

# 'H' is for Human Right: An Exploration of Literacy as a Key Contributor to Indigenous Self-Determination

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to examine literacy as a key contributor to cultivating individual and collective self-determination for indigenous peoples. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) defines literacy as a human right intrinsically important for human development and well-being. Therefore, literacy is pivotal to fostering self-determination. This article introduces some broad definitions of literacy, including examples offered by indigenous sources. Following this is consideration of the human rights discourse as it relates to literacy specifically, with a particular focus on the way in which this discourse has unfolded in New Zealand. The article then explores literacy as a human right and the role it plays in contributing to indigenous self-determination. The article concludes that there is a need to ensure literacy interventions, which are designed to fulfill the rights of indigenous learners with regard to literacy, are embedded in indigenous epistemology, history and pedagogy.

## Research paper

### Keywords:

human rights, indigenous literacy, Māori, self-determination

## INTRODUCTION

Literacy is essential to social and human development in its ability to transform lives (UNESCO, 2009), and it is generally accepted among scholars and educators that a high standard of literacy is critical to positive educational experiences and outcomes (Nguyen et al., 2017; Snow & Biancarosa, 2003; Sue & Okazaki, 1990). Indeed, ensuring basic literacy skills for all is a central goal of every national education system in the world. The word 'literacy' is widely used in contemporary vernacular, and has become somewhat of a colloquial term used to describe competency and understanding in a broad range of fields. Examples include 'emotional literacy' (Knight & Modi, 2014), 'financial literacy' (Lusardi, 2015), 'digital literacy' (Koltay, 2011), and 'environmental

literacy' (Abiolu & Okere, 2012). These examples demonstrate the semantic elasticity of the term, which is a key feature that may contribute to its widespread use. In considering the extensive use of the word, as an initial orientation to this article, it is necessary to acknowledge the multitude of definitions associated with literacy, and to locate the broad concept of literacy within the context of this article. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) (2009), in considering some of their own definitions of literacy, notes that these have evolved over time. For example, in 1958 a person was considered to be literate if they could "with understanding, both read and write a short simple statement on his or her everyday life" (UNESCO, 1958, p. 153). Two decades later, this definition had expanded to include an ability to:

Engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning of his or her group and community and also for enabling him or her to continue to use reading, writing and calculation for his or her own and the community's development. (UNESCO, 1978, p. 54)

In 2005, UNESCO defines literacy as:

The ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve his or her goals, develop his or her knowledge and potential, and participate fully in community and wider society. (p. 44)

UNESCO's evolving ideas acknowledge some key elements related to literacy, which include the ability to use texts competently and with understanding, and recognise the pivotal role literacy plays in fostering an ability to continue to learn, engage and contribute to diverse and manifold aspects of social life both at an individual and community level. These definitions also serve to illustrate an increasing realisation of the impact and ever-expanding reach of literacy in the various realms of human development and engagement.

Further to this, because this article is exploring literacy primarily in a New Zealand context, it is important to consider some domestic definitions of literacy. Literacy Aotearoa (2017) defines literacy as “listening, speaking, reading, writing, numeracy and critical thinking, interwoven with the knowledge of social and cultural practices. Literacy empowers people to contribute to and improve society.” Similarly, Penetito (2001, as cited in Rawiri, 2005) contends that “[l]iteracy is a means with which to express, understand, provide for, and make sense of oneself and the whole richness of oneself in its widest cultural, spiritual, intellectual and physical sense” (p. 5). According to a report written by the Māori Adult Literacy Working Party (2001), literacy is a pivotal component of nation building, and when fully realised, it enables people to take part in the fullness of the society in which they live.

