

## Connecting to Māori knowledge

Mātauranga Māori draws from precolonial Māori knowledge which includes traditional ways of being and engaging in the world. In its simplest form, it uses *kawa* (customary cultural protocols) and *tikanga* (cultural practices) to critique, analyse and understand our engagement in the world.

Mātauranga Māori is based on ancient values from the spiritual realm of Te Ao Mārama relating to the cosmic creation of the natural world caused through Tane's act of bringing light and life into the world. Mātauranga Māori is constantly evolving as Māori continue to make sense of their own existence amongst humanity within the world.

Eminent Māori scholar Dr Charles Royal describes Mātauranga Māori in this way: 'he whakaatu, he whakamārama hoki i ngā ahuatanga o te Ao. Mā reira e mōhio ai te tangata ki te Ao, e mātau ai hoki ia ki ētahi whaingā, ki ētahi tikanga. He mea ako, he mea whangai' (2008, p.37). Royal thinks about Mātauranga Māori as something that helps explain and enlighten us about different aspects of the world around us, and in that process, a person gets to know about and understand some of the different purposes and meanings, some of the different ways of learning about his/her world that can be transferred from one person to another.

Mātauranga Māori provides insight into pre-colonial Māori perspectives about knowledge and knowing. The Māori epistemological genesis that understands the whakapapa connections and relationships between all things human and non-human.

Mātauranga Māori in the *mahi* (work) of Poutama Pounamu is not just creating a space for Māori ways of being and knowing, but valuing the richness that these *whakaaro* (ideas) bring to our *kaupapa* (agenda). It is understanding that there is no 'one' way to 'know' something. It is also understanding that the strength in our *mahi* comes from multiple world views and the acknowledgement that Mātauranga Māori can deepen and enhance other theories and ways of viewing the world.

## Mainstream discourses

Discourses about Mātauranga Māori in Aotearoa, New Zealand are often framed around phrases like:

*'I don't really understand what it is', 'it means different things depending on who you talk to', 'it is sacred, traditional stuff that is hard to relate to today's context', 'we already do pōwhiri and kapa haka at school', 'there aren't enough resources to help us learn about it and incorporate it into our teaching', 'it's not my place and I don't feel comfortable using it', 'it's not my culture so why do I need to know about it' and 'if it's not important to Māori students and their whānau why should I bother with it?'*

In looking at these phrases, what is most interesting, and at the same time disappointing, is the lack of value attributed to Mātauranga Māori as a legitimate body of knowledge and way of knowing - a frame of reference for deepening our understanding of and connecting to our own context in Aotearoa. In English medium schools, the majority of learning and teaching happens in one domain only and without reference or deference to any other ways of knowing'.

*Domains of knowledge are an important concept that I have only recently become aware of. I have spent most of my life in school and yet I had no idea of this concept.*

This lack of understanding stems from the often invisible, hegemonic undercurrent that exists in our society, promoting certain bodies of knowledge and ways of doing as being superior to others while belittling or silencing all others. The Education and Training Act 2020 requires us to recognise this but move beyond in order to incorporate Mātauranga Māori authentically and appropriately into our everyday practices.

Poutama Pounamu provides opportunities for schools, centres and their communities to explore the potential that exists from understanding their contexts through a Mātauranga Māori lens. The conscientisation of people to this new reality can and should play an important role in realising the potential of Māori and non-Māori alike.

## Links with practice

We have experienced first-hand the power of having Mātauranga Māori as a pivotal part of our learning.

For example, when one encounters new people, whakawhanaungatanga, or making connections through a ritual called *mihimihi* (reciprocal introductions), provides a formal opportunity for people to announce their familial connections, and to make connections to other people (both living and dead) and also to inanimate objects such as through pepeha by naming the canoe that brought their ancestors to this country, their mountain and their waterway. Connections are seldom made about who one is in terms of work or title until these whakawhanaungatanga connections have been properly established. Tangible benefits are always evident when we engage in these practices prior to beginning the work. Whakawhanaungatanga such as this embodies Mātauranga Māori.

*What is to be achieved will be achieved all the more successfully if time is taken to undertake whakawhanaungatanga properly. The establishment of relationships and making connections forms a more secure basis for effective interactions.*

*Whakawhanaungatanga is the work before the work.*

Another link has emerged from observing participants at regional wānanga using *whakataukī* and *whakatauāki* (Māori metaphoric sayings) as a way of developing their sense-making using Māori metaphors as the frame of reference. This can be both enriching and complex, providing evidence of the robustness of Mātauranga Māori to draw out the tangible and intangible dimensions of any kaupapa in a very inclusive way.

*Having whakataukī as part of the theorising has opened up another layer in my understanding of some of the mahi.*

*The kaumātua were able to provide all of us with an alternative way of looking at things that opened up our thinking and enabled people to consider whether the current status quo embraces (or not) Mātauranga Māori.*

*One thing that I have noticed is when Mātauranga Māori is at the table, many people are able to make stronger links to ideas, concepts, theories that may otherwise seem inaccessible.*

## Mātauranga Māori contexts

The holding of wānanga on different marae, from Bluff's Te Rau Aroha to Northland's Otiria marae, has been one of the most important institutions of Poutama Pounamu delivering opportunities to teach and learn in Mātauranga Māori contexts.

We support educators to establish a wider appreciation of Mātauranga Māori through our focus on the Mauri Ora Pathway. This pathway prioritises the importance of educationally powerful connections with whānau, hapū and iwi in the education process. We incorporate cultural relationships and being responsive when leading learning across schools and centres and it raises the importance of adaptive expertise in our work of interpreting and evaluating the curriculum and implementing policy. When this plays out effectively academic success and cultural strengthening are simultaneous acts and the importance of Mātauranga Māori and te reo Māori across the curriculum is clearly understood. When whānau contribute to this pathway we all stand to learn.

*I have reflected on the dominance of one knowledge domain and realised this has limited my own thinking because even though I am Māori, I am a product of the New Zealand education system. Having Mātauranga Māori as an accessible and valued domain of knowledge across all learning and teaching in schools is something we would all benefit from.*



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