

“What can I do about Māori underachievement?”

Critical reflections from a non-Māori participant in Te Kotahitanga

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Biographical Details

Dawn Lawrence is currently a Regional Co-ordinator with the Te Kotahitanga Research and Professional Development Team at The University of Waikato. She has been involved with Te Kotahitanga since 2005, when she participated in the professional development as a teacher, going on to become an in-school facilitator in 2006.

Abstract

In January 2005, during my induction into Te Kotahitanga, I was challenged to consider my role, as a non-Māori ¹teacher, in addressing the disparities that exist for Māori within our education system. This began my learning about, and through, a Culturally Responsive Pedagogy of Relations.

A Culturally Responsive Pedagogy of Relations requires teachers to critically reflect on their own discursive positioning, and how those mental images impact upon the way in which they interact with Māori students. This paper draws on a retrospective analysis of my learning and discursive repositioning from a well intentioned teacher, with little sense of the role I could play in addressing the disparities that exist for Maori students, to a critically reflective teacher, working from a relational base to develop a Culturally Responsive Pedagogy of Relations.

My story

My ancestral home is the British Isles. I am the daughter of English parents. I was born in Dagenham, England. In 1974, my parents left their home and family and emigrated to Aotearoa New Zealand. I am the partner of a fifth generation Pākehā, and mother to a Pākehā daughter. I do not speak te reo Māori, my experience of marae is always as manuhiri, and my New Zealand education taught me that Māori were noble savages that arrived in this country on seven great canoes.

I cannot claim any of the highly publicised events, such as the Moutua Gardens / Pakaitore occupation, the felling of the pine tree on One Tree Hill / Maungakiekie, or even the recent debate over the foreshore and seabed, as the catalyst for my recognition of the different lived experiences of Māori and non- Māori. The turning point was an inauspicious event, in which I replied yes to an invitation issued as I was shown around a school during an interview process. That invitation was to

be part of the Te Kotahitanga research and professional development project. My induction into this project was, similarly, not an event that precipitated any sudden changes in me or my teaching practice. However, it facilitated a process which Te Kotahitanga has termed discursive repositioning (Bishop, Berryman, Cavanagh, & Teddy. 2007). This, for me, occurred as I began to actively construct, explore and critically reflect upon my understanding of a Culturally Responsive Pedagogy of Relations (Bishop et al., 2007). In this paper I will explain how this has been defined by Te Kotahitanga and the way in which I began to make sense of it.

To position this story

What I share with you in this paper are my thoughts, reflections and experiences. Whilst I focus on the time I was a teacher participant in Te Kotahitanga, they are re-storied by my experiences and learning as an in-school facilitator and by my current role in the Te Kotahitanga Research and Professional Development Team. They are also shaped by who I am; by the fact that I am firmly located within my own prior knowledge and cultural experiences or, as I have grown to understand, as culturally located (Bishop et al., 2007).

It may seem odd to want to go back to a part of your career several years past and ask yourself, “So what can I learn from this?” There certainly was a time I would have seen it as pointless, perhaps even self indulgent, but this illustrates part of what I have learnt through my efforts to understand what is meant by a Culturally Responsive Pedagogy of Relations. I have come to understand learning as an active process, that if we embrace it we find ourselves in a constant state of learning, unlearning and relearning (Wink, 2010). It took some discursive repositioning, or a shift in thinking though, for I believed knowledge was fixed. That knowledge was what was written in books by experts. I guess part of that came from my experience of education, in which my teachers imparted their reified knowledge which was then backed up by the books we read. There were precious few instances where we, as students, were given the opportunity to work collaboratively to co-construct our learning. I recall the majority of my teachers taught through the transmission model (Bishop et al., 2007), in which their goal appeared to be to fill our heads with as much curriculum content as possible. I do not recall anything particularly responsive, or relational between my teachers and students, nor do I recall any obvious recognition of culture other than in social studies lessons.

A Culturally Responsive Pedagogy of Relations

A Culturally Responsive Pedagogy of Relations is defined as:

... where power is shared between self-determining individuals within non-dominating relations of interdependence; where culture counts; learning is interactive, dialogic and

spirals; participants are connected and committed to one another through the establishment of a common vision for what constitutes excellence in educational outcomes (Bishop, et al., 2007. p. 15).

But those are just words on a page, reified knowledge if you like. Intellectually they make sense but what does it actually look like in a classroom? From this definition you could be forgiven for thinking there is an accompanying list of strategies to go with it. I know that as a teacher I certainly hoped for one or two.

