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AUTHENTICALLY WEAVING MĀTAURANGA MĀORI INTO OUTDOOR EDUCATION

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INTRODUCTION

> *Kotahi te kākaho, ka whati; ki te kāpuia, e kore e whati.*
> *When reeds stand alone, they are vulnerable,*
> *but when bound together they are unbreakable.*
>
> Kīngi Tāwhiao

Honouring Te Tiriti o Waitangi requires educators in Aotearoa New Zealand to move beyond acknowledging Māori perspectives towards authentically embedding mātauranga Māori within teaching and learning (Ministry of Education, 2007). While recent educational reforms, including *Mana Ōrite mō te Mātauranga Māori*, have reinforced the importance of recognising mātauranga Māori within national education policy (Ministry of Education, 2020), many tangata Tiriti educators remain unsure about how this should be embodied in practice. Questions surrounding authenticity and cultural responsiveness continue to create uncertainty, often limiting meaningful partnerships with Māori communities.

Tangata Tiriti refers to non-Māori whose right to belong in Aotearoa New Zealand is founded upon Te Tiriti o Waitangi. Although the term has been interpreted in different ways, it is used throughout this study to emphasise the shared responsibility of fostering partnership under Te Tiriti within education (Rātima et al., 2022). Rather than describing ethnicity alone, tangata Tiriti also suggests an ongoing identity journey in which educators critically consider their own cultural positioning, identity, and responsibilities within a bicultural nation.

Outdoor Education provides a particularly valuable context for this journey because learning occurs through relationships with people, place, and the natural environment. Unlike many curriculum areas, Outdoor Education enables Te Tiriti o Waitangi to be experienced through practice rather than simply taught as content. However, many tangata Tiriti educators continue to experience uncertainty when engaging with mātauranga Māori. Fear of making mistakes, causing offence, or misrepresenting Māori knowledge can contribute to what Tolich (2002) describes as "Pākehā paralysis," a reluctance to engage because of hesitancy rather than resistance. Moving beyond this paralysis requires humility, reflexivity, and a willingness to learn alongside Māori communities.

The purpose of this study was to explore the perspectives and experiences of Māori and tangata Tiriti outdoor kaiako to better understand how tangata Tiriti can authentically partner with tangata whenua under Te Tiriti o Waitangi and within Outdoor Education. Using a culturally

responsive qualitative methodology, this research sought practical approaches that move beyond tokenistic inclusion towards authentic and reciprocal relationships with Māori. The study was informed by the Teaching Council's *Ngā Tikanga Matatika, Ngā Paerewa – Our Code, Our Standards* (Education Council, 2017) and the *Effective Teacher Profile* (Bishop & Berryman, 2009), recognising culturally responsive teaching as relational, reflective, and grounded in genuine partnership.

Mātauranga Māori is defined as "the body of knowledge originating from Māori ancestors, including the Māori worldview and perspectives, Māori creativity and cultural practices," while te ao Māori encompasses "Māori knowledge, language, values and beliefs, and provides the context within which Māori live and interact" (Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 4). Rather than viewing these worldviews and perspectives as additional curriculum content, this study considers them fundamental to developing an Outdoor Education pedagogy that reflects the unique cultural landscape of Aotearoa New Zealand.

Outdoor Education has been recognised within *The New Zealand Curriculum* since 1999 as part of the Health and Physical Education learning area (Ministry of Education, 1999). Its purpose extends beyond technical outdoor skills to developing relationships with self, others, and the environment. These characteristics position Outdoor Education as a powerful setting in which kaiako (educators) can enact the bicultural aspirations of Te Tiriti o Waitangi through authentic engagement with people and place.

The primary research question guiding this study was:

How can tangata Tiriti authentically partner under Te Tiriti o Waitangi within Outdoor Education?

