a bunch of boys that you are ever likely to come across. I remember thinking at the time, "girl, you've got your work cut out for you". They projected a macho image - which I knew immediately, was a front for me and for the benefit of those who were with them. They stayed for about an hour the first day, and came back just about every day, asking if they could help me with anything in the classroom, or just to talk. I was very lucky - I got a head start on getting to know these boys before school started. It was a good thing too, because I was able to form my own judgements about them, and wanted to do so with all the children. I decided not to look in the progress cards just yet, for I felt that my own perceptions could be coloured by what other teachers had had to say. I did look into their portfolios to find out their reading, math and spelling levels, and at any other diagnostic results I could find that would give me an idea of where they were at academically. It gave me sufficient information to carry on with until the PAT tests could be administered.



THE FIRST TWO WEEKS OF TERM AND A CRITICAL INCIDENT

We spent a wonderful first two weeks of term getting to know each other, and for the moment, I only wanted to focus on the children and what went on in my classroom. Within these two weeks, an incident arose with one of the girls. She kept referring to a previous teacher, who had allowed her to do this that and the other. However, I felt that it was very unfair on the rest of the class that she be allowed these privileges and not them. I also told her and the others that I was not that person, and that I had my own way of teaching. I acknowledged that this teacher must have been a wonderful teacher to have a class so loyal, however, I could not be that person, nor did I want to be. She became very upset, called me a bitch, and said that she wanted to be moved to another class. I told her that she could change classes as soon as it could be arranged with her parents. She stormed off to Whāea Y's class (my colleague in the bilingual unit), and the rest of the children said to me that it was about time someone put a stop to letting her get away with everything, that she had always been the teacher's pet. They had all felt like second-class members of the class, knowing that she received preferential treatment from their former teacher, and had to treat her differently.

Her parents came in that afternoon, and I asked if their daughter could be present to make sure that what was said between us was a truthful rendition of events. We both agreed about what had happened. The parents felt strongly that their daughter belonged in the mainstream, as opposed to a bilingual class, where she would be solely among children her own age, and not in a multi-level classroom. These parents felt that their child was being 'short-changed,' and were honest enough to express their lack of confidence in the ability of a beginning teacher and that they would prefer a more experienced teacher for their child.

I must admit to feeling like a second rate teacher and so indignant, that I felt prompted to ask them to leave their daughter in the unit with me until the end of the term. If, at the end of term they felt that her progress was not sufficient, then I'd be more than happy to let her go. They agreed to this. The girl stayed in my class for the rest of the year, and refused to go to mainstream the following year because she felt safe where she was. Academically she was quite a knowledgeable young person, and once she settled into the classroom, the children actually came to like her.

I gained so much confidence from this incident in these ways.

- I felt that I could be open with the parents, which made all the parents feel comfortable with me.
- I stuck to my belief that I would never ever compromise fairness – that being consistent really does pay off – and children respect fairness.
- I was able to show, not just the parents of the girl, but all the children and their parents that I could deliver not just the academic, but the social aspects of teaching as well.
- As a result of doing these things, the self-esteem of the children blossomed, as did their attitude to learning.

Within those first two weeks, I noticed some aggressive incidents were occurring within and outside of the classroom. A possible cause for this was that most of the children had been in the same class with each other from the time they were at kōhanga. This meant that they were so used to one other that they felt they were entitled to bully, harass and physically set upon each other as they pleased. It was more pronounced between siblings. These behaviours had escalated over the years so that the older boys and sometimes the girls too, would swear at and physically abuse children and teachers in the playground – especially when they did not get their way, or felt that there were unfair decisions or practices being made or carried out.

The behavioural programme Hei Awhina Mātua (help for parents) is a whānau-based programme where students, teachers and parents "recorded and prioritised behavioural and learning difficulties". In the homes, "the whānau members and the students agreed that arguing and fighting among brothers and sisters" were on the unacceptable behaviour list. Similarly, "students and teachers also recorded high ratings to school sports, fitness, playtime, and other outside activities, as contexts in which problem behaviours occurred" (Glynn, Berryman, Atvars, Harawira, Walker, & Kaiwai, 1997, p. 122.). This programme is similar to the process I used in my class. Issues of this nature needed to be teased out, and our morning discussions were the ideal place and time for debates to occur, for feelings to be aired, and

experiences to be shared. Our discussions started after morning karakia (prayers) and mihimihi (greetings). We would discuss many things, like what would they really like to learn about – what were their interests, what kinds of things really upset them, and what things were they really good at doing. The children themselves initiated most of the subjects, and the participation rate was always high. I later found that this is called co-constructing the curriculum.

