A story about language and learning: Manaia and Teuila

Manaia and Teuila's story

Manaia is the living fulfillment of his parents' dreams. Forty years ago, they made the brave decision to leave their small village in northern Upolu to give their children access to a New Zealand education. Today, Manaia is the principal of a large, multiethnic, urban primary school – not just educated, but an educator.

Every day, Manaia gives thanks for the opportunities his parents gave him. But he carries a hurt. With the best of intentions, his parents chose not to speak Samoan with him at home. Consequently, he has grown up with some understanding of his heritage language but little confidence in speaking it himself. Manaia identifies and is recognised as Samoan but is a passive bilingual – others speak on his behalf. Manaia senses he's missing a way of seeing and experiencing this part of his world – he can observe it in others but can't quite grasp it himself.

All this meant that when a group of teachers and parents approached him some years ago to suggest setting up a bilingual unit, Manaia had to go away and think about it. How could he offer effective leadership to teachers and learners who were operating in a language he couldn't use himself? He realised that his reluctance came out of his own inner conflict, a conflict that he very much wanted his students to avoid. He had to do it.

In the years since, Manaia has worked hard to create a context characterised by learning, across all parts of the school community. For teachers, this has included working with researcher Bobbie Hunter to learn to construct communities of mathematical inquiry – communities in which participants think and talk like mathematicians. It's also involved individual teachers reflecting on the effectiveness of their practice. Often these have evolved into collaborative inquiries as teachers identify common ideas and issues they are exploring.

The bilingual unit has flourished within this context and now has six classes, from Years 1 to 8. Its teachers participated in the mathematical inquiry learning alongside their colleagues. Purpose-built assessment tools developed within their cluster of bilingual schools helped them connect the learning to their practice and understand its impact on student outcomes. They saw some progress, but were puzzled:

> *Sasae: We're doing all this work and our kids still aren't talking enough in their learning!*

> *Alofa: Do you think it's about culture? Are the children being taught they need to listen and not be heard? Maybe that's a block for them getting the idea of mathematical argumentation.*

> *Paul: My inquiry showed that a lot of them are rote learning Bible passages for prayer time and White Sunday. Are they learning for recall rather than understanding?*

Connections to the emerging ideas about a system that learns

Commit to a system that learns

Manaia and his staff place ākonga learning at the centre of a learning system that extends across the school community and beyond, to learning from research. Staff were willing to change how they teach, and Manaia was willing to create the learning context that has made this possible.

Assessment, inquiry, and evaluative capability

Collaborative inquiry networks

The theory and research sitting beneath the concept of mathematical inquiry communities is well-proven, but this does not mean that it is possible to simply transfer tools and processes from one context to another. Participation in the bilingual cluster provided the opportunity to work together to create assessment tools purpose-built for bilingual contexts that could add to the teachers' understandings about the impact of their changed practice on student progress and achievement.

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The bilingual unit holds regular fono (community meetings) as one method of maintaining a flow of information between home and school. At the next fono, Manaia and his colleagues told the parents about what they had noticed about their children's oral language.

> **Teacher:** *Are your children this quiet at home?*
>
> **Parent:** *No – they talk all the time!*
>
> **Teacher:** *What happens during lotu? [prayer time]*
>
> **Parent:** *We sing, read from the Bible, pray.*
>
> **Parent:** *After the reading, we ask them what they think the reading means and if they have any questions.*
>
> **Teacher:** *What language do you use at home?*

There was a mixed response from the parents. Some parents spoke both Samoan and English at home with their children, while others spoke mostly, or only English.

> **Parent:** *At our house, it's mostly English – our kids need to speak English if they're going to make it in New Zealand.*

Reflecting on these conversations and on the literature about bilingual learning, Manaia and his colleagues were reminded that memorisation is a great skill that they could incorporate into classroom learning. They also realised that learning talk was happening at home, but that there was a deliberate transition between different kinds of talk, such as reciting, asking and answering questions, and social talk. However, much of the talk was happening in English and this was impacting on its quality. The teachers and Manaia decided to do four things:

» encourage parents to speak with their children in their strong first language to develop the knowledge and connections that are the platform for academic learning at school

» re-visit earlier work on generating academically productive talk using strategies such as talk moves (for example, increasing wait time)

» clarify to students that at school, just like at home, we can change the way we talk with each other according to its purpose

Connections to the emerging ideas about a system that learns

Learning partnerships with parents and whānau

Regular talanoa (dialogue) provides opportunities for teachers to check their questions and assumptions and learn about the language and learning practices of the home. The information-sharing informs decision-making and enables home and school to work in harmony, connecting student learning across the different worlds they inhabit. Each partner brings their best resources to support learning talk and help move young people along their individual learning pathways.

» build on the literacy practices students bring from their homes and culture, such as memorisation (including rote learning), and help the students discern the value of such strategies compared to other ways of learning and how to use them in the classroom.

At the next fono, Manaia talked to the parents about the changes they were going to make in the bilingual unit, why, and how they could help. He asked a parent and child to stand next to him to physically represent three generations and the process of language loss that occurs when the first generation speaks the heritage language, but the second does not respond in that language. The following generation begins to lose access to that language because the second generation no longer speaks it.

Manaia: If this is my Mum and Mum speaks Samoan to me, but I don't speak it back, I'm a passive bilingual. I might understand, but I can't ask questions, add other ideas, tell her what I'm thinking about or feeling in that language. But when Teuila and her Mum speak together in Samoan, they learn together. Teuila is developing a 'bilingual brain'. She's learning the right way to talk with different people and in different situations. She learns when to just listen, when to use 'small talk' – conversational language – and when it's okay to ask questions or make suggestions. All that learning she's getting at home with her Mum and the rest of her family means Teuila has a strong foundation for the academic learning we do at school.

We learn through our language – through talking, listening and responding. As Teuila gets older, she'll be able to navigate her way through the world in ways that people like me, with our passive bilingual brains, just can't.

Recently, Teuila's class created digital siapo (bark cloth art). Teuila's aunty and some other women from a local cultural group talked them through some traditional motifs and designs and explained how and why siapo is made. The students also explored the patterns in modern siapo designs, using the language of geometry – words like 'reflect', 'rotate', and 'translate'. They used a digital drawing tool to create their own designs and worked in small groups to create algorithms for patterns that they programmed into Scratch (a free online programming language). Their academic learning talk included descriptive, persuasive, procedural and explanatory language, as well as the language of mathematical argumentation. Their teacher supported them to think about the language they were using and how to speak to each other when their learning purpose changed. Later, they shared the patterns they had created with the members of the cultural group.

Teuila: We learned from our mothers and aunties about our culture and the patterns in siapo. Our teacher taught us how to use what we learned to create our own digital siapo. When we did that, we had to use our academic language – explaining our ideas to each other, talking things through when people didn't agree or didn't understand each other. Aunty really liked my pattern – now she wants me to teach her coding!

Responsive local curriculum

The bilingual unit is itself a response to local priorities. Teachers design opportunities to learn that respond to young people's language, identity, and culture while also meeting community aspirations for academic success and student well-being. Community members are included in the delivery of the curriculum and are beneficiaries of student learning.

Kōrero Mātauranga
Me kōrero tātou

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