

# “WE WANTED TO SEE IF YOU WERE THE REAL DEAL”: TEACHING AS A CULTURAL PRACTICE IN A CHALLENGING ENVIRONMENT

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## Abstract

*Teaching can be viewed as a cultural practice in which teaching is embedded in the culture of the teacher and informed by the culture of the students (Bell, 2011). In this paper, a narrative is presented detailing an authentic example of teaching in New Zealand in which culture is prioritised. It describes the challenges faced by a young female teacher as she worked in a low decile secondary school with male students, the majority of whom were involved in the Mongrel Mob<sup>i</sup> gang. Her approach and responses were centred in her belief in culturally responsive teaching. The deliberate actions of the teacher led to a turning point for the students, allowing their mana to remain intact as she acknowledged their identity, language and culture. This teacher’s experience provides an example of how a teacher can enable learners in diverse classrooms to succeed in their learning.*

## Keywords

Culturally responsive; secondary; culture; teaching.

## Introduction

Teaching can be viewed as a cultural practice in which teaching is embedded in the culture of the teacher and informed by the culture of the students (Bell, 2011). Culture is multifaceted and is linked to the ideas, customs and social behaviour of particular people groups or society. Individuals may relate to one or more cultural identities; for example, the students discussed in this paper identify as Māori, and they identify as Mongrel Mob.

Teachers need to acknowledge their own culture and how this informs their teaching. Bell (2011) suggests that teachers need to acknowledge their own culture first and foremost, as their cultural norms inform their choice of teaching and learning activities, the relationships that they form with their students, what knowledge is valued, the expectations that they have for their students, and the learning outcomes valued. After a teacher understands his or her own cultural position, that teacher then needs to work to understand the culture of the students in their classroom. Competent teaching may be seen to be teaching which takes into account the culture of the students.

Teachers also need to acknowledge and validate their students’ culture to ensure an optimal environment to support cognitive growth (Bell, 2011; Bishop & Berryman, 2006; Bruner, 1999; Vygotsky 1978). Teachers who do this are practising culturally responsive pedagogy, which has been shown to raise the achievement of students whose culture is not the dominant Eurocentric culture in mainstream schooling (Bell, 2011; Gay, 2000; Sleeter, 2010).

The following story illustrates a teacher practising culturally responsive pedagogy in her classroom. After her story we will explain Lydia’s actions in relation to Bell’s (2011) eight features of culturally responsive pedagogy.

## Lydia’s Story

Lydia took on the role of Head of Department (HOD) Physical Education and Health in one of the lowest socioeconomic areas in New Zealand. The school she was working in was filled with Mongrel Mob gang prospects and associates, and around 80 percent of students identified as Māori. When

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<sup>i</sup> Mongrel Mob is a notorious street gang in New Zealand, known for its violence and organised crime

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ISSN: 2382-0349

Pages. 39–44

Lydia applied for the position she knew what she was letting herself in for. However, she had always been passionate about Māori learners and she saw this as an opportunity to work with Māori youth in an area which had a big reputation for all the wrong reasons.

For the first two weeks in her new teaching position, Lydia struggled with her Year 10 boys' physical education class. This class was made up of 20 Year 10 boys: all identified as Māori, and the majority were involved in the Mongrel Mob gang. Lydia was not intimidated by the fact that she was teaching students from the 'Mob'; however, she was concerned about the dominance they had over her within the classroom. Through her observations of their behaviour she quickly realised that the students had no respect for her as a woman or as a teacher—they just viewed her as a Pākehā. In asserting their dominance, they had told her directly that she was not going to tell them what to do, and that they were going to play tag, basketball or touch rugby every lesson. They also stated that it was their goal to break her. Lydia was determined from the outset that she was not going to let these young men get to her. She believed it wasn't their fault that they had a gang-like mentality. Lydia wanted to build a relationship with these young men, and to understand them. She decided if all that she achieved in the year was that they had more respect for themselves and for women, then she had done her job.

The class behaviour was very difficult to deal with. The young men in her Year 10 class turned up to class stoned, swearing, talking in derogatory terms about women and their conquests, and often barking like dogs (Mongrel Mob behaviour). It was disturbing for Lydia. They would taunt Lydia using obscene language, and on one occasion three of the boys surrounded Lydia against the wall, getting into her personal space saying that she better "know who owns this place". Lydia had little support from the school Senior Leadership around these incidents. It was acknowledged that Lydia had all of the 'bad eggs' in one class, and it was her job to 'sort them out'. Comments made included "It's the gang, they will never change"; "They use their gang and being Māori to intimidate us"; "They don't care about education, they just want to smoke and sell drugs"; "At least we don't have parents on our back about NCEA<sup>ii</sup>."

