

STILL STANDING, STILL HERE, STILL DANCING

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The following autobiographical account and philosophical reflection comes from a University student in the final year of her Bachelor of Teaching. Iwa Clendon-Tau wrote this in response to a course assessment in which students could choose between keeping a journal or writing an essay. The course is a non-compulsory paper on teaching-learning processes. Iwa brings aspects of her life-history to bear upon her beliefs about identity, culture, language, and learning.

To understand the path of learning for me is to understand my initial perception of this institution called 'Education'. There are many stories to be had, but this is one experience that helps formulate my own intentions. It lays a foundation much like Bruner's 'scaffolding' in order to tautoko (support) the shaping of my thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and philosophies. My view as a teacher is encapsulated in my being, as a mother, and a Māori woman.

Where it all began, my first 'dance' at school

What I can remember about my first day at school was the bigness of everything and the smell of old wood. Something that sticks in my mind is that the classroom seemed to be in shadows, the light sort of shone through on a slant from the top of the room.

I clung to my mother for dear life. The teacher looked grumpy and she had these deep lines on her face that made her look like Uncle Hemi's Pākehā wife and her eyes looked dead. I will never forget these words: "You can leave now, she'll be alright. Come along, don't be a baby". I thought, "No, please don't leave me Mum". My mum looked at me sadly but she left anyway, saying sorry to the teacher for holding her up.

That day I had a major illusion crushed. I learnt that my Mum was not the boss, the teacher was. Even my big strong Dad who could fill up six sacks of kina by himself and grab a couple of crays on the way, before the tide turned, even he listened to the teacher. Those Pākehās were GOD, but not Uncle Hemi's wife. People were always talking about her. Even as young as I was, I felt sorry for her. She was like me, an outsider.

You see my Dad was not my real Dad, but he was kind to me. His Mum didn't like me or my mother come to think of it (well not my Mum for ages, with me it lasted years). At least she had to be nice in front of Dad, and the rest of the time I don't remember. My Mum married Dad when I was about 5 or 6 years, and that's how come we went to live in the village. It was hard being new and so I wanted to help Uncle Hemi's wife, but I was only a kid. I overheard someone say it was a shame my Mum had kids when she married Dad, he deserved better.

I hated those big black baggy bloomers (like I had a bum, the size of Neho's horse), and that heavy gym dress I had to wear to school. The teacher was always grabbing my girdle in disgust and muttering about how useless I was at tying it.

She used to tie it real tight. One time she tied it so tight that I actually farted and that earned me my first slap across the head. She looked at me, like I look at wetas.

It took a while, but my cousins let me hang out with them if I became watcher (spot the teacher first) and I became the best watcher in the school. I became so good at seeing the teacher that I saw them even when they weren't there. Then Tony stinky tarau (pants), called me a teka (liar).

Teka was right up there with incest and made me the ridicule of the school. The worst part was they would speak about me in Māori even if I was right there. This really reminded me of how much I wasn't one of them, especially when it would be about the way I dressed or some part of my body or that my Dad was supposed to marry Tony's auntie. I got that Tony though. I waited till we were all drawing pictures, then I took a book and using the same colour crayon as Tony's I scribbled in it and showed it to the teacher. He got the strap and I've had this bad feeling in the pit of my stomach ever since.

When I was about 8 years old we went to live in town. Not a lot of kids spoke Māori compared to the village school but it was ten times bigger and I was still the new kid, the outsider. It was as at this time that I learnt to bury my hurts down deep. Even to this day whenever I hear people say how strong I am, how much c_ _ p I can take etc., I think back to the days when I cried silent tears. It's not about pity or anything, that was just how it was back then. Feelings got hurt all the time, you got up, you got on, you learnt to cope. Most of my learning was by trial and error, that was life.

Ironically, there was one thing I did really well and that was White-man's English. It became my favourite subject. I would get so lost in a story that someone could be talking to me and I couldn't hear them. The subtle nuances of the language that threw other kids challenged me, and writing and reading was my escape where my imagination screamed to fly. The words just seemed to make sense so, then, began my love affair with books and learning, something despite many hiccups, I have never lost.

You'd think with pretty good academic ability I would slot in, but even in the Pākehā world I couldn't fit. My Dad worked at 'AFFCO Freezing Works' but he was on the 'outside gang' and they were like the lowest status and pay. My Mum was the laundry maid at the local pub. I loved my parents and tried so hard not to be ashamed but my brother was always sick and so when my Dad used to go diving for kaimoana (seafood) to swap with the grocery man to pay our kai (food) bill, as the eldest I went to help. I remember getting out of our old beat-up car to lift the sacks with salty matted hair and wearing an AFFCO jersey because I had spent the last 3-4 hours in the water and I was freezing. My thoughts were always, "please don't let anyone from school see me." I was 12 years old, but of course most of the time someone did. I got used to the sniggers and even learnt to laugh the loudest.

How did it get this way?

I think one of the reasons I embraced English was that I felt so useless at my mother tongue and Māori ways. I was never taught Māori as my mother was never taught it. I used to ask my maternal grandmother to teach me, but she refused. She said it would get me nowhere. She wouldn't even tell me about the old ways just that she was the fastest runner in the valley and that they used to give her a head start then chase her on horse-back. I was her favourite grandchild

and she wanted me to be somebody and give her white mokopuna (grandchildren).

Personal philosophy about learning now:

As a learner I find the experiences of my life divide into 6 phases. After childhood came my 'two left feet' (teen years), 'a step and a half' (young adult years), 'running free' (adult selfish years/having kids), 'catch a breath' (middle-aged years/looking up), 'alternative walk', sometimes brisk, sometimes stopping to smell a flower, sometimes bent, but always still standing, still here (the now years, Māori, mother, teacher).

As I try to articulate my philosophy about my learning, I perceive it firstly, as an ongoing, continuous, even infinite medium. The most crucial learning tool I have is 'me'. I may have lecturers, peers, colleagues, friends, family etc., and they all play a part in helping me to develop my learning but, at the end of the day, it is my perception of me, my desires, my dreams and my commitment to these things, that will determine any outcomes as a learner. I have a strong belief in 'personal responsibility for learning'. The taking of opportunities for my own professional development sit well with me and helps me to feel empowered. The ability to question, to answer, to reason, to discuss, to debate, to reflect all instil in me a deep sense of gratitude for the 'gift' and 'privilege' of learning.

Personal philosophy about teaching:

I guess my philosophy on teaching has a strong emphasis on 'bi-culturalism'. Actually I had to really ponder deeply the implications of this statement particularly so because we are so far as an institution from this particular objective. The continual reflections that this course has required me to do has been thought provoking at times, as it has meant opening doors to the past that I thought no longer had the power to hurt. I suppose the overall aim is getting a sense of direction for my teaching in the future, which is intrinsically linked to those experiences that have led me on the path I now face.

As I discover more of my Te Reo and Tikanga Māori, I feel like a second language participator and yet the feelings invoked by the exploration are very much first language stirrings. At the same time when I hear a wonderful articulate speaker of English, or read a well written book, the play of words are uplifting to my ears, eyes, and mind. This is my interpretation of bi-culturalism and it also incorporates lifestyles and beliefs.

I don't mean to give the impression of disregard for other races or cultures that have become a part of Aotearoa, but I firmly believe until the Māori/Pākehā dichotomy has been addressed and refocused as a partnership in the true sense of the word, we will always be operating at half potential. We then can address multiculturalism seriously, when biculturalism is no longer seen as a dirty word.

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