I had reflected about such practices a lot and had described them in my "teaching philosophy", developed when I was a third year student teacher. What I had said then was my ideal classroom environment is one that... would enhance the natural 'homey' atmosphere, beneficial to all children. In a non-threatening environment, children have the hope of achieving self-actualisation, and be free of 'put downs' and ridicule. I want children to feel safe enough to explore, experiment and enjoy coming into the classroom. Our classroom will reflect the interests of the children, and their hopes and aspirations. The curiosity that inspires children to higher order thinking will be found in a variety of learning activities like, science experiments, learning centres, investigations, problem task cards and many others – like debates and research.

Similarly, Fraser (2001) mentions that having a "safe place to take risks" is the ideal in the classroom, where "people are treated with respect, and while we may passionately disagree with someone's idea, we respect his or her right to that idea" (p. 26). Fraser has more to say that echoes what I embarked on with the children. She writes of "ownership and responsibility" and the effects of tapping the children's "reservoir of potential" (p. 24).

McGee and Taylor (2001) describe a variety of techniques like "questions in the classroom" (p. 119) that can be used to increase higher order thinking in children's discussions, and many of these I was using in conjunction with 'wait time.' When Yates (2001) describes elements of whole class discussion that "stimulate students' thinking by challenging, probing and exploring topics and issues" (p. 150) I can relate to what he is describing and feel I was promoting this in the daily discussions and debates.

TREATIES, CHARTERS AND SCHOOL RULES

In one of these discussion sessions, I raised the subject of the Treaty of Waitangi. It had been under discussion in the school and had led to a lot of issues, personal hostilities, biased opinions and general stereotyped comments. The next unit we

did was based on treaties and contracts.

Although, at the time, I had not read the materials I refer to above, ideas like these informed my plan of action for my class. I must admit to feeling quite pleased with the idea that their behaviours were going to feature largely in this unit on treaties. We started firstly with finding the definition of a treaty or contract. We explored the Magna Carta, the Treaty of Waitangi and my own teaching job description as a means of comparing similarities between contracts. Once they became familiar with the concepts that underpin contracts, we went into the school rules. We discussed the purpose of the rules and what would happen if there were none. One of the tasks was to be able to recall the rules for playground behaviour and the consequences (the children went as far as submitting and justifying to the principal what they thought would be good school rules). We went further to discuss collaboratively, our own set of classroom rules set out in treaty form, with consequences described. The next two steps involved setting classroom responsibilities, and personal work and goal contracts. To support this kaupapa (subject), I taught the children how to use "I" statements whenever there were issues of conflict, and went further to teach them conflict resolution skills, which they practiced in the classroom whenever an issue arose. At first I needed to mediate these sessions. When putting the skills into action in the playground, initially I was called out many times, to mediate. After a while, the children learned the mediation skills. They asked to be mediators in the classroom and, after sitting in on a few of their sessions, I felt that they were handling being mediators in a very mature manner – which freed me considerably to get on with the rest of the class. By the end of the year, children in my class were mediators in the playground for all the children in the bilingual unit. At first, the teachers were a bit sceptical about whether it would work, particularly with the boys who were known 'rebels', but most were grateful for the mediators' help, which made things a lot easier for the teachers on duty. There was never an occasion where the children abused the position of mediator to favour one of their friends. They valued highly, the trust, particularly that of myself and Whāaea Y, and the senior teachers and principal.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH PARENTS

The majority of the parents of both the bilingual classes had been at the pōwhiri to welcome me to school. They were as curious about me as I was about them. During kai hākari (an informal celebratory meal, after the formalities of a pōwhiri, to help people to settle in) the parents

who were at the interview came up to me and re-introduced themselves, and in turn, they introduced the other parents to me. It was 'close inspection' time. I must admit that the parents were reticent in coming forward, for which I shall always be thankful. It meant that the formalities could be dispensed with, that we had each other's communicative 'measures', and I knew exactly how to respond, professionally. I guess that they must have felt comfortable with me as well, because they never hesitated to come to me if they had any worries or concerns. As the years progressed, we were also able to communicate easily on a social level. This occurred whenever the unit had get togethers at the end of each term, as well as chatting informally before and after school, when helping the children dress for their kapa haka performances when we would pōwhiri new pupils into school, and many other formal and informal instances. I would meet up with a couple of the parents on an outside school, social level, because we were avid darts players, and we would have a lot of fun competing against each other.