Three subsidiary questions supported this inquiry:

1. How do outdoor kaiako currently embed mātauranga Māori within their teaching practice?
2. How can tangata Tiriti authentically implement mātauranga Māori principles and tikanga?
3. What approaches support meaningful collaboration between tangata Tiriti and Māori within Outdoor Education?

To answer these questions, it is first necessary to understand the historical, cultural, and pedagogical influences that have shaped Outdoor Education in Aotearoa New Zealand. The following review of literature explores the evolution of Outdoor Education, the enduring influence of Eurocentric traditions, and the growing movement towards culturally responsive and place-responsive pedagogies that better reflect the bicultural aspirations of Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Outdoor Education in Aotearoa New Zealand has developed within two knowledge traditions. Long before colonisation, Māori engaged with the natural world through holistic cultural practices in which physical activity, spirituality, whakapapa, and relationships with the environment were inseparable (Hokowhitu, 2007). Activities such as throwing teka (darts or javelins), flying manu tukutuku (kites), exercises with taiaha (weapons), and haka (action dance) were never simply recreational pursuits; they reflected broader cultural values and ways of understanding the world.

The formal development of Outdoor Education within New Zealand schools drew largely from British educational traditions during the mid-twentieth century (Lynch, 1999). As Outdoor Education evolved, increasing emphasis was placed on adventure, challenge, technical competence, and risk management. By the 1980s, environmental education had become progressively separated from outdoor pursuits, resulting in programmes that often prioritised activities over relationships with place (Irwin & Straker, 2014; Lynch, 2006).

This legacy continues to influence Outdoor Education today. Zink and Boyes (2006) found that school programmes remained strongly shaped by a Eurocentric pursuits-based model emphasising adventure and individual achievement. Because many of the dominant philosophies underpinning Outdoor Education originated in Britain and North America (Cosgriff et al., 2012), Indigenous ways of knowing have frequently been positioned as supplementary rather than foundational. Barker (2022) argues that Outdoor Education continues to privilege colonial perspectives, often overlooking the cultural narratives and relationships that existed long before these programmes were introduced.

Growing criticism of this model has led many scholars to advocate for Outdoor Education that is responsive to local places and communities. Cosgriff (2008) argues that authentic Outdoor Education should move beyond teaching generic activities such as climbing, kayaking, or tramping in isolation from the histories and meanings of particular places. Instead, educational experiences should enable learners to understand the stories, whakapapa, and cultural significance embedded within the landscapes they encounter. Similarly, Brown (2012) contends that place-responsive pedagogy helps learners develop a sense of belonging by recognising how relationships with place shape identity and learning.

This shift towards place-responsive Outdoor Education aligns closely with the bicultural commitments embedded within *The New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007), which explicitly recognises Te Tiriti o Waitangi as one of its foundational documents. Rather than viewing Outdoor Education solely as a vehicle for personal challenge, a bicultural approach positions it as a context where relationships with whenua, iwi, hapū, and local communities become central to learning.

Developing culturally responsive Outdoor Education therefore requires more than incorporating Māori language or tikanga into existing programmes. Washbourne (2018) argues that meaningful change depends upon genuine partnerships with Māori communities and a willingness to address the ongoing impacts of colonisation. This requires tangata Tiriti educators to engage in ongoing reflection regarding their own cultural assumptions and educational practices.

One barrier to this process is the persistence of "Pākehā paralysis" (Tolich, 2002). Feelings of uncertainty, fear of causing offence, or concerns about cultural authenticity can discourage educators from engaging with mātauranga Māori. Milne (2017) suggests this paralysis often reflects deeper uncertainty surrounding identity and responsibility rather than opposition to biculturalism itself. At the same time, Glynn et al. (2001) argue that because Pākehā culture occupies a position of institutional power, responsibility for meaningful change rests primarily with tangata Tiriti educators rather than with Māori communities.

