

My first year: How I became a confident teacher

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Heeni Turinui looks back over her first year of teaching and identifies the things that helped her become a confident beginning teacher. Her experiences provide some sound ideas and support for other beginning teachers.

When I accepted my first teaching position in a multi-level, new entrant to year two bilingual class, I was not as prepared as I would like to have been. I knew I had to work on several things concerning junior education with which I was not completely *au fait*, despite the good grades I received in teachers college. Additional to this were the things identified during my final practicum by my evaluating lecturer, upon which I really wanted to focus and refine in teaching, delivery and management.

What I thought might be a problem

While the following may not be inspiring situations, in terms of confidence, without them I may have taken longer to achieve the confidence and competencies needed to feel like a teacher, or to achieve the levels of success that were to come for me, particularly in bilingual education. If anything was going to impact negatively on my year, I felt that it would come from one or all of the following.

- I had never, even during practicum, taught in a bilingual classroom before. My level of reo Māori fluency would have been at 30–40%.
- I was more prepared to teach a senior class than a junior class.
- The resources I had collected were, in the majority, for senior school and in English.
- I had never reckoned on having to plan and orchestrate lessons and programmes so that our kaiarahi-i-te-reo - a fluent speaker of the Māori language - could complement the programme by using te reo Māori [the Māori language] with the children. I also needed to do this at a later stage with our kaiawhina [teacher aide/helper].
- I had no tutor teacher until after the Easter break, some three months into my first year of teaching.

I did have the experience of teaching what I knew of Māori language and tikanga, to tamariki and staff at my own children's school, and I felt quietly confident that I would do a good job. I had a few ideas tucked away for junior classes in my ideas book; I had a fair complement of resources to start with - for language, maths and science. I had a strong desire to teach and to continue to learn the teaching craft and all its nuances. Moreover, I was in a school that I really wanted to be in, a school that provided me with all the elements that gave purpose and meaning for me as a teacher. I was in my element.

Being prepared before school started

Before school started, I made up karakia [prayer], himene [hymn], and waiata [song] charts, and any other reo Māori charts that I needed. I hunted through the Māori resources in the school to find posters and books, and went to the National Library to access other resources the school did not have. I set out the classroom, gathering all the instructional reading books that the children would need; organised the running records needed to reassess their reading; painted reading boxes and the boxes for developmental activities; scrubbed the walls, tables and cupboards out thoroughly; arranged curriculum areas; placed an order for art resources, math games and activities and science equipment. Everything was in place. The coat pegs and places at the tables were named; everyone was in their reading and math groups as per the records left by the previous teacher. The teaching station was set up and ready to go, along with the million and one other things that needed to be completed before school started. I absolutely loved doing all these things, watching the classroom take shape and take on a 'homey', comforting, and colourful atmosphere.

I felt quite exhilarated at being able to spread my teacher wings, and let flourish some of the ideas that I had held on to for so long. These practically burst out and set themselves in place. Although there were some practices which must be adhered to, because of the special nature of the unit, these did not make too much of an impact on my high levels of enthusiasm or confidence.

Establishing routines

The first things I implemented were the routines, that is what was to happen when the children first got to school. These were things like showing the children where to put their bags, coats and lunchboxes, showing them around the school grounds, orienting the new entrants to the school, pairing them up with a buddy so, they would not feel lonely and they would have someone to ask questions if they forgot something like where was the whare-iti – [bathroom/toilet]. In the classroom, the tamariki needed to know where all the resources were kept, how to look after them and to return them. Even these junior children were not too young to be responsible for a few things in the classroom. They became ‘taniwha’ [dragon]. If they were responsible for the library, they were allowed to be a taniwha if books were not put back properly, or if they saw someone doing the right thing, there was time for them to mention it before each class break. We went through the school rules and made up some classroom rules. From the start the majority of the children found it easy to ‘stick to the rules’.

Loving the children versus my professional responsibility

I had three children who were used to getting what they wanted from their parent(s) and who would try to manipulate situations to gain the same effect within the classroom. It took me a while to recognise this behaviour for what it was. Instead I made the assumption that because I was ‘only a beginning teacher’ I must be at fault. I continued to try all sorts of different behaviour modification programmes for their ‘off task’ behaviour. They responded brilliantly to positive reinforcement. However, when it came to wanting something that was different from what the rest of the class wanted, there was no option for them but to go along with the rest of the class, which often provoked a reaction from at least one of the three children. At times, my colleagues would say that I was too soft on them or would tell me to stop making excuses for their behaviour – even my tutor teacher and kaiairahi-i-te-reo. They would say that I needed to be a lot firmer. However, I looked at these children and thought they did not look old enough or big enough to even be at school, let alone have me ‘on their case’. The professional side of me struggled with the caring, ‘mummy’ side of me.

