



## Huakina mai: Doorways toward culturally responsive education

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### Abstract

Tertiary teachers need to be well-informed, intellectually adroit, and knowledgeable in the areas of their discipline. They also need to keep abreast with the shifting dynamics of diversity, and be cognisant of any personal biases that may potentially inhibit the teaching and learning that transpires in their classrooms. This paper discusses how one summer school course illuminates the relationships that exist between diversity, equity, engagement and educational success, by drawing on culturally responsive approaches in lectures, professional conversations, workshops and assignments.

### *Huakina mai: Doorways toward culturally responsive education*

Across sectors and throughout the decades, the disparate engagement and achievement of Māori in education in Aotearoa New Zealand has garnered neither sufficient nor sustained targeting. However, a quiet revolution by proponents of culturally responsive education has, in recent years, begun to make its mark, with engagement and success of major importance. This has meant that culturally responsive epistemologies and methodologies have assumed a presence in tertiary institutions like never before, and the call to respond to the disparity that exists between cultures with respect to academic achievement is one that is now heard and acknowledged widely by a large majority of educators. This imperative – relating to equity – is affirmed in the *Tertiary Education Strategy (TES) 2010–2015* (Ministry of Education, 2010). It suggests the need for tertiary institutes to focus proactively on raising the achievement of Māori students at higher levels by “improving their pastoral and academic support and the learning environment by adopting teaching practices that are culturally responsive to Māori students”

(p. 11). This paper describes a summer school course designed primarily for practising teachers and school leaders but relevant for all educators willing to engage in responsive ways with cultural diversity, while also being aware of the impact of any personal biases that they might have.

The revolution, although quiet, has not gone unnoticed and has led to justifiable claims that tertiary courses that focus on up-skilling teachers must appreciate the interconnection of ethnicity, power and privilege, while at the same time be active and intrinsically motivational. This requires the courses and those who run them to be acutely aware of the lived realities of their tertiary students' culture, be cognisant of the fact that knowledge should be co-created by educator and student and by student and student, and be accepting of the notion that an ongoing critique of power relationships within the tertiary contexts should prevail. *Ngā Haeata Mātauranga*, a 2007/2008 report on Māori education, highlighted such principles and practices when its authors recounted the strategies that appeared to be working for and with Māori learners in schools (Ministry of Education, 2009). However, a constant reality that continues to challenge educators across the sectors is that the majority of Māori are enrolled in mainstream settings and that the majority of their educators are non-Māori (Glynn, 1998). Implicit in this observation is the need for all educators, whether tertiary or school, to study and interact with the intricacies of culturally responsive practice and to integrate the newly acquired knowledge into their respective contexts.

Research into kaupapa Māori education across the education sector (the findings of which are intended to inform mainstream educators and thereby enhance teaching and learning outcomes for Māori) have contributed positively and proactively to the professional development of many educators, especially during the past decade. The present emphases on the need for learning and teaching relationships between Māori and non-Māori not only hold to the premise that 'culture counts', but also to allow learners to initiate learning interactions, exercise self-determination in respect of the learning process, and become co-inquirers in engagements with their educators and their peers (Bishop & Glynn, 1999). This and other research provides the basis for a summer school course that, arguably, offers discerning consumers of tertiary education a place where they can reflect on the potential impact that bias can have on the learning and teaching that occurs in today's diverse educational contexts.

## ***He kura raumati: A summer school that opens cultural doorways***

The summer school course, *Culturally inclusive pedagogies: Motivating diverse learners*, has demonstrated that many educational professionals have taken up this challenge and are now making a more positive difference for Māori learners after having undertaken the 6-week tertiary study experience. Quintessential to the summer school programme is the message that when educators – regardless of their cultural backgrounds – connect to the culture of the students in their classes, building and sustaining relationships are enhanced and the likelihood of better performance by the students increases. The knowledge gained here leads tertiary students to an awareness of the potential impact a negative cultural bias is capable of having on learners, thereby leaving the course knowing better how to ameliorate that.

Within the summer school course, four principles may be used to measure progress towards culturally responsive pedagogy: success (whakanuia), connectedness (hononga), ambiance (pūmanawatanga), and scholarship (mātauranga). One important phenomenon within the summer school course is the opportunity for students to widen their knowledge and lift their confidence through engaging in cultural

zones that are quite different from their own. Throughout the course the tertiary students encounter (in class) the languages and customs of the cultures represented by their tertiary student colleagues, and (in assignments) the learning and teaching content.