The Māori Adult Literacy Working Party (2001), in exploring the more specific notion of Māori literacy, argues that:

Literacy programmes for Māori are not only about reading and writing... though they include this. They are also about outcomes that show that people have increased cultural and political knowledge. As well as knowing how to speak te reo this includes knowledge about whakapapa, knowledge about who you are and where you come from. (p. 9)

This extract illustrates the conceptual and ideological differences between indigenous and Western concepts of literacy and indicates why there is a need to consider definitions of literacy beyond those associated with reading and writing, and particularly, in the context of this article, those definitions that are informed by Māori epistemological perspectives, which differ significantly from Western notions of literacy. Romero-Little (2006) points out that literacy is not new to indigenous communities, and that for centuries these communities have had their own distinct understandings, forms, and processes of literacy that provided children with meaningful opportunities to acquire the cultural and intellectual traditions of their respective communities. Hopa (1991, as cited in Romero-Little, 2006) suggests that indigenous literacies are not confined to the narrow and decontextualized view of literacy that is associated with reading and writing. Illustrating this, the following extract offers an insight into the far-reaching nature of literacy as it is conceived of in Te Ao Māori (the Māori World) and for Māori communities:

Literacy in Māori terms should include the ability to read and write in both Māori and English i.e. biliteracy, and be able to use that

ability competently, i.e. to be functionally biliterate in Māori and English. Being literate in Māori should also include having the capacity to ‘read’ the geography of the land, i.e. to be able to name the main land features of one’s environment (the mountains, rivers, lakes, creeks, bluffs, valleys etc.), being able to recite one’s tribal/hapū boundaries and be able to point them out on a map if not in actuality, as well as the key features of adjacent tribal/hapū boundaries and being able to ‘read’ Māori symbols such as carvings, tukutuku, kōwhaiwhai and their context within the whareniui (poupou, heke, etc.) and the marae (ātea, ārongo, etc.). (Māori Adult Literacy Working Party, 2001, p. 7)

It is important to note that this extract does not stand as the single Māori definition of literacy; Māori ontologies are diverse and informed by a multitude of realities of what it means to ‘be Māori’. However, what this extract shows is a perspective that differs significantly from Western notions of literacy – a perspective with an integrity of its own that warrants attention in research pertaining to literacy in Māori communities and in literacy interventions (where the term ‘intervention’ is used not in reference to ‘interference and need’, but rather in reference to positive transformations in the experiences and positioning of indigenous peoples) that are designed to support literacy for Māori learners.

In summary, these examples of some definitions of literacy provide an insight into the far-reaching and complex nature of literacy and the influence it has on people’s lives. Māori notions of literacy are grounded in a Māori worldview and require consideration in the context of this article. A key message in this article is the importance of acknowledging the broad scope of literacy beyond the bounds of dominant Western hegemony, and its salience to cultivating self-determination for indigenous peoples in the areas of health and well-being, community engagement, cultural imperatives, and lifelong learning.

## HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE TREATY OF WAITANGI

Most social science research conducted in New Zealand invariably begins by positioning itself within the context of the founding document of New Zealand as a nation state, the Treaty of Waitangi (1840), and this section explores the nexus between the Treaty and international human rights. The Treaty formalised the relationship between Māori and the Crown, and established a set of rights and obligations that continue to warrant recognition and fulfilment today. The Treaty is comprised of three articles: Article One provides the Crown with the

right to govern, Article Two promises to protect Māori tino rangatiratanga (self-determination), and Article Three guarantees shared citizenship and equal rights for all. This includes the right to education (Human Rights Commission, 2018), of which literacy is a central and inextricable component. Most research in New Zealand that has relevance to or is inclusive of Māori, routinely makes reference to the Treaty and the need to uphold the rights and obligations it provides for. The Human Rights Commission's 2009–2010 Statement of Intent notes that "human rights dimensions of the Treaty of Waitangi include both universal human rights and indigenous rights" (Human Rights Commission, 2018); however, it is comparatively rare for calls to recognise the rights of Māori to be placed on the world stage in the context of the international human rights discourse. This begs the question, 'Are we too domesticated in New Zealand with regard to advocating for human rights?' Indeed, Durie (2004) notes one of the three key goals to emerge from the 2001 Hui Taumata for Māori education, in particular, is for Māori to actively participate as global citizens. In this regard, Māori engagement in international contexts where Māori have an active political voice in various human rights fora contributes to the realisation of the Hui Taumata vision. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge the rights guaranteed to Māori under the Treaty of Waitangi while at the same time encourage a global positioning of the Treaty alongside international discourses relating to human rights.