In exploring the aspects of caring, McLaughlin (1990) notes that “[E]stablishing caring relationships with students is a challenge for all teachers, especially for novice teachers. Their attempts to care may conflict with their hope of assuming an authoritative professional stance” (p.182). Noddings (2000) writes that the concept of care is based on the distinction between ‘caring for’ and ‘caring about’. ‘Caring for’ refers to the direct, personal response of carer for a cared-for. ‘Caring about’ is more indirect” (pp. 3-4.). Noddings (1986) also discusses the ‘ethic of fidelity’ and draws a comparison between the Kantian and utilitarian ethics of fidelity saying that “fidelity to individuals is derived from fidelity to principle.” This suggests that the fidelity of professional caring, of duty and justice, may at times override other aspects of caring like those of emotion and protectiveness. I eventually found that I could be both a ‘duty and justice’ carer as well as an emotional and protective carer. I came to realise that the children needed a professional more than they needed another mum. Until I had fought my way through that, I could not grow as a teacher, particularly in terms of behaviour management.

I could tell from the moment the children walked through the door what kind of day we were all likely to have. I had to get onto them as soon as they walked in, so that I could determine what was wrong, what was upsetting them, and how I would be able to help them to have a successful day. If they had had an argument

with a member of the family, I would talk it through with them until they felt better. Some days it would be because they had had kapahaka or rugby practice, or relations visiting the night before and did not get enough rest; other days, they may have woken up too late to have breakfast. Thereafter, along with the other teachers in the bilingual unit, I made sure that we brought weetbix, milk, milo, bread for toast and a bag of apples, just in case children had missed breakfast or they had eaten their lunch for breakfast, on their way to school. I was well aware of the needs outlined by Maslow, and how hunger can divert and affect the learning of the children.

According to Maslow’s Table of Hierarchical Needs, a child must have their physiological needs met before they can advance to other levels that lead towards self-actualisation. The most basic physiological needs are: “hunger, protection, security, good self concept, truth and goodness”. “A well fed child is more likely to be a learner than one distracted by hunger” (Calder, Faire, & McGougan, 1994, p.41).

In 1995 there were 673,000 children enrolled in New Zealand schools. Francis (1995) reports that “more than 22,000 are perceived by their teachers as going hungry.” Of the 2348 schools that responded to a survey carried out by Otago University, 39% of the schools estimated that up to 10% of their school roll were regularly hungry, and a further 9% of schools estimated that more than 10% of their students were regularly hungry (p.1.). The initial perceptions of our teachers were not far from what was found in the report. The report also mentions the main geographical areas where children were going hungry and that it occurred predominantly among Māori and Pacific Island children who are disproportionately represented in the lower socio-economic groupings.

The importance of listening skills

Another of the things I put into place with the class very early on, was listening skills. I felt that it was important that the children were able to listen carefully, not

just to instructions, but also to the other children when they shared their ideas, thoughts, work and news. It was a basis for the tamariki to learn to value what others had to say, to show that they were interested in what was being said by asking relevant and thoughtful questions. In response, the speaker would then be able to enlarge on what they were saying to give more clarity. It gave confidence to the speakers when they could see that the listeners were making eye contact and that they weren't distracting or diverting the attention away from what the speakers had to say.

Relationships with parents and caregivers

Establishing communication lines between school and home was important to me. I got this under way through weekly letters, letting the parents know the good things that happened in our class during the week, including reminders about up and coming events and copies of brilliant pieces of work done by some of the children, plus reminders about help we needed and resources and other useful things like empty ice cream containers, coloured paper and cardboard that parents are great at hoarding for the children. The parents also came in as a result of the call for parent helpers in the classroom for language and maths. They were wonderful.

However, unfortunately, for me, I did not think this one through as thoroughly as I should have – especially when the parents arrived *én masse* the next morning, after a newsletter home. After that, I set up a timetable, where they filled in the times that would be best for them to come in. I

also had a small list of things that the parents could be doing with the children during reading, printing, process writing and maths. Many of the parents, wanted to do more – stay in the class all day if they could – but it was not realistic for that to happen. However, they rallied brilliantly when it came to pasting Māori text into English language reading books or to helping make up activities and resources attached to the BSM (Beginning School Math) resource. There was always a full complement of parents when it came to looking after groups of children on our class or syndicate trips.