Lydia decided to use the first two weeks of term to work out the dynamics of the group in order to plan her next move with them. She engaged in conversation with smaller groups of students to get to know about them and to help them get to know her. Within the first two weeks Lydia made contact with all of the immediate families of the boys in her class, to introduce herself and give out her email and phone number, in case they wanted or needed to contact her about their sons. She rang home about small successes, and this worked well as the boys of the families that she contacted would thank her the next day. Lydia also rang home about the abuse that she was receiving from key ringleaders within the class, and on two occasions the parents asked to meet with Lydia and the students to address this behaviour. All of the parents that she contacted about the negative behaviour were disgusted in their sons' behaviour as the same behaviour was not being displayed at home. She worked on building trust with these students, and while she showed them that she cared enough to go the extra mile, she was also teaching them that she was not going to tolerate the abuse that she was receiving. By the third week, Lydia had a general gauge of the students, their groupings and the ringleaders.

On the Monday of the third week, Lydia had them enter the gym as usual. They were all standing around with their bags in a small group and were yelling at Lydia to hurry up and get the gear out. Lydia had locked the changing rooms and the gear shed. Lydia stood in the middle of the gym silent for quite some time. Eventually, some of the students began to quieten the other students down; Lydia could see that they were eager to get into their PE lesson. When the gym was quiet, Lydia addressed the students. In a soft voice she asked them to sit down on the bench seats. Most students followed this simple instruction, as they wanted to get on with the lesson and get the gear out. The ringleaders didn't follow the instruction. They began saying, "What the --- for, we never do this shit, just give us the f\*cken gear b\*tch." Lydia remained quiet; some of the boys started to manage the group's behaviour. This continued for a good 10 minutes. Eventually, all of the students were sitting down

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<sup>ii</sup> NCEA is National Certificate of Educational Achievement: New Zealand's school leaver qualification.

and quiet. Once they were all quiet, Lydia addressed the whole group for the first time since teaching this class. She spoke softly, saying her pepeha<sup>iii</sup>:

Tēnā koutou i tēnei ata, Ko Pakaraka tōku maunga; Ko Ngapuhi tōku iwi; Ko Ngati Hatua tōku hapū; Ko Oramahoe tōku marae; Nō Tauranga ahau. Ko Jermery tōku pāpā; Ko Ko Paula tōku māmā; ko Sally taku taina; Ko Cassie taku tamāhine; Ko Devon taku tama; Ko Lydia tōku ingoa.

A few of the boys, during Lydia's pepeha, were saying 'chur' and 'Kia ora' which were both seen as affirming by Lydia, as some of the boys identified to the whenua<sup>iv</sup> where Lydia had whakapapa<sup>v</sup> too. While Lydia had their attention, and with her basic Māori language knowledge, she proceeded to say:

Nā tō rourou nā taku rourou, Ka ora ai te iwi; with my food basket and your food basket, together we will thrive. We have two options from today, we can continue to work against each other and you can continue to fail to progress in your physical education, or we can work together to build a Physical Education and Health programme where you will have the ability to thrive and become the men that I know that you can be. I am failing you all, and will continue to fail you if I am to let this behaviour continue; I want to empower you, to help you all realise your potential and to push you all to achieve bigger things, that I believe you are all capable of.

The boys remained silent, some with their heads down, others looking at Lydia, and Lydia continued:

I understand the behaviour that you have been showing me, you're defensive, you're protective, you have seen many come before me. I could go as far to say that you may be distrusting of Pākehā people. I am here not because of the 'pay' as you all have suggested, I am here because I saw an opportunity advertised to work with Māori students. I applied because I love my culture, I love being able to identify as Māori, and I thought that there was no better opportunity than to work with Māori students. I am equally passionate about physical education and health and I would love the opportunity to be able to share my knowledge around our culture, sport and physical education, and at the same time learn from you all—get to know you individually. You all strike me as very able, competent sports men, some of the best that I have seen over my entire teaching career. You also strike me as respectful men that act up around your peers for effect. I would love to teach you a traditional Māori game quite similar to touch and tag rugby, has anyone heard of Ki o Rahi before?

The gym remained silent, some boys shaking their heads, enough to let Lydia know that they had never heard of Ki o Rahi. Lydia continued:

Ki o Rahi, as I said, is a traditional Māori game played in my home whenua (land) of Northland, which has now spread nationwide, with regional teams and competitions. Ki o Rahi tells a story, which I will go into later, an ancient story that has been handed down over the years, much like Māori myths and legends. But before I can take you on this journey I need to ensure that I will have your respect as your teacher and as a female, because let's be honest, over the past few weeks I have been treated unfairly by all of you. However, I am all about moving forward. We can leave the past in the past and pretend that we just met today and continue forward together. Or you can slip back into our old ways that were not desirable and will not help you reach your full potential, the potential that I can see in all of you talented young men sitting here before me. Your behaviour from this moment will let me know how you want this to work.

