

## Seven

### Addressing Diversity Race, Ethnicity, and Culture in the Classroom

*Russell Bishop*

A common question asked by practitioners is “Isn’t what you described just ‘good teaching?’” And, while I do not deny that it is good teaching, I pose a counter question: why does so little of it seem to occur in classrooms populated by African-American students? (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 484)

We are dealing, it would seem, not so much with culturally deprived children as with culturally deprived schools. And the task to be accomplished is not to revise, and amend, and repair deficient children, but to alter and transform the atmosphere and operations of the schools to which we commit these children. Only by changing the nature of the educational experience can we change the product. To continue to define the difficulty as inherent in the raw material, the children—is plainly to blame the victim and to acquiesce in the continuation of educational inequality. (Ryan, 1976, pp. 61–62)

The widely accepted educational goals for Maori, established at the first Hui Taumata Ma-tauranga held in 2001, are that Maori ought to be able to live as Maori, actively participate as citizens of the world, and enjoy both good health and high standards of living (Durie, 2001). Together with the government goals of equipping learners with twenty-first century skills and reducing systemic underachievement in education, these goals inform the new 2008–2012 Maori Education Strategy, *Ka Hikitia—Managing for Success* (Ministry of Education, 2007), which has as its main strategic outcome: *Maori students enjoying education success as Maori*. Within this frame, there are four student outcomes for Maori: learning to learn, making a distinctive cultural contribution, contributing to Te Ao Maori, and contributing to Aotearoa/New Zealand and the world.

It is unfortunate that, despite these aspirations, statistical data consistently show the persistence of continuing social, economic, and political disparities within our nation, primarily between the descendents of the European colonisers and the indigenous Maori people. Maori have higher levels of unemployment, are more likely to be employed in low-paying jobs, have much higher levels of incarceration, illness and poverty than the rest of the population and

are generally under-represented in the positive social and economic indicators of the society. These disparities are reflected at all levels of the education system.

In comparison to majority culture students (in New Zealand they are primarily of European descent), the overall academic achievement levels of Maori students is low (6.9% of Maori boys and 11.5% of Maori girls achieve university entrance, compared to 28.9% and 39% of their non-Maori counterparts); approximately 50% of Maori students leave school without any qualifications, compared to 21% of non-Maori students; 8% of Maori boys and 13% of Maori girls left school in 2005 with a level 3 qualification compared to 28% and 49% for non-Maori respectively; their retention rate to age 17 is 60% of that of their non-Maori counterparts; their rate of suspension from school is three to five times higher, depending on gender; they are over-represented in special education programmes for behavioral issues; enrol in pre-school programmes in lower proportions than other groups; tend to be over-represented in low-stream education classes; are more likely than other students to be found in vocational curriculum streams; leave school earlier, with fewer formal qualifications (41% Maori boys, 39% Maori girls, cf. 18% and 11% respectively, left school before age sixteen), and enroll in tertiary education in lower proportions.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the choice provided by Maori medium education in New Zealand, decades of educational reforms, policies such as multiculturalism and biculturalism, and models of reform that have emphasised the deficiencies, for example, of homes in terms of literacy resources (Nash, 1993), or, more recently, the neurophilosophy claims about the deficiencies of the brain (Clark, 2006), have resulted in little, if any, shift in these disparities for the large proportion of Maori students attending mainstream schools since they were first statistically identified over forty years ago (Hunn, 1960). These outcomes stand in sharp contrast to the aforementioned goals, and it is suggested that, while these outcomes are most clearly exhibited in secondary schools, the foundations for these problems commence in the primary school years. Indeed, while there are achievement differentials evident on children entering primary school, there are indications (Crooks, Hamilton, & Caygill, 2000; Wylie, Thompson, & Lythe, 1999), that by years four and five, these differentials begin to stand out starkly.

## The Need for an Explanatory/Theoretical Framework

Teachers require an explanatory theory of how different ways of managing the classroom and creating activities are related to student outcomes. (Alton-Lee, 2006, p. 618)

Just how this situation of educational disparity has arisen has been the subject of much debate over the years. Whatever the case, what is important to the Maori people is that the debate does not just focus on causes but, rather, on solutions. However, even this is not as simple as it might appear. Hattie's (2003a) meta-analyses on the influences on student achievement have led him to conclude that "almost all things we do in the name of education have a positive effect on achievement" (p. 4). However, not all effects are equal.