Parent helpers in the classroom

The relationship built between the parents and myself was a solid one. We were able to speak frankly with each other about anything to do with the classroom or their children. Knowing that the parents were aware of what I was trying to make happen in the classroom and that they approved of my plans, gave me a lot of confidence. I initially worried about how they would react if I needed to 'growl' at their children while they were helping in the classroom, but the parents would just carry on with what they were doing. It was hard getting the parents not to 'growl' at their own children, especially if I had already spoken to the child. Nevertheless, eventually the parents became familiar with what was expected and would have a quiet word in the child's ear if they were off task, or remind them to settle quickly. They learned also to work with children other than their own, and the children became used to their parents being in the room, even though in the initial stages, some children would cling to their parents while they were in the classroom.

Asking 'dumb' questions

The weeks before my tutor teacher started, were a wonderful time. Our kaiarahi-i-te-reo was working next door in the senior bilingual classroom with the long-term reliever, and they were just through the curtain if I needed them. I did what I felt was right and good for the tamariki [children], trying to incorporate every piece of knowledge and understanding that I had to give. If I was unsure about any form of practice, I knew that I only had to ask. Knowing I could ask anything, including things that might seem silly to me, and receive supportive answers, also gave me a strong sense of confidence. Other things that made me feel confident were the good relationships that had developed between myself and the principal, staff, the kaiarahi-i-te-reo, ancillary and administration staff, the Māori resource teacher, parents, board of trustees and most of all, with the tamariki.

Working with ancillary staff in the classroom

Showing sensitivity to our kaiarahi-i-te-reo was easy, but trying to work him into the programme and trying to explain the kinds of concepts in lesson and unit plans that would develop through different activities was a lot harder. Although it



took quite a while – adapting, changing and amending - to work out a programme that would work to the satisfaction of us both, it was worth the persistent effort when at the end of the year, the use of te reo Māori by our tamariki had increased significantly. We organised a time plan of what we wanted to have happen, and how it was going to happen. We looked at where the tamariki were at in terms of their reo, and split them into two groups. I took the group of tamariki whose reo needed to be built up to a level sufficient to participate in the group that the kaiarahi-i-te-reo was working with. We then started on another programme where we would run an immersion programme for the morning, extending it every fortnight until we achieved three days per week of immersion in Māori and two days of English. During this build-up, I also increased the amount of time delivering the programme in te reo to the children. According to our kaiarahi-i-te-reo, it was by far the most that the reo had been spoken in the classroom in the whole five years that he had been working at the school. He was ‘tickled pink’.

Getting help from the advisers to schools

There were two of us beginning teachers at the school and we both wanted the maths adviser to come out and take us through the Beginning School Maths kit. We felt that we didn’t know enough about it to use it effectively. Those sessions with Judy gave us both a huge boost in confidence. We not only became confident users of BSM, but Judy also gave us heaps of organisational maths management tips. She was willing to come into our classes to observe us and give us feedback as well. Judy gave us a progressive type of flow chart so that we could follow the use of the kit and the particular strands that we were developing in our classrooms. When Judy returned the following week, she expected us to be at a certain stage, and then we would discuss how our math lessons were going. If we had any further concerns and if we had any other areas that we wanted to focus on, she was

more than happy to observe us again. Judy told us to phone her anytime if we had any difficulties, or needed advice about any concerns with maths.

The findings in Mansell’s (1996) survey showed that beginning teachers ranked advisers third after other teachers and courses in terms of where they felt they might get the best help. The survey also showed that advisers were under considerable pressure in trying to provide all the services and support that was expected of them (Mansell, 1996, p.6).

Beginning teacher meetings

One of the services that advisers provide is programmes of support for beginning teachers and their tutor teachers. This was the case in our district and we (all the beginning teachers) were notified prior to the courses and asked to reply to the organisers with any concerns that we wanted discussed. If the demand was heavy enough, the focus of development would be based on our concerns. This programme was brilliant. We not only got together with tutor group members from our college days for a huge catch-up, but each of us found that we were struggling in the similar areas and/or making huge strides in other areas. Between us, we were able to give examples of what worked well for us in specific areas. Despite the wealth of information we were given at college and the many experiences during teaching practicum, management of behaviour was still a problem for many of us. Our discussions drew out a wealth of strategies, tips and experiences, that we pooled for our use in our own classrooms, and as well the advisers who had organised the course gave us additional strategies.

Participants in Lang’s (1996) study indicated that it might not be possible to learn at university or teachers’ college, all that a teacher needs to know about behaviour management. They felt that it may not even be possible to learn it all during teaching practicum saying “you can’t be taught how to do it because you need to get to know the children first” (p.5). A participant in an earlier study that I undertook said “when you’re out on practicum, there was always that safety net that you could fall back on” (Turinui, 2000, appendix). Courses such as those run by the advisers play a valuable role in ‘topping up’ the knowledge learned in pre-



service education programmes and form an important part of the two further years of 'training' that teachers in New Zealand receive prior to becoming fully registered.