In considering human rights guaranteed by the Treaty and international instruments, it is pertinent to examine briefly the notion of human rights and the various institutions, means, and tools that promote these rights. The United Nations (UN), which officially came into existence in 1945 with a broad vision, which includes the promotion and protection of human rights, defines the scope of human rights, and argues that "rights [are] inherent to all human beings, whatever [their] nationality, place of residence, sex, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, language, or any other status" (Office of the High Commissioner, 2016). The UN also states "we are all equally entitled to our human rights without discrimination" (Office of the High Commissioner, *ibid.*). The human rights discourse is a common feature of contemporary political discussions, and has come to play a distinctive role on the international stage (Beitz, 2001; Heard, 1997; Sen, 2004). This role is primarily that of a touchstone, or benchmark, that measures the policies, practices, and treatment of people by nation states and international economic and political institutions, and that also sets a standard of behaviour for nation states and international institutions to aspire to. The prominence of human rights in international fora increased significantly in

the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, elevated to such a position by the conception of human rights instruments that include the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), and more specialised agreements such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). Currently, human rights serve as a baseline tool for monitoring and reporting, and advocacy by non-governmental organisations, at both the domestic and international level of politics (Best, 1995; Korey, 1998). The humanitarian appeal of human rights is used for a variety of purposes including advocating for the universal provision of relevant and responsive education systems and literacy interventions.

In major arenas of international politics, concerns about human rights are expressed more prominently than ever before, and currently, human rights are one of the most codified areas of international law (Stamatopoulou, 2016). There is constant pressure from the international community and organisations like the UN for nation states to meet the universal standards of behaviour established by human rights instruments, and international pressure on nation states is often able to effect change (Stamatopoulou, 2016). However, there is a line of thought that views human rights as foundationally dubious and lacking in cogency. This view may generate questions like, 'Where do these human rights come from?' 'What is their ultimate authority?' and 'If human rights are an entitlement that people possess simply by virtue of their humanity, who granted the entitlement, and how can they be appealed to in order to uphold it?' A key feature of human rights is that they are relational, meaning someone else needs to fulfill the rights in order to ensure their provision. Currently, customary international law does not override the domestic laws of nation states, and Beitz (2001) argues that the international capacity to enforce human rights laws on states is embryonic at best. Indeed, there is great variation in the degree to which internationally-recognised human rights are embedded in domestic legal systems; however, in New Zealand, there are two pieces of legislation that specifically promote and protect human rights, namely the Bill of Rights Act 1990 and the Human Rights Act 1993.

The Bill of Rights Act in New Zealand provides for a range of civil and political rights, and the Human Rights Act seeks to ensure that everyone in New Zealand is treated equally and fairly. In considering the notion of equality, when the UDHR was adopted in 1948, equality was understood as meaning 'equal treatment', whereby everyone is treated the same (Stamatopoulou, 2016). For example, in the context of literacy, a policy that reflects this understanding of equality would mean every literacy intervention

is offered in English, irrespective of the diverse languages that may be spoken in a particular setting. However, Yale Law Professor James Whitman disputed this line of thought, and argued that treating everyone equally does not necessarily mean treating everyone well (Åhren, 2016). As a result of a shift in thought concerning the meaning of equality to include notions of equity, the concept is now understood to acknowledge fundamental differences that exist between people, particularly between different ethnic and cultural groups, and some argue that these differences must be considered to ensure individuals do not suffer from discrimination (Åhren, 2016; Stamatopoulou, 2016). These ideas about equality have relevance in the context of this article because it is argued that it is not simply enough to ensure the rights of Māori learners to access quality literacy interventions are fulfilled but rather to ensure that those interventions are culturally relevant and responsive, and thus in doing so, providing for human rights as per domestic and international law. By virtue of the Human Rights Act, New Zealand as a nation state proclaims to ensure it treats people equally – that is, without discrimination. Both the Bill of Rights Act and the Human Rights Act are evidence that New Zealand values human rights and believes they have an important place in the domestic legal system. This commitment is further demonstrated by the inclusion of international laws in domestic legislation, and the establishment of the Human Rights Commission and the Office of Human Rights Proceedings. Such actions indicate that New Zealand understands its obligations to its citizens and the role nations states play in the provision and protection of human rights.