I have come to understand a Culturally Responsive Pedagogy of Relations to be a discursive position, a way of thinking about and understanding teaching and learning. It is a position that works from a place of connectedness, shared vision and the active participation of all involved. Akin to what Freire (1986) terms authentic education, it positions teachers alongside students in order to transform the world, rather than the students themselves. It challenges teachers to learn, relearn and unlearn (Wink, 2010) their pedagogy.

The Effective Teaching Profile [ETP](Bishop, Berryman, Tiakiwai, & Richardson. 2003) is as close to a list of strategies you will get in Te Kotahitanga. It includes six metaphors from within te ao Māori, expressing ideas specific to the context of the ETP: manaakitanga (caring for Māori students as culturally located individuals), mana motuhake (high expectations), ngā whakapiringatanga (creating a well managed learning environment), ako (reciprocal learning in which the teacher is also a learner) and kotahitanga (a shared vision of what constitutes excellence)(Bishop, et al., 2003). When I first meet these metaphors not only did my tongue trip over the actual language, but I had no idea what they meant. I remember getting frustrated and quite agitated with my ever patient facilitator, because she just wouldn't, although in hindsight couldn't is the better word, give me a list of strategies.

The thinking inherent in Te Kotahitanga is that by using Māori metaphor for pedagogy, teachers are challenged to work outside the dominant discourse. They must firstly learn what sits within and around these metaphors, relearn to teach within a context constructed by these metaphors, and unlearn the beliefs and assumptions of the dominant Pākehā discourse evident within traditional education practice. It certainly challenged me. But a large part of that challenge was that I had long since stopped seeing myself as a learner. I don't mean that I thought I had nothing left to learn but learning for me was structured, organised, linear, something that was done to you, something you could compartmentalise as occurring at a teacher only day or a PD Workshop. It wasn't messy. It

didn't make you frustrated or angry. It didn't raise as many questions as it answered. And it certainly didn't happen alongside the kids in my classroom.

The baseline

Before I became involved in Te Kotahitanga I would have said I used a whole range of strategies and interactions to hook my students in. I would have also said I sought to develop relationships with my students built upon caring and high expectations for their learning. Power sharing, connectiveness, interactive learning conversations; I would have given you examples of them all. I was a drama teacher; students were constantly invited to bring their own ideas to the learning; there were no desks and no designated teacher space at the front of the room. I saw myself as a discursive teacher², who used pedagogical interactions³ to facilitate learning contexts in which Māori students could bring themselves, however they defined that, to the learning.

Late in Term 4, 2004, a Te Kotahitanga in-school facilitator came to observe me teach a Year 10 Drama class. It had been explained to me that this was to capture some baseline evidence of my teaching practice prior to my involvement in the Te Kotahitanga professional development. I had no idea what she was looking at, or for. I probably should have been more concerned about that. I probably should also have been concerned about the fact that I would not receive a copy of the observation sheet or any feedback about the lesson. But I wasn't. I was confident that I was an effective teacher and, at the risk of sounding arrogant, I figured that's what she would see.

True to her word, I never did see the data gathered during that observation until I requested it in February of this year. I was surprised to see that it showed a classroom dominated by teacher centred instruction and monitoring interactions creating a "transmission classroom" (Bishop et al., 2007, p.66) where, as Bishop et al. (2007) explain, I was actively engaged in the instruction and monitoring whilst my students were, for the most part, passive recipients; "exactly the pattern of interactions the narratives of experience participants stated had little positive impact on their learning"(Bishop et al., 2007, p. 66). Bishop et al. (2007) also explain how student frustration in this classroom environment often manifests as inappropriate behaviour. With almost 30% of all interactions coded in that lesson being negative feedback on behaviour this correlation appears evident in my classroom at the time. I was focussed almost as much on 'fixing' the behaviour of students as I was on their learning. But remember, I didn't know I taught this way at the time. Without the opportunity to see and critically reflect on that evidence I went into Te Kotahitanga still thinking of myself as an effective teacher.

After the baseline observation, my next encounter with Te Kotahitanga was the Hui Whakarewa. This is an intense, three day hui, held at a marae. Teachers are introduced to the theoretical underpinnings of Te Kotahitanga, are challenged to critically reflect upon the way in which they currently explain Māori student underachievement, to consider the impact this has on Māori students, and begin to determine other possibilities. I did not know that at the time. As I stood with the group awaiting the karanga to call us onto the marae I was sure by the end of that three days I would have that list of strategies and I would be an even more effective teacher.

