

Literacy for indigenous communities' cultural continuity and dynamism

Āneta Hinemihi Rāwiri

Te Puna Mātauranga o Whanganui – *Whanganui Iwi Education Authority*
Whanganui, Aotearoa/ New Zealand
aneta@tpmow.co.nz

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In early 2004, Whanganui Iwi was invited to join a collaborative university-communities research project, to investigate adult literacy and employment within Wanganui City and Districts communities. The project is supported by a NZ Foundation for Research, Science, and Technology grant for a 3.5 year longitudinal study.

Given their distinctive adult literacy needs and aspirations, Whanganui Iwi instigated a separate Iwi study alongside the wider collaborative project (of which Whanganui Iwi is also a partner). This paper describes this indigenous community-based study called ‘Ngā Whiringa Muka – Whanganui Iwi Adult Literacy and Employment research project’. Academic supervision and research capacity is drawn from within the Iwi, who work closely with community Elders and members to design and carry out the study.

Adult literacy has become more commonly defined and approached by non-indigenous peoples as an important means of ensuring economic stability, and stimulating economic growth (OECD, 1997 & 2000; Ministry of Education, 2001).

While literacy has always been valued by indigenous peoples as a means of achieving economic prosperity, within indigenous and First Nations understandings, literacy skills function in a more fundamental and critical way. Literacy is the means with which to express, understand, provide for, and make sense of, one’s self and the ‘whole’ richness of one’s self in its widest cultural, spiritual, intellectual and physical sense. There are many rich, ancestral ‘literacy’ practices which function in this way. Describing these as ‘indigenous literacies’, validates these literacy skills and approaches as being just as important, and just as relevant as orthodox western understandings and economic approaches to adult literacy learning.

The role of education in caring for Whanganui Iwi ancestral literacies and literacy practices has been noted:

For Whanganui Iwi, education will contribute to the achievement of positive development and outcomes. It is a central brace to the process of growth and wellbeing for the individual, the whānau, the hapū and the Iwi. Education is the gateway to understanding and wisdom, so that Whanganui Iwi can be independent and strong, yet willing to coexist with respect and dignity, ***while caring for and nurturing the Tribal Estate for future generations.***

[emphasis added] (Te Rūnanga o Te Awa Tupua (on behalf of Whanganui Iwi), 2000: 3)

‘Tribal Estate’ is defined as “marae, land, forests, tribal knowledge, philosophy and practice, such as mita, tikanga, whakapapa and wānanga”. They provide the basis for Whanganui Iwi to move forward as a strong, vibrant, robust and prosperous Iwi – culturally, socially, and

economically. There has been very little examination of how adult English language literacy programmes can be modified to engender employment outcomes which are consistent with such aspirations.

A literature review found that indigenous notions of adult literacy and employment are about participation on their own terms in today's world (Rāwiri, 2005). They are based on a desire to continue to manage their own affairs – according to ancestral ways of life and values – as they have done for many centuries. The project is now moving into the field study phase.

References

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