



Culturally Responsive Whānau Relations for Including Māori Students in Education

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents findings from two studies¹ that each aimed to develop understandings of how to more effectively support Māori learners with special education needs. The first study occurred just prior to Specialist Education Services (SES) move into the Ministry of Education. The second study comes from the Enhancing Effective Practice in Special Education (EePiSE) project. Both studies identified the importance of developing culturally responsive whānau² relations for including Māori students in education.

An example of an immersion school's response for including a student identified as having severe behaviour is presented from the EePiSE study to exemplify what culturally responsive whānau relations looks like.

Research

Keywords

Behaviour problems, cultural values, effective practices, immersion programmes, kura kaupapa Māori, Māori culture, Māori students, parent school relationship, special education, whānau.

INTRODUCTION

The Special Education 2000 policy (Ministry of Education, 1997, 1998) evolved out of an ongoing process that has seen a shift in special education from a position 'where a deficit was seen to be within the learner to that where it is located within the organisation' (O'Brien, & Ryba, 2005, p. 23). This has been accompanied by a focus on what the child can do, that is, from a strengths base rather than any perceived deficiencies or needs base. The policy also clearly signalled that families were definitely expected to contribute their thinking to the education response. Part of the Special Education Policy Guidelines of 1995 required that, 'information about the barriers to learning and the provision of resources were to be shared between families/whānau and education providers' (Mitchell, 1999, p. 34). Subsequently, schools have been increasingly encouraged to include the community in decision making processes with regards to their children's education. The Ministry of Education (2003) also defines the special education services provided for Māori as needing to be where 'tamariki³ and rangatahi⁴ with special education needs and their whānau learn effectively through the provision of culturally competent services, which will ensure mana⁵ and tikanga⁶ are upheld' (p. 56).

Many educators, however, fail to recognise the overpowering impact that their own culture has on indigenous students and at the same time they fail to recognise the beneficial contribution that their students' own culture can bring to the learning contexts (Bishop & Glynn, 1999). Failure to recognise the importance of their students' own prior experiences or "cultural toolkit" (Bruner, 1996) can severely restrict the learner's ability to engage actively in their own learning through meaningful relationships and interactions with others (Wearmouth, Glynn, & Berryman, 2005).

Kauffman (1997) observes that parents and educational professionals tend to hold values and set behavioural standards and expectations that are consistent with those of the culture in which they live and work and that attitudes and behaviour gravitate towards the cultural norms of their families, peers and communities. Educational professionals from the majority culture are in danger of seeing their own culture as "normal" or the "default setting" against which other cultures are viewed as deficient. Where there is conflict between the culture of the child and the culture of the classroom, barriers to learning can be created, often unintentionally. For those who want to better understand the child with special needs, as with any child, it is necessary to understand the culture (the traditional and contemporary values, beliefs, practices, iconography and preferred ways of knowing and learning) of the child and their family. This means looking at current pedagogies and examining ways in which students' own cultural experiences can be integrated into curriculum programming, content and delivery. Importantly, it also challenges educators to reflect critically on their relationships with students and on the role of educators themselves, in perpetuating low levels of student participation and achievement (Bishop, Berryman, Tiakiwai & Richardson, 2003).

Groups of researchers such as Glynn, Berryman, Atvars and Harawira, (1997), Habel, Bloom, Ray and Bacon (1999) and Bishop, et al., (2003) have all studied the needs of students from minority cultures who experienced learning and/or behaviour disorders. These researchers found that students had both clear views of their problems, as well as practical suggestions for improving their learning programmes. Further, when interviewing Māori students Glynn, et al., (1997) found that these students were also able to suggest worthwhile and fair solutions that were culturally based.

¹ Both studies were undertaken by members of the MOE, SE, Poutama Pounamu research-whānau, within the ethics requirements of the University of Waikato.