Reading the narratives

Six weeks prior to the Hui Whakarewa I received a draft version of the narratives of experience, now published in the book *Culture Speaks* (Bishop & Berryman, 2006), and a letter from the school facilitation team requesting that I read and annotate them as I felt appropriate. The narratives are the collected stories from Māori students, their whānau, principals and some of their teachers from the five schools who were part of the initial phases of the Te Kotahitanga research (Bishop et al., 2003). I diligently did just that. Of the 98 pieces of text I highlighted during that first reading, 75 were comments made by the researchers, 9 were from the teachers, 8 from whānau and only 6 by Māori students themselves. Plainly I did not prioritise listening to the voices of Māori students. And what's more, the Hui Whakarewa did little to make me realise this.

Hui Whakarewa

Fundamental to Te Kotahitanga is the concept of discursive positioning and repositioning. Within Te Kotahitanga, the concept of discourse initially provided a means to talk about the way in which the teacher participants in the narratives (Bishop & Berryman, 2006) used “images and metaphors ... to create meaning for themselves about their experiences” (Bishop et al., 2007, p. 24). Bishop et al. (2007) posit that in the case of most of these teachers, their discursive positioning primarily worked to “perpetuate the status quo” (Bishop et al., 2007, p. 24). This meant that, no matter how well intentioned they were in their efforts to make a difference for Māori students, they were hamstrung by the way in which they made sense of the situation in front of them. What Bishop et al. (2003) suggested was that the discourses teachers typically drew on, to make sense of Māori underachievement, apportioned blame to an array of factors outside of the teacher's sphere of influence, or agency, providing few, if any, solutions. A major consequence of this deficit theorising⁴ is that it negatively impacts on relationships within the classroom. It is the perpetuation of the status quo, in which Māori students are subordinated and teachers dominate.

Unlike their teachers, the students within the narratives (Bishop & Berryman, 2006) were shown to be positioned within relational discourses. Many of their shared experiences were negative, yet they

could see numerous solutions. They explained that, in order to create learning contexts in which they could succeed, teachers needed to change the way in which they related to, and interacted with them. They went on to provide examples of what they saw as effective teaching pedagogy. It is these descriptors that form the basis of what has been termed and defined as above, as a Culturally Responsive Pedagogy of Relations (Bishop et al., 2007).

This reified knowledge was part of what was passed on to me during the Hui Whakarewa I attended in 2005. I remember feeling overwhelmed by the language that was used, intellectually intrigued by the ideas that were being presented, but unable to make any clear connection between what was being said and what I did in my classroom. After those first three days of professional development I was no closer to any real understanding of how I might affect change for Māori students.

The Reflection Journal

At the Hui Whakarewa all Te Kotahitanga teachers are given a 'reflection journal'. It was explained to me that this would be invaluable throughout my learning and I was encouraged to use it to record notes and reflections.

The few notes and reflections I recorded during the Hui Whakarewa provide yet more evidence of what I valued and prioritised as a teacher and how I understood my role at the time.

On Day One of the Hui I made three entries. The first was to identify the three discourses used to explain Māori student achievement evident within the narratives - child and home, systems and structures, classroom interactions and relationships (Bishop et al., 2003); the second was to paraphrase the first two key points within the ETP; and the last was a co-operative learning strategy.

The notes made on Day Two are equally revealing by their brevity. These included a one word definition of deficit theorising; a whakataukī used to start the day; a re-iteration of the three discourses identified in the narratives; and an explanation of a behaviour management strategy called 'see me cards'. Also included was the following reflection:

The biggest challenge for me at the moment is to remember that the observation tool is not meant to judge but to help me. (2 February 2005)

This, my only recorded reflection from two full days of professional development, aimed specifically at facilitating a critical reflection, through the creation of dissonance, on my current discursive positioning in regards to Māori educational achievement, makes me think that I may have missed the point. In retrospect however, what I believe sits behind this reflection was my discomfort with

the idea of working from a relational base, in which power was to be shared, and in which I was positioned as a learner.

On Day 3 of the Hui Whakarewa I made the most notes of all – two pages worth in fact. I copied down two whakataukī; a list of sixteen classroom strategies; and a list of seven ‘useful’ classroom phrases in te reo Māori, four of which related to behaviour. Day 3 of the Hui Whakarewa is specifically focussed on strategies and planning and so the nature of my notes is not surprising. What it does suggest, however, is that I had yet to understand that it would take more than new strategies and some half remembered te reo Māori to make any difference for Māori students. My final note was a Venn diagram, shown in the figure below.