With this caution in mind, two recent studies (Bishop et al., 2003; Bishop et al., 2007), considered the relative importance of such influences on student achievement as whanau, home and community, classroom relationships and pedagogy, teachers, schools and school systems, students themselves, and a multitude of other contributing and confounding factors

on learning and achievement, including external socio-economic contexts and systemic and structural conditions. In both of these studies,<sup>2</sup> we spoke with and listened to Maori students talk about their schooling experiences in secondary schools, and the meanings these experiences in mainstream settings (where over 90% of Maori students participate) had for them and for other young Maori people. Both groups of students, in 2003 and again in 2007, identified the development of a caring and learning relationship between teacher and student as the crucial factor in their being able to effectively engage in education. Importantly, in both cases, students (and their whanau) understood themselves to be powerless to make the changes needed to bring about such relationships where they did not already exist and that it was the teachers who had the power to bring about the necessary changes.

The recent large meta-analyses by Hattie (1999, 2003a, 2003b) and Alton-Lee (2003) support the understandings of these young Maori people and their families by telling us that the most important systemic influence on children's educational achievement is the teacher. This is not to deny that other broad factors, such as the prior learning and experiences that the child brings to school, the socio-economic background of the child's family, the structures and history of the school, and the impoverishment of Maori, socially constructed by the processes of colonisation, are not important; it is just that teacher effectiveness stands out as the most easily alterable from within the school system. It is what transcends influences external to the classroom when the student is at school that is the focus of most of the work that seeks to improve the educational futures of all students. Further, as Hattie suggested, this is the most useful site for the provision of professional learning opportunities for teachers when seeking to change the learning culture in schools and to reduce the persistent disparities in educational achievement. This position is supported by numerous international scholars, including Sidorkin (2002), Fullan (2003), Hargreaves (2005), and Elmore (2007), among others, who advocate that changing classroom practices and modifying school structures to accommodate and support these changes are the most likely strategies to improve student performance.

Using Smith's (1997) terms, it is clear that these somewhat 'culturalist' approaches stand in contrast to the more 'structuralist' notions of Nash (1993), Chapple, Jeffries and Walker (1997), and Thrupp (2001, 2007), among others, who advocate a social stratification (low social class, low socio-economic status and resource/cultural deprivation) argument that being poor or poorly resourced inevitably leads to poor educational achievement. Much research in this area looks at the associations between variables such as socio-economic status, ethnicity and other family attributes, and the resulting achievement in ways that suggest that such variables predetermine, or at least strongly influence, achievement outcomes. Anyon (1997, cited in Thrupp, 2001), speaks for this group when she states that:

Unfortunately educational "small victories" such as restructuring of a school or the introduction of a new pedagogical technique, no matter how satisfying to the individuals involved, without the long-range strategy to eradicate underlying causes of poverty and racial isolation, cannot add up to large victories in our inner cities with effects that are sustainable over time. (p. 20)

Nonetheless, both sets of arguments pose problems for educational practitioners in their search for improvement. The culturalist arguments tend to ignore or downplay the impact of structural impediments on student achievement, whereas the structuralist positions tend to promote the argument that teachers do not have agency in their practice in that there appears

to be little that teachers can achieve in the face of overwhelming structural impediments, such as ‘school mix’ and structural poverty.