Collectively, this literature suggests that authentic engagement with mātauranga Māori requires more than curriculum reform. It calls for tangata Tiriti educators to undertake their own identity journey, develop reciprocal relationships with Māori communities, and reimagine

Outdoor Education as a place where Te Tiriti o Waitangi is lived through everyday educational practice rather than acknowledged symbolically. It is within this context that the perspectives of experienced Māori and tangata Tiriti outdoor educators become particularly valuable.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore how tangata Tiriti can authentically weave mātauranga Māori into Outdoor Education. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the research sought to understand participants' lived experiences, perspectives, and reflections on culturally responsive practice within the unique educational context of Aotearoa New Zealand. Rather than seeking consensus or generalisability, the study aimed to develop a deeper understanding of the relationships, values, and experiences that shape authentic engagement with mātauranga Māori.

Recognising that the research was undertaken by a tangata Tiriti researcher within a mātauranga Māori context, the study was guided by culturally responsive research methodologies. These approaches acknowledge the importance of respecting participants' cultural knowledge, experiences, and values while ensuring research is conducted in ways that are relational, ethical, and culturally appropriate (Berryman et al., 2013). They also require researchers to critically examine their own assumptions and positionality throughout the research process.

As an experienced Outdoor Education educator in Aotearoa New Zealand, I occupied both insider and outsider positions throughout this study. My professional experience enabled shared understandings with participants regarding Outdoor Education practice, while my identity as tangata Tiriti required continual reflection when engaging within a mātauranga Māori space. Reflexivity therefore became central to the research process, requiring ongoing consideration of how my own identity, experiences, and assumptions might shape data collection, interpretation, and representation (Finlay, 2002; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Rather than attempting to remove researcher bias and subjectivity, reflexive practice sought to make the influence of positionality visible and able to be critically examined.

To strengthen the cultural integrity of the research, the study was informed by the IBRLA framework (Initiation, Benefits, Representation, Legitimation, and Accountability) (Macfarlane & Macfarlane, 2018). Guided by the principles of partnership, participation, and protection under Te Tiriti o Waitangi, the framework provided a culturally responsive structure for engaging with participants and ensuring Māori perspectives were represented respectfully throughout the research process.

Data were collected through semi-structured kanohi ki te kanohi interviews with four experienced Māori and tangata Tiriti Outdoor Education educators. Purposeful sampling was used to identify participants recognised for their experience within Outdoor Education and their engagement with mātauranga Māori in educational settings (Patton, 2002). Semi-structured interviews provided consistency across participants while allowing conversations to develop naturally as participants shared their experiences and perspectives (Longhurst, 2003). Following transcription, each participant reviewed their transcript to confirm its accuracy and could amend or clarify responses where required.

Interview data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. Through repeated reading, coding, and reflection, patterns were identified across participant narratives before being refined into broader themes that captured shared understandings while recognising individual experiences. Four interconnected themes emerged: identity, relationships, Outdoor Education as a context for bicultural practice, and moving beyond tokenism through authentic partnership. These themes provide the structure for the findings presented in this paper.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was granted through the University of Waikato, whose Charter recognises Te Tiriti o Waitangi and affirms a commitment to partnership with Māori. The study was informed by *Te Ara Tika: Guidelines for Māori Research Ethics* (Hudson et al., 2010) ensuring that cultural integrity, participant wellbeing, and respectful engagement remained central throughout the project.

All participants were initially approached either in person or by telephone before receiving an information sheet, consent form, and invitation to participate. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained before interviews commenced. Following each interview, transcripts were returned to participants for member checking, enabling them to confirm accuracy and amend their contributions where necessary before analysis.

FINDINGS

Thematic analysis identified a series of interconnected themes relating to identity, relationships, authenticity, and culturally responsive practice. These findings are presented through participants' voices before being interpreted in relation to the wider literature.

Although each participant brought different experiences and perspectives, they shared a common belief that authentically weaving mātauranga Māori into Outdoor Education begins with educators rather than the curriculum. Participants described authenticity as an ongoing process grounded in identity, relationships, and reciprocal learning, rather than the addition of isolated cultural practices. The four themes presented below reflect these shared understandings.