² Immediate and extended family

³ Children

⁴ Young people

⁵ Personal prestige

⁶ Traditional cultural practices

Importantly researchers recognised that educators, working with students experiencing learning and behavioural difficulties, needed to be able to build worthwhile relationships with their students before engaging in any other agenda. The following two studies discuss the importance of developing worthwhile relationships in further detail.

SES SITES OF EFFECTIVE SPECIAL EDUCATION FOR MĀORI

In 2001, Berryman and colleagues used the experiences of Māori families, and the special educators with whom they worked to identify five sites of effective special education practice for Māori, within SES (Berryman, et al., 2002). These sites provided specific details of interventions by special education professionals working from a strengths-based paradigm with Māori students and families. In each site, interviews as chat (Bishop, 1996) were facilitated with the service providers, the clients and anyone else determined by these groups as important to the intervention. These conversations were aimed at generating ideas about why the interventions had been effective for the Māori clients. At each site Māori elders were an important part of the entire process.

The information from these sites identified the importance of professionals and families forging relationships built on respect and collaboration and working together for the benefit of students. Once relationships such as these had developed, families felt that they were able to bring their own expertise, about their child and their culture, to the intervention. Only when professionals were responsive to families were professionals able to apply their own expertise to further extend the knowledge of the entire team including that of family members.

Looking across the five sites, a number of common features or general characteristics emerged. These involved both professionals and families in:

- Acknowledging and supporting the expertise of the other and thus achieving effective and balanced working partnerships.
- Negotiating collaborative and culturally competent approaches to understanding and resolving problems.
- Demonstrating a willingness to listen to new ideas, and to work beyond their experience and or cultural comfort zone.

Apart from these general characteristics, important Māori cultural values and practices provided a strong cultural foundation upon which effective partnerships and relationships were developed. Further, it was the understanding of these cultural values and practices, and/or the sincerity and commitment by non-Māori to understand, that made for effective relationships with Māori. Māori and non-Māori professionals in these sites, understood the importance of these traditional cultural values and practices in forming collaborative relationships on which partnerships could be built and maintained. They also understood that this was not likely to occur effectively until educators stopped directing how parents would participate in education. This is

especially problematic when students are faced with ongoing learning or behavioural challenges. Examining educational settings where Māori parents participate from choice, rather than by direction, is key. In New Zealand this is most likely to be in settings where Māori students are already experiencing success (Bishop, Berryman, Cavanagh, & Teddy, 2007).

ENHANCING EFFECTIVE PRACTICE IN SPECIAL EDUCATION (EPISE)

In 2004, findings and outcomes from the pilot EPISE study in three kura kaupapa Māori and one Māori immersion school (Berryman, Glynn, Togo & McDonald, 2004) further reinforced the importance of collaborative relationships and the role and responsibility each individual and/or group of people play in supporting students requiring additional support. Many Māori can still demonstrate descent from waka⁷ and key ancestors, enabling them to claim their iwi⁸ identity and their hapū⁹ and whānau standing. These relationships allow Māori to share a common heritage with a large number of people. Today, whānau identity is increasingly defined not only by one's links to important ancestors, but to contemporary links with people to whom one engages on a regular basis.

Students in these four EPISE schools were observed and understood to be positioned at the centre of a school-whānau, that is, a community of people – some familial and others not. The school-whānau was further understood to be relating and interacting towards a common vision of helping students to fulfil their holistic potential. Within the context of whānau, each group of people had important roles in generating and maintaining relationships and promoting interactions for the involvement and participation of all concerned. Providing solutions from within home and school contexts and working in collaboration with students, their families and their teachers was essential in all four of these EPISE schools, as was being able to seek the advice and knowledge of cultural experts. Within the metaphor of whānau, Māori communities already have effective solutions for assessing, finding new solutions as required and more effectively meeting the needs of their students (Smith, 1995). Within a school-whānau model, schools do not expel members of their own whānau but work in collaboration to seek solutions that work effectively for all.