Lydia paused, the boys looked around at each other. One of the ringleader boys stood up walked forward, staunch, eye balling Lydia; Lydia didn't know what to make of this act. He put his hand out

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<sup>iii</sup> Pepeha is used in a Māori context as a person introduces themselves by linking themselves to their ancestors and family, and identifies important places like their mountain, river and traditional family tribal spaces.

<sup>iv</sup> Tribal land.

<sup>v</sup> To recite genealogy which links to tribes and land.

as if to shake her hand and pulled her in for a hongi<sup>vi</sup>. The hongi lasted several seconds. After the hongi he said:

We are taught to be staunch, that is how we protect ourselves. We wanted to see if you were the real deal. You have my respect. You are the only one that [sic] has taken the time to speak with us like you have, and stick with us without giving up. I'm sick of being handed out worksheets in class and not being pushed or helped to better myself. I want to learn Ki o Rahi, and maybe one day we can go to the tournaments too Miss.

The rest of the boys stood up and gave Lydia their 'gangster' handshake, some said "Chur miss, where is the gear, we will grab it for you."

### **Culturally responsive pedagogy**

The following section considers Lydia's actions in relation to Bell's (2011) eight features of culturally responsive pedagogy:

1. "Culturally responsive teaching is not ethnic-blind and takes into account, rather than ignores, the culture and ethnicity of the students" (Bell, 2011, p. 42). Ethnic blindness refers to when a teacher ignores the ethnicity of the students (Gay, 2000) and relates the students to the same culture as themselves. Lydia took into account the ethnicity and culture of the students that she was teaching, the community in which the students lived, and acknowledged their two cultures 1) Māori and 2) Mongrel Mob. Whether Lydia agreed with the gang culture or not, it was a part of her students' culture, so she was considerate of this culture and tried to understand their behaviour within the culture of their gang. Being open to the two main cultures that the students were bringing into the class allowed Lydia to gain understanding of her students and pitch her teaching to suit their cultural needs.
2. "Culturally responsive teaching does not use deficit theorising to explain differences in the achievement of students of different ethnicities" (Bell, 2011, p. 42). Deficit theorising is based on stereotypes, which may lead to blaming the student and their family. When this happens teachers lower their academic expectations of those students (Bell, 2011; Shields, Bishop & Mazawi, 2005). Lydia knew that her students and their families were gang members; she knew that her students were Māori, and knew that some of them were living in extreme poverty. In her statement to the students she acknowledged their abilities and was pushing them to succeed. She acknowledged them as Māori, through identifying herself as Māori and sharing her pepeha. Lydia created a cultural climate within her classroom that allowed the Māori students to enjoy achieving as Māori and restored the mana<sup>vii</sup> of their ethnicity within her class; this was further acknowledged by a student giving Lydia a hongi after she had finished speaking. The hongi has a spiritual significance to Māori, representing the two sides coming together and sharing breath. New Zealand research has shown that no matter a student's ethnicity, socioeconomic status, family make up or culture, if the student has the right cultural climate within the classroom, free from deficit theorising, then the student will be more likely to succeed alongside their peers (Bishop & Berryman, 2006, 2009; Bishop, Berryman, Cavanagh, & Teddy, 2009; Ministry of Education, 2016).
3. "Culturally responsive teaching includes high expectations of students, not expectations based on stereotypes" (Bell, 2011, p. 42). Teachers with high expectations of their students, and that take pedagogical actions based on those expectations, are being culturally responsive in their approach to the teaching of their students (Bell, 2011; Bishop et al., 2009; Ministry of Education, 2009). Initially, Lydia did not express any expectations for her students. She let them come in and run the class for the first two weeks; she let them control the situation and participate in the activities that they wanted. Her approach was to let the students have the

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<sup>vi</sup> A traditional Māori greeting done by pressing one's nose and forehead (at the same time) to another person at an encounter, where the ha (or breath of life), is exchanged and intermingled. It serves a similar purpose to a formal 'handshake' in modern western culture.

<sup>vii</sup> Authority, control, power, influence, status, spiritual power, charisma - *mana* is a supernatural force in a person, place or object.

power so that she could learn from the students about their behaviour and class culture, and be able to speak with small groups of students. As soon as she addressed the class in the third week she let all of the students know that she had high expectations. Not only did she have high expectations for their academic work within the Physical Education curriculum, she demanded more from them in regard to their behaviour and the class culture. Despite the students' behaviour and cultural affiliations, Lydia went into this class with the assumption that high achievement was a goal for all students.