However, there were some parents whom I did not see very often, they did not seem to want to come in to school. Some of the reasons for the parents' inhibitions about coming in to school can be found in their "linguistic or cultural community" being different to that of the teacher (Harold, 2001). Harold suggests that teachers prepare a "repertoire of strategies to cater for families from a range of different backgrounds" (p. 269). Ramsay and his colleagues (1990) identified and interviewed parents who very rarely involved themselves with school. Several factors came to light that explained their reluctance or the "difficulties" that arose to prevent their involvement. These included "lack of transport, telephone, or childcare, fear of schools and teachers arising from their own school experiences, and a lack of confidence about the language or jargon used by the teacher" (cited in Harold, 2001, pp. 269-270).

The parents did not mind if I visited with them in their homes or spoke with them over the phone – especially if either of us had a concern that needed to be discussed straight away. I learned to be very diplomatic when it came to particular parents, especially the fathers. Some of them were accustomed to using physical methods to get their children to conform. They did come in to school when the children were part of performances, kapa haka, and the end of the year get-together. It really surprised me when some of those parents showed up for parent teacher interviews the following year.

Within the first month of being at this school we held a parent-teacher evening for our two classes. After the whānau group chairperson went through the purpose of having a whānau committee, it was my turn to present my programme. I shared my teaching philosophy with the parents, to let them know what I based my programme and relationships on, and my expectations. I took the parents through what was going to happen during the term, by showing them my long term plan; what I intended to do in the classroom to address the 'aggressive behaviours' of our children; the topics of study; the trips that were coming up – and the parent helpers that would be needed; the daily timetable, how everything worked together, and the best times to come in to see me; how the communication lines worked; and homework expectations. The parents often requested a homework sheet for themselves – not only to keep pace with their children, but because they enjoyed doing them too, especially the brainteasers and problem solvers. Once I had completed my part of the meeting, I asked the parents if they had any questions, if there was anything about the programme that they did not completely understand, or if they had any concerns. I let them know that I was happy to re-explain any part of the programme and answer any queries that they had. The parents were really pleased with what was going to happen in the classroom, particularly with reference to aggression. Of all their concerns, this was the most prominent. Their next concern was based on academic achievement and te reo Māori – Māori language. The parents were also very appreciative when it came to having prior knowledge of trips, so that they could budget for the expenses and make sure they had no commitments on the days of these trips. This programme, more than anything else, made it possible for the parents to reach out to me and for me to them. This evening, the pōwhiri and the many before and after school informal chat sessions forged a close, strong bond between the parents and me.

Whenever I visited with the whānau in their homes, I always assured them that I was there to see them, not to inspect their home. One of the things that I always did (and still do) when I went to someone else's home, was to take off my shoes. The parents would always tell me to leave them on, but I never do. It is not just a matter of being polite, nor is it just showing respect for their property. For me

it also goes back to ingrained culture. Because Tumatauenga is the god of war, everything outside, including the dust, is attributed to him. However, because the structure of the home is fashioned after the tinana (body), when we enter the whare it can be likened to returning to the womb – a place of peace and safety. We take our shoes off because the dust and dirt all belong to Tumatauenga, and there is no place for him within the domain of peace. Here Rongomatane, the god of peace and rongoa (medicine) prevails.

Many of these parents were humble people and made excuses for the state of their modest homes. I think they mistook 'fine, modern furniture' as a measure of a good home. I could tell some of the parents, directly, not to criticise their homes, that hospitality alone was wonderful to me. For example, while others noticed peeling paint and wallpaper, and dishes in the sink, I saw floors scrubbed almost white, and helped to do the dishes while we talked.

One of the parents, who was a student teacher, was the chairperson of the whānau committee. She was a motivator and keen to see children succeed. She would try anything if it meant that our children would benefit from it. Not only that, she instigated workshops into our monthly whānau meetings. We, the other bilingual teacher, myself, the whānau chairperson and some parents often congregated after class and talked informally about the unit, the developments in the classroom and the direction the parents wanted the unit to take for their children. They became aware of 'parent power', and how they had the right to have input into reviewing and reshaping the policy according to their aspirations for their children. After studying the policy for the unit, we found that it no longer matched the aspirations of the parents. These parents became empowered. We had a few large whānau meetings with the board of trustees, to set up what we decided to call the Bilingual Management Committee. When these meetings began, I was so impressed by our parents, because I knew how difficult it was for them to get up in front of teachers and members of the board and share their feelings and convictions. It was a truly moving, exciting and inspiring time, and I was so proud to be a part of and witness their successes.