From a socio-cultural perspective, relationships and learning experiences within a whānau context are seen as being very important and able to contribute. Bruner (1996) suggests that from the basis of prior experiences all new learning and sense making takes place. Glynn, Wearmouth and Berryman (2006) further suggest that learners are more likely to develop understandings and skills in contexts where there are regular and sustained interactions with more-informed individuals around “genuinely shared activities”. Activities that are “genuinely shared” are those where both learners and teachers can find shared meaning and purpose. Regular interactions, in contexts such as these, are more likely to result in relationships of respect where learners are developing and refining their identity, their knowledge and

⁷ Canoe

⁸ Tribe

⁹ Sub-tribe

their skills in such a way that interdependent positive social relationships between learning partners, such as were found in these school-whānau, are affirmed and extended (Berryman, et al., 2004).

Contextualised social interactions such as these have been shown to be fundamental to the acquisition of intellectual knowledge and skills (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bruner, 1996; McNaughton, 1997, 2002; Vygotsky, 1978). Cognitive development and social development therefore are understood as being mutually facilitative and inseparable. Cognitive development is acquired through interactions around authentic shared activities in culturally responsive social contexts (Glynn, Wearmouth, & Berryman, 2006). All students, including those experiencing difficulties, are understood to be active agents, engaging in their world through their relationships and interactions within the social and cultural contexts in which they engage. From this perspective, it is the social experiences that drive their cognitive development.

Vygotsky's (1978) concept of working in the zone of proximal development provides a key to understanding the power of social interactions with the role of the more-skilled person working to support students to participate in activities in which they are as yet unable to participate on their own. Glynn, Wearmouth, and Berryman (2006) and others (Wood, Bruner & Ross, 1976) would suggest that these support people do not simply scaffold support for others and then remove it when they judge that the learner can work independently. Rather, they engage in a process of guided participation in contexts where there is reciprocity and mutual influence, where learners work interdependently and new knowledge can be shared and co-constructed. By engaging in guided participation with students experiencing difficulties, whānau helpers (both school and home) gain in knowledge and expertise, and establish or deepen their relationships with the students whom they are supporting. For Māori, these models are also clearly seen in practice within the tuakana-teina model where the elder or more skilled tuakana provides support to the younger or less skilled teina. They are also seen in ako, a model that draws on the interdependent roles of the kaiako¹⁰ and akonga¹¹ and the reciprocal benefits that emerge when each of these roles interacts in support of the other.

CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE WHĀNAU RELATIONS

Part of a narrative of experience, from three different people (principal, parent, and child) in one of the EEPiSE school-whānau, is presented below to exemplify these culturally responsive whānau relations.

Tumuaki (Principal): ... making mistakes is not an issue, it's waiho oku whenu, mauria mai oku painga – heed not my weaknesses, but heed to my strengths, and together we will learn – yeah we've made plenty of mistakes, hell who doesn't?

We talk to parents about that when we have raruraru (problem), it's not focused on the negativity of the issue, the kōrero is focused on what can we do together to help

as a whānau to move forward and we're going through that one right now with a couple of issues and so we're meeting with parents, it's a big people thing, so we're going to be meeting with parents next week and we're going out to the various people in our community, and saying "hey we all got to be on this waka, or else we're not going to do it together, so we do a lot of talk with our whānau".

A mother who enrolled her son in this school talked about the difference that this type of response had made for her and her son.

Mother: When both my son and I came in touch with this kura, I decided to try and work it out for him. He was working with SES prior to that, special education, that sort of thing. He had "behavioural problems" quite bad, "dysfunctional" and he just had a whole list of problems that he was going through at the time.

From the time that he started here, it's been a hard journey it hasn't been all good, but just to now, his wairua, his spirit, his self-esteem, his confidence and his learning has just lifted. He got stood down for fighting at the last school, and the other boy that was in the fight never got stood down, but my boy got stood down. I didn't think that was fair or that he was dealt with fairly. The kids knew that he was different and he felt he was different so whenever he got upset or angry, his SES teacher [Behaviour Support Worker] would just jump in and make arrangements for him or movements for him that tended to his needs. He [the son] knew that and he would use that to his advantage, I felt he could never just settle in, whereas here, he was given the opportunity to settle in.