The feedback from one tertiary student (a classroom teacher) goes some way to encapsulating the meanings for the first three principles; whakanuia, hononga, and pūmanawatanga:

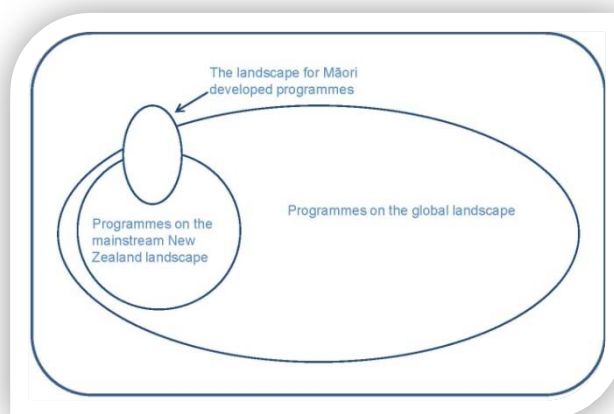
*Just dropping a line to let you know how much I appreciated what I learned in the summer school paper. I can't believe this paper is not compulsory. Now that I am back in the classroom with a new group of students I can see the impact of what I learned has had on my teaching. (success)*

*I have built stronger relationships with children and made a first positive contact by phone to all the parents. They were so appreciative I couldn't believe it. I have made a promise to be fair to the children and have drawn on this statement several times with good results. I can see them being reflective themselves in their fairness to each other. During the first couple of weeks we covered the Treaty of Waitangi and created our own classroom treaty. When we signed it we made a special occasion and had a little kai and took photos. (connectedness)*

*I walked up the local maunga (Pirongia Mountain) in the weekend. I have looked out my classroom window for 3 years to that mountain and never appreciated it. My class is now a different place, a place I feel I can share a part of myself, relax and have a laugh with the kids. (connectedness)*

*Thank you very much for the wonderful opportunity to experience the summer school and the great practical advice. Definitely one of the most useful and memorable papers I have completed. (ambience)*

With regard to the fourth principle, all tertiary students are comprehensively appraised for their level of scholarship (mātauranga). In many courses the majority of the material (literature, methodology) is derived from conventional knowledge streams and sourced globally (see Figure 1). While there is nothing inherently untoward about this, the summer school planning team consciously addressed the imbalance by drawing from selections of local (Aotearoa New Zealand) indigenous material and literature, alongside those from the national and global arena. A reality for locally indigenous generated literature is that, unlike the national and global generic literature, there is not a large amount of published research material. The good news is that it is growing.



**Figure 1:** An uneven playing field?

## Cultural responsiveness and its impact for Māori learners

Culturally responsive educators will use differentiated instruction and pedagogy to tailor teaching to the different needs of the students (Dickey, 2011; Foorman, 2001; Tunmer, Chapman, & Prochnow, 2003). In addition to being pedagogically informed, educators who are exploring culturally responsive teaching will reflect on and unpack their own cultural biases so that they may reassess and realign their practice and model inclusion in the true sense of the word. Negative cultural bias imparted by educators severely limits the potential positive impact on learning for Māori consumers of education. Bias and its impact are considered throughout each module of the summer school.

Cartledge and Kourea (2008) suggest that educators think over a series of introspective questions in order to uncover any biases that could influence their practice. For this purpose they developed eleven questions to guide self-reflection. Prochnow and Macfarlane (2008) present adaptations of the questions from a New Zealand perspective (see below). Although these questions were originally aimed at educators in schools they are relevant to the tertiary context. The questions are open-ended to stimulate reflective analysis of teaching practices, attitudes, and critical awareness of how actions and intentions may be perceived by others:

1. Does the ethnicity of the students in my class influence my perspectives/biases in terms of how I respond to and manage their learning? If so, how?
2. What is the correlation (negative/positive) between my behavioural interactions with students and their ethnicity?
3. How are my responses being perceived by the students?
4. How are my responses being perceived by the students' peers?
5. Is the learning of my students improving? How do I know that? If not, why not?
6. How equitable and culturally appropriate are my class/lecture management strategies? How do I know?
7. Do my class/lecture management strategies facilitate long-term change(s) or do they merely cater for the here and now?
8. How do I identify cultural influences on, and explanations for, various learning styles and behavioural nuances?
9. How do I currently respond to/address positive and long-term learning and behavioural change in my students? Do I influence and empower their pro-social skills?
10. What class/pedagogical management skills do I need to develop? Do I effectively manage these in the present environment of diversity?
11. How can I improve my management/instructional skills so that I am not resorting to teaching ideology/processes that proceed solely from a western-scientific space?