TEAM TEACHING

The relationship that developed between me and the other bilingual teacher was strong, not just because we had known each other at college, but our styles of teaching complemented each other, and we had the same expectations and the same desire to see our tamariki succeed. We got together every week to plan for the next week, especially in areas where we could work together on a topic of study that could be integrated into the topic chosen by the wider junior syndicate. We discussed at our weekly meetings, any concerns or successes and our plan of action to increase levels of learning or strategies for any concerns. We co-ordinated our timetables to maximise tuakana teina (older-younger buddy) relationships. This increased the level of reo Māori used in class. Sharing knowledge concepts gave our junior tamariki more breadth and depth of understanding. In this way we were also able to guide the children to being more understanding of each other and promote the rights of the individual to be and feel safe. We were also able to give each other some release time, so that one or the other could do some diagnostic testing, and we needed to assess the level of reo Māori, which was harder, because at the time, there were few assessment tools that we could use.

Our children were not only participating in the cultural festival and the school musical, but some of our children were also involved in choir practices – in which many schools in Canterbury were participating – and which would culminate in a week long schools music festival. There were many times where we had to be very flexible and make time for these other activities. This usually meant that the children had to work a little harder the next day to catch up on any of their missed curriculum work.

In the senior syndicate, if I could not find enough Māori resources to complement a specific subject taken by the rest of the syndicate, then we, the children and I would choose a Māori subject based on the overarching kaupapa, like science – earth and beyond. Our units were helpful to the wider senior syndicate when we studied the same kaupapa, because then they would have a Māori component, complete with resources, to complement their own studies in their classrooms.

Many of the teachers, including the deputy principal, often said that they admired the two of us, they felt they could not do the same job that we were doing in the classroom, and achieve such success with children whom they had all but given up on. Again, I did not place much importance on this praise, because I did not see

that I was doing anything unusual. What I was doing was meeting the needs of the children to the best of my abilities. It was hard. One thing that made it hard was having to write two copies of everything, like units or long-term plans – one in English and the other in Māori.

DEVELOPING MEANINGFUL

RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE CHILDREN

Getting to know the children was easy. They seemed like any other normal, haututu (mischievous) children. We got to know a lot about each other during our chat sessions. They were curious about my background, so I shared my whakapapa (genealogy) with them, and a few other personal details, like my children, the type of home I lived in, and that I was going to be a grandmother soon. The only thing that I kept them guessing about was my age. They tried all sorts of tricky strategies to try and prise that out of me, including deduction via seemingly innocent questions, like how old my eldest daughter was, and how old I was when I had her, how old was I when I started training. They even went as far as asking my grandnephews to ask their nana! It was like an on-going game of twenty questions – which they loved.

I talked to the children about how important their welfare was to me, and that when I was at school they were the most important people in my life. They asked if they were more important than my own children were. I said no, that they were just as important to me as my own children were. When they began to see that I 'walked the talk', they also began to trust me. I could not tell them enough that it was okay to make mistakes, because that is how most people learn. When some of them began asking for help voluntarily, I knew that they had made a breakthrough. Some of the children were still too shy to ask for help, but it did not take me long to find and help them. As they began to open up, they shared so many experiences with me. Some of them were just short of breaking the law. I really felt for those children. I supported them in situations where they found themselves in difficulty and did not know what else to do, and that included confronting some of their parents. None of the parents ever told me to refrain from doing this – well, not directly to me anyway. It was also good to see the children coming in to school a lot happier in the mornings.

These children loved to make and create and they loved doing their curriculum work, I think because it was based around their own interests. I tried really hard to find ways that would make learning fun for them. There were a couple of topics

of study that the children did not enjoy, but they were compulsory school wide subjects. The year six children in my class were academically minded children who enjoyed challenging curriculum activities. They enjoyed doing the unit 'It's great to be different!' because it made them feel special and valued. They thoroughly enjoyed participating in the 'feelings for' kaupapa (topic) about children in South America. They were fascinated with the culture, and made many comparisons with their own Māori culture. It was a revelation and a challenge for them. I had to expand my search for challenging material for these tamariki, that ended in giving them secondary school work, at the fifth form level in some of the curriculum areas. Some of these children had previously been 'behaviour problems' because they found their work too easy and had too much spare time on their hands, and because they only knew of one way to settle a problem. As explained earlier, they learned other coping strategies, and learned that learning can be fun and challenging. They were so proud of themselves because they were capable of doing fifth form work. Again, it was only meeting their needs. These intelligent individuals helped many of the other children, not only in their own class, but also in the junior class (tuakana-teina tutoring). They had a way of explaining concepts that seemed crystal clear to the younger children, that an adult mind like mine had not even perceived – despite the many times I tried to explain a process in a variety of different ways. Learning, at times, was reciprocal, in that the younger children would share their own perceptions and understanding of concepts with their tuakana in ways that the older children had not thought about – and would engage in discussion and justification of thoughts. In some of these instances, they would call on me when they came to a stalemate. Sometimes I had to tell them that I did not know, but it would be well worth investigating. These children achieved what I could not. At those times, I was very pleased that I let them know right from day one that I did not know everything. There was a wide range of learning needs among the children, and a few of my younger children were still emergent readers. I worked diligently with them, and managed to get some teacher aide time for two of them. I was so proud of them and their achievements - by the end of the year they had not only caught up to their reading age level, but were reading above their chronological ages.