In conclusion, this overview illustrates the complexity of the human rights phenomenon, the influence the international community can have on encouraging nation states to recognise and fulfil these rights, and New Zealand's commitment to incorporating international human rights instruments in domestic legislation. Therefore, human rights are now a well-established, central element in international policies and practices, inextricably woven into the vernacular of conversations on equality, autonomy, freedom, and justice for all, and for these reasons, it is argued that elevating the demand for rights guaranteed to Māori under the Treaty of Waitangi to an international stage has the potential to strengthen the case for ensuring the provision and fulfilment of human rights, which includes the right to literacy. This section has also provided a platform from which to explore literacy as a human right and the central position it holds in the fulfilment of human rights provided for by both the Treaty of Waitangi and international human rights instruments.

## LITERACY AS A HUMAN RIGHT

UNESCO (2009) defines education as a fundamental human right intrinsically important for human development, and acknowledges that literacy is an inextricable component of education, and an essential tool for pursuing other human rights. UNESCO (2016) states:

Literacy is a fundamental human right and the foundation for lifelong learning. It is fully essential to social and human development in its ability to transform lives. For individuals, families, and societies alike, it is an instrument of empowerment to improve one's health, one's income, and one's relationship with the world.

In 2003, the UN launched the United Nations Literacy Decade with the slogan 'Literacy is Freedom' to push the social, economic, cultural, and political benefits of literacy (Limage, 2009), which provide the rationale for recognising literacy as a human right. UNESCO (2006) identifies a multitude of interrelated benefits of literacy, which include social advantages such as better health and education outcomes, economic gains such as the potential to earn a higher income, and political benefits, which foster an ability to participate in local and national politics. The links between literacy and improved social, economic, and political outcomes are well-established (World Literacy Foundation, 2015) but UNESCO (2006) notes that the cultural benefits of literacy are more difficult to quantify. However, the need for literacy interventions in indigenous languages is central to a discussion on literacy in indigenous communities. Some commentators cite various benefits for promoting indigenous and minoritised languages in literacy interventions that include enabling people to connect with and participate in their own culture, and contributing to cultivating shifts in attitudes, behavioural patterns, norms and values in wider society (Grant, 2001; Wadham, Pudsey & Boyd, 2007). Literacy was often a critical tool used as part of the colonisation and assimilation processes against indigenous communities (Moon, 2016). However, Romero-Little (2006) observes that indigenous peoples worldwide are deconstructing dominant Western paradigms and typical constructs of literacy, which were grounded in an agenda of suppression and colonisation and narrowed the concept to reading and writing. Instead, these communities are claiming, articulating and constructing their own distinct paradigms, which are based on indigenous epistemologies, and are embedded in self-determination and social justice (Knuth, 1999).

Some theorists view literacy as a pivotal contributor to the quest for self-determination for indigenous

peoples, suggesting that a high level of literacy in an individual fosters an ability for that individual to contribute positively to the group to which they belong (Bialostok & Whitman, 2006; Māori Adult Literacy Working Party, 2001; Romero-Little, 2006; UNESCO, 2005). Such contributions may raise community aspirations, galvanise a collective voice, and create political, economic and social opportunities for the group – all of which have the potential to contribute to collective self-determination (Bialostok & Whitman, 2006; Romero-Little, 2006). Anaya (1993) identifies self-determination to be rooted in core values of freedom and equality, and expressly associated with peoples instead of states, thus placing it within the realm of human rights. Anaya also notes that self-determination is often taken to mean a form of separatist government, particularly in the case of indigenous peoples; however he contends that self-determination is in fact about meaningful participation “that does not require the assimilation of individuals, as citizens like all others, but the recognition and incorporation of distinct peoples in the fabric of the State, on agreed terms” (p. 87). In addition to self-determination being a right guaranteed under Article Two of the Treaty of Waitangi, which was reaffirmed in a Waitangi Tribunal report that confirmed the first signatories of the Treaty never relinquished their right to self-determination (Waitangi Tribunal, 2014), this right is also affirmed in a number of international human rights instruments. This includes Article Three of UNDRIP, which states, “Indigenous peoples have the right to self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development” (UN General Assembly, 2007). Indeed, self-determination is at the very heart of UNDRIP (Stamatopoulou, 2016), and it can be argued that fulfilment of the rights guaranteed in UNDRIP contributes to self-determination and, to a large extent, social justice. These points serve to illustrate the prominent position literacy holds in accessing the right to self-determination.