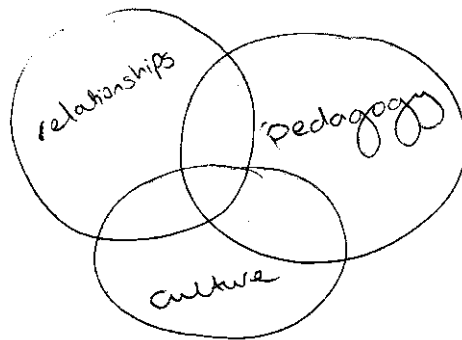


Figure 1: Final entry in reflection journal at Hui Whakarewa, 3 February 2005

I am not entirely certain what I tried to represent in this diagram. I am not sure that it is even important. In retrospect, what this diagram represents is a step towards a positional shift; a shift to considering the connections between relationships, culture and pedagogy.

Timperley, Wilson, Barrar and Fung (2007) talk about the need to engage teachers prior knowledge in order that new learning be assimilated, they also warn of over-assimilation. This is when the new learning is “perceived as congruent (“I already do this”) when it is actually quite dissonant” (Timperley et al., 2007, p. xli). What the combined evidence of my early learning in Te Kotahitanga suggests is that idea of over-assimilation. Reading the narratives did not create dissonance within me, the discursive positioning through which I read them worked to confirm what I believed I already knew. My lack of engagement with the reflective journal also speaks of this. And I am certain that even the data from my baseline observation, had it been shown to me at the time, would again have done little to challenge my view of myself as an effective teacher for Māori students. It was, however, the critical reflection on the data collected during sequential classroom

observations within feedback meetings that was to build that dissonance and create new discourses within which I was able to position myself.

The spiralling learning conversation

Each term, I was observed by an in-school facilitator. During that observed lesson the facilitator recorded the engagement of five Māori students alongside the observed pedagogical interaction types I used to facilitate the learning across a sustained twenty five minute period. Also recorded was the cognitive level of the lesson, the physical location of the five Māori students and where I was located at ten points throughout the twenty five minute time frame⁵. During the rest of the lesson, the facilitator recorded evidence for each of the six relational aspects of the ETP on side two of the Observation Tool⁶. I will admit that for my first observation I made little effort to do anything differently. I had come away from the Hui Whakarewa feeling my teaching practice had been affirmed and the observation data would further support this.

After each observed lesson a feedback session occurred. It was during my first feedback meeting that I realised that I might actually have to take some ownership of this process. The facilitator and I used the data gathered to provide me with feedback and feed forward. This was the first time I had had such a comprehensive mirror held up to my teaching practice and I can remember feeling quite challenged by it. I was then invited to reflect on what the evidence was showing in regards to my implementation of the ETP and consider a possible goal arising from that evidence. We then negotiated what support, through the process of shadow coaching, the facilitator would provide me in my work towards the goal. My goal from that first observation was to develop a culturally appropriate context for learning.

It seemed to me at the time that this would be an easily achieved goal. My understanding of culturally appropriate contexts for learning was to display some Māori iconography in the classroom, try to include some te reo Māori, and use Māori and New Zealand based resources wherever I could. That was my list of strategies. So, ever the diligent teacher, I ticked them off one by one ready for my next observation. It was to be this goal where the dissonance and the potential for repositioning really began for me.

The evidential ratings⁷ for the relational aspects of the ETP across the period 2004 to 2007, in which I participated as a classroom teacher, showed that I had clearly struggled with the establishment of culturally appropriate contexts for learning. I simply did not understand what this meant. And why would I be surprised at this. I was born in England, and raised by English immigrant parents who brought with them the cultural discourses of their own experiences. I had been educated in a school

system that worked to perpetuate the dominant Pākehā discourse and most of the knowledge I had of Māori positioned them as ‘the other’. It took learning about, and through the metaphors from te ao Māori, woven through the ETP, for me to understand being culturally appropriate was more than simply hanging some kōwhaiwhai patterns around my whiteboard, or greeting students with ‘Kia ora’.

What I discovered was the culturally appropriate contexts for learning and cultural responsiveness are inextricably linked. The representations of Māori culture within the classroom were important but only meaningful when they were interwoven with responsive learning contexts in which Māori students were able to freely bring their understanding of themselves as individuals, and their world, into the classroom. Despite the relatively high instances of cultural responsiveness recorded in my early observation data I would suggest that this was actually evidence of teacher determined responses from Māori students. All of the observation data was gathered in a drama classroom, in which I worked hard to ensure students could share and incorporate their own ideas into their work. Ongoing reflection on the type of pedagogical interactions I facilitated with students within subsequent feedback meetings brought me to recognise that I, in fact, determined what appropriate responses were through my selection of resource materials and performance conventions and, in so doing, unwittingly perpetuated a power imbalance within my classroom. This realisation fundamentally changed my relationships and pedagogical interactions with Māori students. The instances of co-construction increased as I positioned myself alongside students as a co-inquirer, bringing ako into the classroom. The focus became the learning, and instances of interactions around behaviour decreased. This saw my students and I begin to develop a shared vision in terms of their achievement. Alongside this shift in focus was a greater variance in my interactions with the whole class, individuals and groups which became determined by the learning context rather than structures set up to establish control. In this way we built and fostered our sense of connectedness and whānau. Whilst the percentage of traditional and discursive observed pedagogical interactions⁸fluctuated these also became determined by the context and worked to support the dialogue between all the learners, including myself, within the classroom, drawing on the metaphor of wānanga .