I gained their respect by being honest, treating them with respect (which was reciprocated), by being scrupulously and consistently fair, by listening carefully to what they had to say, and empowering

them as much as possible, in their own classroom. To begin making the classroom theirs, they had to design a plan for the classroom, the way that they wanted it to look and justify why the curriculum areas should be where they put them, and why their published work should be displayed in a particular way and in a particular place. The classroom was rearranged once every month. Their published work had to be changed more often, although sometimes I did not want to take down artwork it was such good quality. Even some of their art folders (which they made out of A2 brown sugar paper) were works of art. Many of their artworks went from our classroom to the hall, and stayed there until the end of the year. Having learned the value of positive reinforcement, I praised them in all their best efforts. Another thing that helped the children to lift their self-esteem was that the children got into the habit of giving positive, constructive comments about each other's work.

FEEDBACK FROM MY TUTOR TEACHER AND OTHERS

My tutor teacher was a great mentor. He made sure that I was aware of any courses that were coming up that would be of benefit to me, and I'd let him know about the courses that I would really like to attend, especially the ones that would fill in the gaps in my learning, or classroom programme, or would provide development in areas where the children would benefit the most. We met once a fortnight to discuss my progress. We discussed any concerns that I had, and he let me know what his responsibilities were, and what I could count on having happen. I would talk with him first about most things that I had planned for the class. I did the same with my team teacher, so they could give me feedback about any shortfalls in what I proposed to do. My tutor teacher took me through a physical education appraisal, which lasted for a month. Nevertheless, at the end of it, I could justify every aspect of high and long jump, from run-up to landing, identifying the lead leg and its importance. I knew the kinds of skills and knowledge that the children needed prior to their first attempt at running, jumping and landing, and activities to prepare the children to gain those skills. I was very aware of the safety aspects and tried anticipating the kinds of problems one could have when dealing with large numbers of children. This was one of the ways I learned to manage and organise large numbers of children safely.

He and the other teachers in the senior syndicate made me feel confident when they sent children to me who were misbehaving. When they got to my room, they would find a seat and carry on with their work. They were really good for me. I even wondered sometimes if they misbehaved so they could spend time in my class, because they knew I had dart boards in the classroom and would allow the children time to play some math games on them when they had completed their work. I had set down some stern rules about darts, which had to be followed absolutely, or the boards would come down, and I would take them home. They were so careful. Many of the children did not have a lot of access to toys, books, computers or learning resources in their homes, so the activities and resources that were provided were well looked after. This took a while to instil, because some of the children wanted to – and did - take home things like, Lego and Connect Four games, for their own personal use. I told them that if that continued to happen, the class would be left without games for rainy days, or to help others to understand how to do their maths. I could not afford to replace them, and would not replace them. The response of the children to this was that little by little, the majority of games and Lego came back into the classroom. I could not and did not use any coercive or intimidating threats to get them to bring them back. That had to be their decision and their choice.

Another thing that made me feel confident was that the teachers in the senior syndicate wanted to have a look at the 'Feelings For' kit that I had made at college and used in the classroom. They had heard about the resource, but had never seen one. They checked it out completely, and asked if they could make a copy for the school resource room, and for their use. They still have the original kit.

There was a time when I became ill, so the principal sent me home and said that he would look after my class. The principal came over to see me when I returned to school and told me that my children were brilliant in their behaviour, their work, and manners. He said that he would come back and look after my class any time. There were times when I could not make it into school, when my children were split into groups and sent to different classes until a reliever came in. My children loved the reliever and she enjoyed being with them. The teachers never hesitated to let me know that the change in the children was wonderful. They would often ask if certain members of the class could come back and buddy up with some of their children.

These incidents and situations are but a few of the things that happened during my second year of teaching, and represent some of the things that made me feel confident. These things stuck in my mind and made me believe that I had made a difference to the children, that by empowering them with skills, coping strategies, motivation, values and good attitudes to learning, that perhaps, it was one less class of children who would slip through the cracks in the educational system.

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