Identity for authenticity

The strongest finding across all interviews was that authentic engagement with mātauranga Māori begins with an educator's own identity journey. Participants consistently argued that tangata Tiriti cannot authentically engage with Māori knowledge without first understanding their own cultural identity, values, and relationship with Aotearoa New Zealand. One participant stated that "If we can understand … where we sit, through whakapapa, through genealogies in our space, then we can start respecting it [mātauranga Māori] a lot more and taking care of it a lot more." Rather than viewing identity as something fixed, participants described it as a continual process of learning and reflection. Several spoke about the importance of acknowledging personal privilege, recognising the ongoing impacts of colonisation, and developing a genuine sense of belonging that did not depend upon appropriating Māori identity. Establishing one's own tūrangawaewae (place to stand) was viewed as creating a stronger foundation from which respectful relationships with Māori communities could develop. Another participant reflected that "by understanding my own cultural identity, even spiritual identity, I started seeing outdoor ed through a different lens and felt super inspired."

Participants also challenged the tendency for educators to search for practical "how-to" strategies before undertaking their own personal reflection. As one participant suggested, authenticity cannot be achieved through resources or lesson plans alone; it develops through humility, curiosity, and a willingness to remain a learner.

Relationships foster connections

Participants consistently returned to the importance of relationships as the foundation for culturally responsive Outdoor Education. Rather than describing mātauranga Māori as content to be delivered, they viewed it as something experienced through meaningful partnerships with people, communities, and place. "Everyone in this country came over or on the ocean," one participant said, "Whether it's past or present, the ocean connects us."

A Māori participant stressed that a genuine relational exchange "isn't just people sharing what they know, it's people learning off each other through reciprocity, which is an important part of te ao Māori." Building these relationships requires time and trust. Participants emphasised that meaningful engagement could not occur through one-off cultural activities or isolated consultation. Instead, educators were encouraged to develop ongoing relationships with local iwi, hapū, kaumātua, and whānau, recognising that knowledge is inseparable from the communities from which it originates.

Most participants acknowledged that many tangata Tiriti educators possess positive intentions but remain hesitant to engage because they fear making mistakes. However, participants suggested that respectful action, undertaken with humility and openness, was preferable to inaction. Genuine partnership was therefore characterised by a willingness to listen, learn, and grow alongside others.

Outdoor Education provides a unique context

Participants consistently viewed Outdoor Education as uniquely positioned to honour Te Tiriti o Waitangi because of its inherent relationship with te taiao (the natural world). Unlike classroom-based subjects, Outdoor Education enables learners to experience relationships with people and place in authentic settings.

This idea was particularly evident in one participant's observation: "Outdoor Education is a natural and authentic space for embedding mātauranga Māori due to the deep connection of te ao Māori and te taiao."

Participants contrasted this potential with what they perceived as the dominant Eurocentric model of Outdoor Education, where technical competence, adventure activities, and risk management often overshadow relationships with place. Several questioned whether activities such as kayaking, climbing, or tramping achieve their full educational potential when disconnected from the cultural histories and values of the environments in which they occur.

Participants went on to describe Outdoor Education as providing opportunities to embed tikanga, whakawhanaungatanga, and local narratives naturally within learning experiences. This positioning was seen as one of the discipline's greatest strengths and an opportunity to better reflect the bicultural foundations of Aotearoa New Zealand.

Beyond tokenism

Across all interviews, participants distinguished between symbolic inclusion and authentic partnership. They expressed concern that some educational approaches remain confined to surface-level inclusion of te reo Māori or isolated tikanga without addressing the deeper relationships and responsibilities that underpin mātauranga Māori.