Drawing it together

As I reflect back on my experiences and learning during my time as a teacher participant, what I have come to recognise is that Te Kotahitanga provided a means to kick start my own learning. It challenged me to see myself as a culturally located individual (Bishop et al., 2007) and understand that I brought that to my teaching practice. There is an assumption that what Māori students need

to achieve are more Māori teachers. It is an assumption that I have heard articulated by both Māori and non-Māori teachers alike, albeit from different discursive positions. That, however, is not what Māori students said in the narratives (Bishop & Berryman, 2006). It is also not my experience. These types of discourses limit us all through the assumption that, by accident of birth, we are consigned to fixed discursive positions with no opportunity for us to critically reflect and transform our own reality, rendering us powerless to affect positive change for Māori students.

I have long since given up looking for the list of strategies, and I still wrestle with my understanding of the metaphors within the ETP. Critically reflecting on evidence of my previous learning has shown me that there is always something to learn by looking back. That the spiralling nature of learning, acknowledged in the reified definition of a Culturally Responsive Pedagogy of Relations, is something akin to a whirl pool, in that, once you allow yourself to go with it there is no end to the learning, and that everything that comes in contact with that whirl pool has the potential to teach.

Conclusion

Te Kotahitanga has challenged me to consider my role, as a non-Māori teacher, in addressing the educational disparities for Māori. It has done this by facilitating a process of spiralling critical self reflection on my discursive positioning and the way in which this shapes my interactions and relationships with Māori students. I have come to understand that there is no list of strategies, and that my role is to position myself as a learner working from a relational base to develop a Culturally Responsive Pedagogy of Relations. If we want a more equitable and socially just society, this, I would suggest, is one of the major challenges facing us all.

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¹ I have used the terms non-Māori and Pākehā in a determined way. Michael King (2004) explains that the word Pākehā “denotes people and influences that derive originally from Europe but which are no longer European” (King, 2004, p. 10). To me, the term Pākehā has come to mean to be of this land, Aotearoa New Zealand but to be of European descent. I, by this understanding, am not Pākehā, having been born in England. I call myself a non-Māori.

² A discursive teacher, within the context of Te Kotahitanga, is one who works to facilitate learning contexts in which students are supported to co-construct learning.

³ Pedagogical interactions are the types of interactions used by a teacher to facilitate learning. In Te Kotahitanga observations these are grouped and recorded within the following categories: instruction, monitoring, feedback and feed forward behaviour (positive and negative), prior knowledge, feedback and feed forward academic (positive and negative), and co-construction. (Bishop, et al., 2003)

⁴ When teachers pathologise Maori students by explaining a lack of achievement on factors within the child and home discourse, or the systems and structures discourse, they lay blame outside of their sphere of influence, or agency. This type of thinking has been termed deficit theorising, as it perpetuates the cultural deficit discourse brought by the British in the early 19th century and unchallenged deficit theorising “creates a downward self-fulfilling prophecy of Maori student achievement and failure” (Bishop et al., 2007, p. 23).

⁵ This data is collected on Side One of the Observation Tool. While it is recorded as discreet pieces of evidence, it is all connected and provides evidence of the level of implementation of the ETP within a teachers practice.

⁶ The six relational aspects evidenced on side two of the Te Kotahitanga observation Tool are: manaakitanga mana motuhake (learning), mana motuhake (behaviour), ngā whakapiringatanga creating culturally appropriate and responsive contexts for learning. (Bishop, et al., 2003)

⁷ On side two of the observation tool, evidence of what is seen and heard by the facilitator of each of the six aspects is recorded. Within the feedback meeting, teachers and facilitators co-construct the rating each evidence set is given. The ratings are on a 1 to 5 scale, 1 being little observable evidence observed and 5 being a lot of observable evidence.

⁸ Traditional pedagogical interactions are understood as those which impart knowledge, monitor understanding and behaviour. Discursive pedagogical interactions are those which seek to access student prior knowledge, provide feedback and feed forward in relation to the learning, and facilitate the co-construction of new learning.