It is important to note the Behaviour Support Worker was responding to only one aspect of the problem, with separation or time-out his most frequent response.

Mother: He believes in himself, he is more confident, he's more responsible and the actions that he takes now he realises the outcomes can be detrimental to him and to those around him. I believe that this school has encouraged him too, maybe not as far as the system goes with his academic side yet but more with his spiritual side and this one-on-one, which does really nurture him. And I'll say that for all of them. He had one teacher working with him when he started at this school he just fell in love with her so there was a connection with him straight away.

He then moved up into another class and there was a bit of readjustment for him and the teachers and that sort of took him down a bit. It was hard for him to find his feet again, that sort of thing. At the beginning of this year, it was touch and go whether he would be stood down permanently or carry on and it was at that point that he realised that he had to make some real life choices. A lot of communicating was done, a lot of talking, a lot of options and it just made him realise you know, what he's got here. The choices that he is going to

¹⁰ Teacher

¹¹ Student

make are going to affect him for the rest of his life. He took the challenge on, of facing up to his responsibility and buckling down, having to lead, rather than be negative and affect the rest around him.

Researcher: How much influence do you think the kura has had in making those changes?

Mother: Ooh he never had this at any other kura that he's been enrolled in, this is how I feel personally in this town, he's been to three other mainstream schools and then here. I just believe they gave him love, they gave him a side that the other schools were too set in their mainstream systems ways to see that there were reasons why this boy was doing what he was doing and they were willing to dig that bit harder to find the good in him. I believe that they dealt to a side that my boy hasn't felt since we lived up North, and we came from a small place up North and the teaching up there is done on a one-to-one. He pretty well much found it here, you know. They took him and realised that he was quarrelsome and they pretty much took him on as being part of their own, not just as a child that they were going to isolate from the rest of the school.

Researcher: How were you received at these other schools?

Mother: It just felt like a job interview going into a mainstream kura, it didn't feel real, it felt like he was just a number. There was no personal touch, yeah just put in the paper work and filed away. They didn't do that here, they went the extra mile to make sure that his needs were dealt to in every way that they possibly could address and that was a big difference. Very informal, very much tikanga Māori yeah the comparison between us and mainstream. The interest and the love that they give out is just part of their kaupapa¹².

You don't get that in the mainstream, you just don't. They can be just as loving and kind and I'm not radical I'm just saying it for what it is but at the end of the day I felt that you were just part of the system, you were just a number and you were filed away like anything else. This is why a lot of our Māori people get upset because my partner is a mobster [gang member]. This is why he wanted to go down and kill the principal in those other schools, yeah do a spinout. But in here, it's completely different.

The mother's clear articulation of the difference between the mainstream school response and the Māori medium response speaks to the cultural connectedness and holistic wellbeing she was searching for, with regards to her son's education.

What they have done for him here at school, hasn't just affected him at school, but he's brought that behaviour home. They just love and care for him and listen to him. Gee if you'd seen him two years ago, you wouldn't have thought he was the same kid. Honestly, he never lasted at school until lunch time without getting into a fight or without giving a couple of kids a hiding or without

getting into some sort of trouble or putting a hole in the wall. He's just not the same child at all. If somebody had said this to me a year and half ago, I would have thought I had faith, but I don't know whether you could work miracles that fast with him. But he was just adamant that this is the way that I am, handle it or get out of my face, this is how I'm going to be.