One participant described tokenistic practice as "really just trash, like when kaitiakitanga is picking up rubbish," arguing that superficial cultural inclusion and literal translation risks diminishing rather than strengthening meaningful contribution. The participant continued by explaining that "it just starts with the reo bro, I reckon it starts with te reo..., a lot of the secrets and understanding can be unlocked with te reo Māori." This implies that te reo is not just about knowing the kupu, but also about understanding the deeper meaning beyond a superficial translation.

Participants consistently argued that authentic partnership requires tangata Tiriti educators to embrace ongoing learning, engage with te reo Māori, challenge existing assumptions, and accept responsibility for contributing to educational change. This included seeking guidance from Māori communities and recognising that culturally responsive practice is never complete but continually evolving.

Rather than presenting authenticity as a destination, participants described it as an enduring commitment to partnership under Te Tiriti o Waitangi. For many, this represented a shift from asking, "How do I include mātauranga Māori?" towards asking, "How do I build relationships that allow mātauranga Māori to be shared appropriately?"

Collectively, these findings suggest that authentically weaving mātauranga Māori into Outdoor Education is fundamentally relational rather than transactional. It was consistently found that identity, relationships, place, and reciprocal partnership are prerequisites for meaningful practice. The following discussion considers these findings in relation to the wider literature on culturally responsive pedagogy, Outdoor Education, and Te Tiriti o Waitangi partnership.

DISCUSSION

This study explored how Māori and tangata Tiriti educators perceive the authentic weaving of mātauranga Māori into Outdoor Education. The findings suggest that authentic engagement with mātauranga Māori is fundamentally a relational and reflective process rather than simply a transactional one. Rather than being achieved through the inclusion of cultural content or activities, participants consistently described authenticity as emerging through self-awareness, reciprocal relationships, and a willingness to remain learners. These findings suggest that the challenge for tangata Tiriti educators is not simply learning more about mātauranga Māori but reconsidering how they position themselves within educational relationships.

The prominence of identity reinforces Tolich's (2002) argument that tangata Tiriti educators must first understand their own cultural positioning before meaningfully engaging with Māori worldviews. However, this presents a challenge, as participants viewed identity not as a destination but as an ongoing journey of reflection and humility that underpins authentic bicultural practice. As one participant reflected, "Understand yourself first because once you understand yourself, you can understand others." This aligns with Bishop and Berryman's (2006) assertion that

culturally responsive practice begins with teachers recognising the beliefs and assumptions they bring to educational relationships. Rather than striving to become experts in mātauranga Māori, participants viewed authentic engagement as a continual process of learning, consistent with the reciprocal principles of ako (Macfarlane & Macfarlane, 2018).

Closely connected to identity was the importance participants placed on relationships. Consistent with Bishop and Berryman (2006), participants viewed whakawhanaungatanga as the foundation of authentic bicultural practice. Relationships with Māori communities were not described as a means of accessing cultural knowledge but as partnerships characterised by trust, reciprocity, and shared responsibility. This was captured this through the metaphor of "having your hand up before having your hand out," emphasising that educators should first contribute to relationships before seeking guidance or support. This reflects the principles of ako and manaakitanga, where learning occurs through reciprocal exchange rather than the one-way transmission of knowledge. Authentic practice, therefore, is shaped less by what educators know than by how they engage with people and communities.

Participants also identified Outdoor Education as providing a distinctive context for authentic bicultural practice because relationships with people, place, and te taiao naturally intersect. Participants' statements on the inherent connection between te ao Māori and the outdoor learning environment support previous research advocating for place-responsive Outdoor Education (Cosgriff, 2008; Washbourne, 2018). They also extend the findings of this literature by suggesting that Outdoor Education provides opportunities to enact the intentions of Te Tiriti o Waitangi through meaningful relationships with local communities and place, rather than through activity alone. Participants recognised, however, that authentic engagement is not an automatic consequence of learning outdoors. Instead, it depends on educators intentionally fostering reciprocal partnerships and contextual learning grounded in local environments.