Help from resource teachers

Another source of support for me, that boosted my confidence, was the Resource Teacher of Māori (RTM) who was amazing. He showed me a variety of activities that could be used with the Māori reading books, and how I could lift my own level of reo Māori at the same time. Becoming adept at these activities and the reo, and learning how to adapt observations made during practicum and in other schools and classes during release time in my first year of teaching, helped to meet some of the learning needs of my own tamariki.

Developing a strong relationship with my tutor teacher

Once she arrived, after Easter, my tutor teacher and I established a good, honest, working relationship. From our discussion sessions came my hardest and best lessons – which I felt great about. I knew that once I became competent in the areas she or I had either identified or queried, I would be a better teacher. More importantly, the children deserved a teacher who was doing all she could to become a better teacher, and therefore improve their chances of success. I felt that I also owed it to myself to be the best that I knew how to be. We met every Tuesday at lunchtime to discuss the progress of the units I had planned, any concerns either of us had, as well as my own development programme. Tuesday was the day because it was the only day that neither of us was rostered on playground duty.

The 0.2 staffing allowance

The hardest task for me was to target the children who found change difficult, and prepare them for the reliever who was employed using the 0.2 staffing component. I did not have a regular relief teacher for the first two months. It was during this period that the children often deviated from their routines when a reliever came in. This disruption continued for a while after Sharon became the regular 0.2 relief teacher. Because of the disruptive behaviour, sets of initiatives and consequences were set up for the class. It took a while to find the right combination that worked consistently. Half the problem

was for the children to get to know the reliever, so, initially Sharon would stop in for a 'visit' while I was in the classroom. The children needed to see that I had every confidence in the reliever, so that they could build up their trust in her also. The reliever needed to see how we interacted with each other – to see what worked and what did not, and to see the expectations and the routines working. What also occurred, was that the children became aware that the reliever was wise to the ways of their classroom and they knew that they could no longer get away with off-task behaviours. Another strategy that helped enormously was the goal I set for myself, to 'catch' the children being good and give positive reinforcement constantly and consistently. This had a huge, positive impact on the tamariki.

How I felt at the end of the first year

At the completion of my first year, despite the huge amount of learning and development that occurred, the demands placed on me consistently throughout the year left me quite shattered, in terms of being drained of energy, ideas and motivation. I believed that as far as my confidence was concerned, nothing could touch it. What I needed next was time to absorb the terrific amount of knowledge, skills, abilities, competencies, paperwork, meetings and how these were organised. Therefore, I targeted relief teaching and part-time teaching for the next year, as a way where I could still be in the classroom and continue to hone teaching skills but also work on my needs. In addition, I needed to put together all the things that I had learned in my first year so I could 'see' my year in its entirety, and how every thing fitted into the overall picture of school life. It all seemed quite segmented and I needed to work my way through it like a puzzle, and gradually settle the pieces into place and add the experiences to the growing knowledge and confidence base I had built during the year.

Strangely enough, confidence came by working through all my mistakes, risks that I was willing to take, persisting when I was up against new or challenging situations, refining teaching skills and recognising when a change was needed. Bandura describes this as self-efficacy. He writes that,

[T]eachers with a high sense of instructional efficacy operate on the belief that difficult students are teachable through extra effort and appropriate techniques and that they can enlist family supports and overcome negating community influences through effective teaching (Bandura, 1997, p.240).

Confidence came through the hard work of learning to consistently deliver instructions clearly and concisely in all things. I eventually learned to be consistent, after much deliberation, particularly in classroom and behaviour management. As a result of this year, I became super organised. I had learned to co-ordinate the work of the kaiarahi-i-te-reo; the kaiawhina (teacher aide / helper) and parents into the classroom programme. I had learned to keep on top of the paper work; I had learned to organise a syndicate wide trip and subsequent trips between kura kaupapa Māori, kura rumaki Māori [total immersion Māori schools], and kura reo rua [bilingual schools] in our district. To be competent and feel confident about all the things that I had learned, on top of all the other 'normal' classroom practices, like curriculum implementation, evaluations and assessment, staff, BOT and syndicate responsibilities, was both extremely challenging and exciting – because I felt that I had achieved most of the things that I had targeted.

My first year was not an easy year, there were times when my levels of confidence dropped and pure dogged, determination took over. There were also times when I could have happily given it all away. Call it stubbornness, call it determination, call it what you will, at the end of the day, it was always the tamariki who made me think about where I really wanted to be. They trusted me implicitly, they knew my moods as well as I knew theirs. I loved them as much as they loved me, and they could be merciless. They knew when an adult was genuine or not. We paid each other the compliment of showing respect for each other. The very relationship that had developed between us, gave me more confidence than anything else did.

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