These questions are able to guide educators through examining their own beliefs and perspectives and, further, the effect these have on their own behaviour and the behaviour of the students in their classrooms. Howard (2003) suggests that teachers must self-reflect in order to be aware of their own beliefs and thereby engage in the art of culturally responsive teaching. Having reflected on self, the positive sequence of culturally responsive learning should begin early with each cohort of students because educators who are indifferent to culturally responsive practices potentially hinder students' learning progress (Cartledge & Kourea, 2008). Conversely, educators who draw from and integrate the most effective teaching methods, along with research-based effective pedagogies, are helping all students.

For Māori in the tertiary environment, whakawhanaungatanga – the making of links between educator and their students – is brought about when the learning atmosphere is not tainted by cultural bias, from either the educator or students. Educators who engender a learning environment where the culture of each individual is respected and bias is removed are then more ably positioned to develop culturally responsive pedagogies. In this regard, this summer course is premised on the belief that the most significant driver for creating a culturally inclusive society is the willingness of people to be more aware, knowledgeable, and accepting of diversity free of cultural bias. The structure and content are purpose-driven for either undergraduate or postgraduate to hone their skills as culturally responsive educators in a variety of contexts. Issues relating to Māori and indigenous ways of thinking, feeling and acting are explored and discussed in lectures and workshops, and reported on in the four assignments.

Spanning six weeks in total, the core of the summer school comprises ten modules delivered over an intensive two week period on campus during January. Learners are expected to undertake assigned readings before the on-campus cycle, and to complete assignment tasks after this. Each module is strategically constructed so that learners may experience a natural progression through a series of theoretical deliberations paired with real-world encounters that set out to challenge them in order to question their thinking and reassess their practice. For many learners, the summer school experience can be a reaffirmation of the many and good practices in which they are already skilled. It is maintained throughout the course that perspectives, when viewed through new sets of lenses, have the capacity to enhance professional practice.

Culturally responsive teaching does not transpire by waving a magic wand; success relies on interacting with sound knowledge and theory, exploring good practice pedagogy, and extending cultural awareness, knowledge, and goodwill. Although the level of difference is disputed, Hattie (2003) asserts that teachers can make a significant and positive difference in students' lives, especially when teacher attitudes and skills are mindful of the intention of new policies and technologies. Thus, a number of the studies learners encounter during the summer school have reported on teachers and teaching, offering profiles of what culturally responsive teachers and culturally responsive teaching looks like. What these exemplary teachers (cited in the required literary sources) did in their classrooms and how they infused elements of sensitivity and awareness into their practice were what made a difference for their students in terms of their attitudes and performance.

In the face of the current outcry about Māori students' educational underachievement and discord in schools, research that highlights effective and responsive practice offers an alternative. Such research reinforces the argument that educators need to approach the practice of teaching as a moral craft and a cultural obligation – an approach that effectively brings into play the heart, the head, and the hand (Sergiovanni, 1994). The heart is about having a philosophy and therefore incorporates beliefs, values, and vision. The head involves personal or cognitive theory. The hand is about practices – the skills, strategies, and decisions that are concrete and emphatic. Each without the other two results in vulnerability; each with the other two signals authority. This course provides an opportunity for participants to explore the 'heart', the head, and the 'hand' in a culturally appropriate, bias-free setting.

## Conclusion

If we are to maximise student success in tertiary education it would appear that we must strive to develop a unifying theory of teaching and learning that addresses the aspects of rigour and relevance. Throughout the years this summer school has been in existence, feedback – either sought or offered –

has consistently been favourable about the choice of content, as well as the learning strategies and teaching methods that reflect the subject matter and the learners' needs. A key competency for these learners is to reach a sense of place within the general scheme of things; it is about belonging. When negative cultural bias is evident belonging may not ensue.

Over the years, this course has modelled an inclusive learning journey, provided relevant and authentic culturally responsive learning experiences, and has been epitomised by way of the Māori concept of *whaiwāhitanga* (participation in and across cultural contexts). This in turn has fostered students' confidence in professional and scholarly performance. Over the years, the summer school learners have commented positively, through student course evaluations, on their encounters with a range of modules, experiences, challenges, and also on the camaraderie engendered along the way. This course is consistent with the warning implicit in *TES* (2010).

Finally, the four principles that opened doorway towards culturally responsive pedagogy – *whakanuia*, *hononga*, *pūmanawatanga*, and *mātauranga* – have been instrumental in sustaining a learning environment that values diversity. These principles are not the domain of this summer school alone. It is clear that many tertiary learning environments display a breadth of information about diversity that is able to be shared; however, we must continue to reflect, refine, and ultimately rejoice in the positive outcomes that result from inclusive and successful educational experiences.

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