They've dealt to him in a way that you can't put it down on a piece of paper in a mainstream school and file it away, because it's not something that can be done just like that, they've just turned him right around. I mean, but my son has just floated through it all. Because it's completely different here they feel you before they see you, you are part of them and that makes a big difference for your child. You know that your child's wairua¹³ is going to be dealt to on a daily basis and that's what he needs to grow. The love and spiritual healing that they've given to him. You can't put that down on a piece of paper. It's been an awesome, enriching loving and fulfilling journey that will give him tools for the rest of his life I suppose.

The son adds his thoughts to these experiences.

Student: They understand me and they just understand me better than all the other schools ... all the teachers listen to what you have to say. Yeah. Māori helped me.

Researcher: So you're not naughty anymore?

Student: Nah, I just changed when I came here in the last year.

Researcher: Oh yeah, why?

Student: Big change! Because of the teachers they listen, the other school they just used ring up my mum and just send me home, because I hit people but they didn't listen to my reasons why I hit them, but not here.

The following year when researchers were talking to staff from the local Ministry of Education, Special Education office about this study, one of the case workers shared an unsolicited similar experience. He talked about a boy who had been one of his most severe behaviour cases. On enrolment into a new school the behaviours displayed in previous school settings had, with very little intervention from him, begun to be turned around. In his opinion, the intervention was in the relationship that this school had been able to build with the family and the son, and the education context that they had subsequently provided for him. The participants in both stories are one and the same.

FINDINGS

The EEPiSE research in these schools sought answers from within the culture and traditional discourses of te ao Māori¹⁴. In the example above, effective and balanced working relationships existed between this principal, the teachers and this mother and son. Each party acknowledged and supported the expertise of the other and all were seen as part of the school-whānau. Relationships involved the following three elements:

¹² Philosophy

¹³ Spirituality

¹⁴ Māori worldview

1. Manaakitanga¹⁵

This element involved the physical roles and responsibilities of the school and the home as whānau themselves. People involved themselves with manaakitanga in the school which was extended to the students and families from their community.

2. Whakapapa¹⁶

The second element involves whakapapa connections. In this school the essence of whakapapa connected ancestors to the students and to all points from the past to the present. This principal took the time to learn who this student was. He was seen to come with the strengths and support of his ancestors. This was reciprocated by the mother who also came to know and understood in the same way who the principal and her son's teachers were.

3. Wairua

The third element involved wairua, the interconnectedness between te ao tawhito¹⁷, a Māori worldview and te ao hurihuri¹⁸. Present day pedagogies, relationships and interactions, came from within the culture handed down from the past. Being able to incorporate aspects of te ao hurihuri with te ao Māori but on Māori terms and as defined by Māori was the key.

Collaborative and culturally competent approaches to understanding and resolving problems were evident in this school. The boy, his mother and the principal all brought their own expertise to defining not only the problem but also the solutions. Problems were then planned for and responded to collaboratively.

CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE PEDAGOGY OF RELATIONS

This example exemplifies the importance of time spent building relationships of respect and trust, before trying to initiate and contribute to change. This mother and her son were both accorded the same respectful right to participate in this education setting as knowledgeable and with expertise rather than as needing to be directed as to how and when they will participate.

There was a clear difference in perception between this school and mainstream schools the mother had previously tried to enrol her son in. In this school the vision for strong student identity was supported by the notion that all students were better supported when their family was working collaboratively with the school towards helping fulfil their children's potential. As specific needs and/or skills were recognised, learning opportunities that came from a cultural and ecologically responsive perspective, aimed at better meeting the needs of the students were planned for and implemented. This was often with direct family input. Being aware of individual potential and a planned approach of support for all and by all, based on existing school and classroom evidence was seen to be a key. While family members raised much to be celebrated, they were also able to safely raise concerns and solutions about teaching and learning processes. Although this was not always easy, these

families expected to be a real part of supporting their school to provide the very best in education for their children. While this was often challenging, the culturally responsive pedagogy of relations (Bishop, et al. 2007) evidenced through the interdependent relationships of respect, cultural groundedness, power-sharing and interactive interactions around a common vision was a priority for this school and its community.