Participants were equally clear that authentic bicultural practice cannot be achieved through tokenistic approaches to embedding mātauranga Māori. Consistent with Bishop and Glynn (2003) and Smith (2012), they challenged approaches that reduce mātauranga Māori to isolated cultural activities or symbolic inclusion. Instead, participants emphasised that authentic engagement requires sustained relationships, critical self-reflection, and genuine partnerships with Māori communities. These findings reinforce that culturally responsive practice is not an additional teaching strategy but an ongoing commitment to relational accountability.

Overall, this study suggests that authentically weaving mātauranga Māori into Outdoor Education depends less on implementing specific teaching strategies than on developing educator dispositions grounded in humility, reciprocity, and partnership. While situated within Outdoor Education, these findings have broader implications for tangata Tiriti educators seeking to engage authentically with mātauranga Māori across Aotearoa New Zealand. Rather than offering a prescriptive model or framework, this research highlights authentic bicultural practice as a continual journey of reflection, relationship building, and responsiveness to people and place.

Implications for future research

While this study provides insight into the perspectives of experienced Māori and tangata Tiriti educators, it also highlights several opportunities for future research. The small participant group and qualitative design were appropriate for exploring lived experiences but limit the transferability of findings beyond this context. Future studies could investigate how these findings resonate across

a broader range of educational settings, including schools, tertiary institutions, and community-based Outdoor Education programmes.

Longitudinal research following tangata Tiriti educators throughout their professional careers would provide valuable insight into how cultural confidence, identity, and relationships evolve over time, rather than capturing perspectives at a single point. Further research should also explore the perspectives of ākonga, iwi, hapū, and educational leaders to better understand how authentic bicultural practice is experienced by those who participate in, and are influenced by, Outdoor Education programmes. Finally, evaluating professional learning initiatives that support educators to move beyond cultural awareness towards sustained relational practice would provide an important next step in translating these findings into meaningful educational change.

CONCLUSION

> *Ehara taku toa i te toa takitahi, engari he toa takitini.*
> *My strength is not as an individual, but as a collective.*

This whakataukī has framed this study from its outset and, ultimately, reflects its central message. Authentic engagement with mātauranga Māori cannot be achieved in isolation. Rather, it is cultivated through relationships founded on trust, humility, reciprocity, and a shared commitment to learning alongside one another. These qualities cannot be reduced to a teaching strategy or embedded through curriculum alone; instead, they emerge through an ongoing willingness to reflect, listen, and respond to people and place.

As educators continue to navigate what it means to honour Te Tiriti o Waitangi in meaningful ways, this study suggests that authentic bicultural practice begins not with having all the answers, but with the willingness to engage respectfully with others, to recognise one's own cultural positioning, and to remain open to continual learning. In this sense, authentically weaving mātauranga Māori is not a destination to be reached, but a lifelong journey of relationship, reciprocity, and shared responsibility.

One participant captured this aspiration when reflecting: "Let's find the things we have in common. Let's protect the things that are worthy of protection."

These words capture the enduring message of this research. Authentic bicultural practice is not about diminishing difference or claiming expertise in knowledge that is not one's own. Rather, it is about building relationships that honour diverse ways of knowing while working collectively towards shared educational aspirations. It is within this spirit that educators can continue to strengthen partnerships, uphold the intent of Te Tiriti o Waitangi, and create learning environments where both Māori and Western knowledge systems are respected.

AI statement

ChatGPT was used in the drafting phase to condense and prioritise material and to improve the flow and structure of sections once the article was written. All content remains the original work of the author.

David Williams is Programme Lead for the Bachelor of Sport and Exercise Science at Wintec in Aotearoa New Zealand. An experienced outdoor educator, his work focuses on experiential learning, practical intelligence, and authentic assessment. He is passionate about embedding mātauranga Māori within teaching practice and spends any spare time in, on, or under the ocean.

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