Furthermore, The World Literacy Foundation (2015) observes a correlation between levels of literacy and personal income, health outcomes, trends associated with crime and welfare, educational outcomes, political participation, ability to use digital technologies, engaging in activities that require critical thinking, and intergenerational support such as an ability to help children with their homework. Therefore, literacy touches, either directly or indirectly, on a large array of the human rights provided for by international human rights instruments. This highlights the central role literacy plays in accessing a multitude of human

rights, which, in turn, affects self-determination, both at a collective and individual level. However, Bialostok and Whitman (2006) warn of the dangers of activities and processes, which promote literacy for indigenous communities, that are infused with “liberatory discourses of individuality, freedom, agency, and human rights’ but that are, in reality, reconceptualisations of earlier colonial projects that were tacitly designed to undermine indigenous cultures and epistemologies” (p. 381). Instead, Bialostok and Whitman encourage what Hornberger (1997) calls ‘ground up’ approaches to literacy, which are largely directed by indigenous communities themselves and thus contribute to individual and collective indigenous self-determination. Moreover, literacy interventions that are informed by indigenous ontologies and knowledge systems have the potential to act as a vehicle that supports the revitalisation of indigenous epistemologies, pedagogies and languages, which, in turn, contribute to the self-determination of these groups. In summary, UNESCO (2002) argues that “[l]iteracy is not only an indispensable tool for lifelong education and learning but it is also an essential requisite for citizenship and human social development” (p. 2). This statement illustrates why literacy has the status of a human right; however, it is important to ensure literacy interventions are not neo-colonial tools but rather are culturally-relevant, informed by indigenous epistemologies, and support the fulfilment of the rights of indigenous communities.

## KEY CONSIDERATIONS

A global trend is evident where learners who belong to indigenous or minoritised groups often do not reach the same standard of literacy compared to learners who come from the dominant group within a country’s education system (Bishop, Berryman, Cavanagh & Teddy, 2009; Haycock, 2001; Hedges & Nowell, 1999; Jeynes, 2007). In New Zealand, various studies continue to report on inequalities in school entry literacy skills, including phonological awareness and oral language, and subsequent reading and spelling performance between Māori and non-Māori students (McNaughton, Phillips & MacDonald, 2003; Tunmer, Chapman & Prochnow, 2002; Westerveld & Gillon, 1999–2000) with some studies noting that early differences in reading and spelling abilities at school entry between Māori and non-Māori learners persist into the adolescent years where significantly fewer Māori learners achieve the required benchmark for literacy compared to their non-Māori peers (Carson, 2012; Harris, 2007). Francis et al. (1996) observe that once a delay in literacy acquisition manifests for a child in primary school, trends suggest that a return to healthy levels of progress is unlikely.

This article strongly rejects the notion of 'Māori underachievement', a term which, if analysed with a Māori lens, would have a very different framework for interpreting, understanding and addressing this notion, and posits that the New Zealand education system may be lacking in its provision of responsive literacy interventions for Māori learners and that current measures in the system may be, in many ways, culturally-inappropriate (Mahuika, Berryman & Bishop, 2011). For example, Māori learners transitioning from kura kaupapa Māori (Māori immersion primary schools) to mainstream secondary schooling, where they are likely to be assessed in English, are often found to have "serious deficiencies in English literacy" (Glynn, Berryman, Loader & Cavanagh, 2005, p. 434). However, in instances such as these, it is argued that the assessment measures, procedures, and content are not relative to the cultural and linguistic context of the learner. Therefore, this article advocates for literacy interventions that include culturally-responsive pedagogy, and where culturally-relevant content, procedures, and assessment are inherent.

Ultimately, this article argues that literacy is a fundamental human right critical to accessing other human rights, and pivotal in fostering individual and collective self-determination for indigenous peoples. It is vital that literacy interventions, which aim to contribute to enhancing early literacy development for indigenous learners, are grounded in indigenous epistemology, history and pedagogy. In doing so, these interventions serve to fulfil the human rights of indigenous individuals and communities, which are provided for by international human rights instruments, and in the context of New Zealand, by domestic legislation and the founding document of this nation state, the Treaty of Waitangi.

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