4. "Culturally responsive teaching involves forming relationships with students for professional caring, and a commitment that students will achieve academically" (Bell, 2011, p. 42). The relationship that is formed between the teacher and the student is key in culturally responsive teaching (Bell, 2011; Bishop & Berryman, 2006, 2009). Lydia let the class run themselves for the first two weeks as she recognised her need to understand the dynamics of the group. As Bell (2011) and Bishop and Berryman (2006) argue, learning may not take place until an appropriate relationship is established and student engagement is achieved. We can see that Lydia acknowledged that she could not go straight into the class and start teaching them because of their extreme behaviour. Therefore she worked on building relationships with smaller groups of students, and she built relationships by contacting their whānau at home to celebrate small successes. By sharing her pepeha she made connections and gained respect from the students who identified to the same whenua, and the fact that she confidently identified as Māori (Bishop & Berryman, 2006). All of these approaches were positive steps towards building relationships with her students.
5. "Culturally responsive teaching includes teachers knowing and relating to their students as culturally located human beings" (Bell, 2011, p. 42). Sociocultural theorising asserts that students do not leave their cultures at the school gates (Bell, 2011). Culturally responsive teachers use many ways to find out their students' worldviews, practices and cultural knowledge to ensure that this is being brought out in their students within the classroom. It is said that such teaching requires a disposition to want to find out and know about a student's cultural worldviews (Bell, 2011). Lydia acknowledged and wanted to respond to the two cultures that the students brought into the classroom; Māori and Mongrel Mob. She used the little te reo she had as a way to show her respect for her students' cultural heritage. By knowing and relating to students as cultural beings, teachers get to know their students, not just as members of an ethnic group or culture, but as individuals.
6. "Culturally responsive teaching includes building relationships and communications with families and communities of students" (Bell, 2011, p. 42). Teachers learning about their students may require them to make contact with the families, participate in community events and invite family members to contribute to the teaching and learning within the classroom (Bell, 2011). Lydia was not intimidated by the fact that the students' families were heavily associated with the Mongrel Mob gang. She contacted her students' parents like she would for any other student. She gave out her contact details, inviting them to make contact with her and made herself available to address negative behaviour with the families face-to-face. Lydia made sure to contact families to acknowledge success in class. This can go a long way to forming positive relationships with the families and the students as they move from viewing communication with the school as being negative to seeing it as a positive event (Bishop & Berryman, 2006, 2009).
7. "Culturally responsive teaching involves using the cultural and ethical knowledge, language, values and practices of the students as resources to inform teacher decision making about curriculum and pedagogy" (Bell, 2011, p. 42). Lydia knew that her students were Māori as all of the students had identified as Māori. Lydia used her knowledge of the language and culture to engage the students. She followed cultural practices by introducing herself to her students through the use of pepeha. Although not a confident speaker of te reo, the little language she used made an impact on the boys. Lydia introduced the students to the game of Ki o Rahi; finding a game that would be similar to their interests in touch rugby and tag rugby, yet linked to their cultural heritage. The decision to teach Ki o Rahi was a considered and meaningful context for the students, as they already had the skills of touch/tag rugby, which were transferable to Ki o Rahi.

8. “Culturally responsive teaching is emancipatory and transformative, and hence it is political for social justice” (Bell, 2011, p. 42). The approach that Lydia took with this tough class of students could be seen as culturally responsive, transformative and could eventually lead to further positive outcomes. The students were given guidelines within which to learn, but were able to come to their own decisions about engagement in their learning, retaining their mana throughout the process.

“Culturally responsive teaching that is emancipatory, transformative and political may start with the teacher being an advocate for the students” (Villegas and Lucas, 2007 as cited in Bell, 2011, p. 42).

### Summary

In sum then, Lydia’s story illustrates teaching as a cultural practice. Lydia was culturally aware and she identified with her Māori culture. She was also aware that she didn’t identify with the culture of the Mongrel Mob gang; however, she was open to understanding the culture that her students brought into the classroom. Lydia’s story showed that students who felt alienated at school could feel accepted and able to engage in learning. Because Lydia was willing to build a relationship with her students, showing them that she was ‘the real deal’, their attitude to her changed completely. By acknowledging her students as culturally located human beings she was able to create a positive learning environment for her students, in which they could achieve as who they were. Her approach meant they were able to maintain their mana. Looking towards the future, for some of these students, Lydia might be the teacher who makes all the difference.

Teachers new to the classroom, or facing challenges in their schools, can read stories such as this one outlining Lydia’s experience in order to gain inspiration as well as practical advice. Teachers’ stories allow the practical outworking of theory in the classroom to be made visible to others, and are an important avenue for teacher learning. Interrogating Lydia’s experience in this case allowed her decision-making and actions to be theorised using Bell’s (2011) eight features of culturally responsive pedagogy. Her actions resulted in a positive outcome, but illustrate the complexity of classroom teaching. This story at once encourages teachers to be courageous in their approaches to challenges, and to be resilient in the responses they may experience.

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