In this school, the principal and many of the staff had strong relationships with their community (both Māori and non-Māori) and fully understood the need for collaboration. Sadly, in many mainstream schools when educational decisions about Māori students are being made, families often are not at the table and, more importantly, nor have they been invited. In schools such as these it is more likely that educators can be heard speaking on behalf of Māori families, explaining why these families will not or cannot participate with the school. Discourses such as: "they work"; "they're really hard to pin down"; "they're happy for us to make those sorts of decisions"; "their children don't really want their parents coming to school at this age"; "that family is having real problems so I don't want to add stress", at best do not take respectful consideration of the range of skills and knowledge that rest with family. At worse, they are undermining and belittling. Alton-Lee (2003), in her best evidence synthesis of quality teaching for diverse students in schooling, provides much evidence to show the importance of establishing effective links between school, home contexts and other cultural contexts in which children are socialised. Importantly, schools need to generate opportunities for working collaboratively in ways that can be of benefit to the schools as well as the students they teach. In the three kura kaupapa Māori and the one Māori immersion school in this EEPiSE project, acceptance and acknowledgement of their families' expertise strongly contributed towards improving the cultural, social, and learning outcomes of their Māori students. This success, in turn, strengthened the schools' relationships with their families.

Building trust within these relationships creates the space for families and for professionals and teachers alike to share their expertise and learn from each other in order to increase student participation and enhance and improve the practices that are implemented with their students. This philosophy is supported in the whakatauki¹⁹ "ehara taku toa i te toa takitahi, engari te toa takitini (my strength is not with the individual, but with the many)". This advocates the importance of drawing on the experiences, understandings and knowledge of all people in the community in order to collaborate and work together as one entity in setting and achieving a common focus or goal.

Māori traditionally have a culture that is based on inclusion, and a collective approach to learning and teaching that values all students and takes responsibility for finding ways to meet their needs be they intellectual, physical, spiritual and connected and included with family. In New Zealand, many of the most successful interventions for Māori students experiencing behavioural and learning difficulties have been initiatives from Māori educators that are derived from a

¹⁵ Commitment and care

¹⁶ Genealogical connections

¹⁷ The ancient world of the Māori

¹⁸ The contemporary world, today's world

¹⁹ Proverbial saying or statement

Māori worldview. The specific values, beliefs and structures within Māori society, driven by kaupapa Māori ideologies and practices can help to ensure cultural, collective, collaborative, consensus and controlled representation by all, and for all. However, in order for this to transpire mainstream educators must acknowledge the mana and expertise of Māori, be prepared to work collaboratively in a culturally competent manner, to learn from Māori and change their behaviour accordingly.

SUMMARY

Within a culturally responsive whānau relations model, power sharing and collaboration is paramount. This narrative of experience provides an example of effective inclusion resulting from a collective and collaborative approach to participation and problem solving that is based on what people can do together rather than on what they can do alone. Contexts such as this ensure students themselves, their families and their educators are all able to bring their own expertise to defining not only the problem but also the solutions. From a Māori worldview there are no individual benefits but rather collective ones, and interdependence is just as valid as independence. These collective ways of working provide a culturally responsive and appropriate platform for generating effective practices that can enhance and sustain the cultural, social and learning needs of all, including students with behavioural needs.

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AUTHOR PROFILES

Mere Berryman



Tracey Togo



Mere Berryman

Iwi: Ngāi Tūhoe

Tracey Togo

Iwi: Ngāti Ranginui, Ngāti Awa

Mere Berryman and Tracey Togo are researchers from the Ministry of Education, Special Education Poutama Pounamu Education Research and Development Centre. Our work aims to investigate and develop culturally responsive approaches for supporting Māori students and their families in a range of Māori and English language educational settings. Sociocultural approaches to learning and development acknowledge the importance of learners developing relationships, and engaging in learning interactions with more skilled others, from within their own cultural experiences. We have found this to be of fundamental importance if students are to assume autonomy over their own learning.