Whilst often seen in opposition to each other, both the culturalist and the structuralist or contextualist arguments provide necessary, but not sufficient, conditions for educational reform; the former downplaying external considerations, the latter downplaying internal relationships and interactions, along with teacher agency. Culturalists quite rightly point to the need for pedagogy reform and changes to the school culture as being necessary, but they tend to ignore the lived reality of Maori people—what Ballard (2007) identified as the “racialised social context” of current New Zealand society—and promote a ‘universalist’ approach or “pedagogy for all” such as Australia’s quality education movement, with its focus on providing quality education for all as a means of addressing the increasing diversity and disparity in the schooling population. Structuralists, while quite rightly identifying that children who do not do well in school come from cultural groups not respected by the majority (Ballard, 2007) and that social inequality affects both individuals and schools, tend to forget that schools have long ‘called the shots’ over what constitutes learning, how relationships between home and schools will be established, and the type of interactions that will take place both between the home and the school and within the classroom itself. However, neither group of theorists has an adequate means of identifying how power differentials are played out in classrooms on a day-to-day basis and the part that teachers, school leaders, and policy makers may play (albeit unwittingly) in the perpetuation of power imbalances and educational disparities. Ironically, Maori students and their families are only too aware of how their power imbalances are played out (Bishop & Berryman, 2006). As Alton-Lee (2003) and Timperley et al. (2007), along with G. Smith (1997) and other Kaupapa Maori theorists in New Zealand and Freire (1997), McLaren (2003), Kincheloe and Steinberg (1997), and Valencia (1997) elsewhere, emphasise, the product of long-term power imbalances needs to be examined by educators at all levels, both in terms of their own cultural assumptions and in a consideration of how they themselves might be participating in the systematic marginalisation of their students. Smith (1997) warns that neither culturalist nor structuralist analyses can satisfactorily account for Maori language, knowledge, and cultural aspirations as major components of existing and developing educational interventions for Maori. For Smith (1997), what is needed is a model that locates culture<sup>3</sup> at the centre of educational reform in the face of deeper structural limitations, in the same manner as that practiced by the Kaupapa Maori educational initiatives of Kohanga Reo and Kura Kaupapa Maori. To Smith (1997), these later institutions have developed “our forms of resistance and transformative praxis which engage both culturalist and structuralist concerns” (p. 222). Therefore, this understanding, developed in Maori medium schooling, offers the English medium sector a model that addresses both the concerns and limitations of the culturalist and structuralist positions, yet also includes a means whereby educators at all levels of the education system can critically reflect upon the part they might play in the wider power plays that mediate Maori participation in the benefits that education has to offer.

Harker (2007) demonstrates such positioning when reconsidering the large data sets of the Smithfield (1994) studies and the Progress at School (1991) studies. He concludes that:

It is clear from the data presented here that any uni-causal explanation based on socio-economic circumstances is inadequate to explain ethnic differences, thus supporting the caution expressed in Biddulph’s BES (Biddulph et al, 2003). The most likely explanation would seem to lie in the interaction between

school environments and the values, attitudes, motivations that underpin the school “culture” and the culture of the home and community environments and the values, attitudes and motivations on which they are based. (p. 17)

Harker goes on to suggest that:

While it is important (even necessary) for the family and community culture of the students to be understood and supported by schools, it is also important (even necessary) for the culture of the school to be understood and supported by families and communities. (p. 17)

Harker (2007) is promoting an analysis that is not based on either a ‘schools/teachers barrier’ culturalist argument or a ‘home/society barrier’ structuralist argument. He is, in fact, identifying the discursive shift that has been taking place in New Zealand’s educational theorising recently when he suggests moving from positioning oneself within either a structuralist or a culturalist mode of explanation towards drawing from more interactive, relational discourses. In this latter mode, as Harker suggests, we are able to see that the arguments about whether “schools make the difference,” or “it is down to the family” are really not useful arguments. It is more a function of the interactions between these two sets of players that offers us explanations of variation in achievement and more importantly, provide us with solutions to problems of educational disparities.

Such a relational theory is put forward in Bishop (2007) and Bishop et al. (2007), where Maori aspirations for self-determination are placed at the centre of the theoretical frame. Self-determination in Durie’s (1995) terms “captures a sense of Maori ownership and active control over the future” (p. 16). Nevertheless, despite the fact that self-determination means having the right to determine one’s own destiny, to define what that destiny will be, and to define and pursue means of attaining it, there is a clear understanding among Maori people that this autonomy is relative, not absolute, that it is self-determination *in relation to others*. As such, Maori calls for self-determination are often misunderstood by non-Maori people. It is not a call for separatism or non-interference, nor is it a call for non-Maori people to stand back and leave Maori alone, in effect to relinquish all responsibility for the ongoing relationship between the peoples of New Zealand. Rather, it is a call for all those involved in education in New Zealand to reposition themselves in relation to the emerging aspirations of Maori people for an autonomous voice and successful participation in mainstream society (Bishop, 1994; Smith, 1997; Durie, 1998). In other words, the Kaupapa Maori position seeks to operationalise Maori people’s aspirations to restructure power relationships to the point where partners can be autonomous and interact from this position rather than from one of subordination or dominance; and this should take place at all levels of education.

Young (2004), explains that indigenous peoples’ aspirations for self-determination are relational, acknowledge interdependence, and “are better understood as a quest for an institutional context of non-domination” (p. 187). That is, being self-determining is possible if the relations among peoples and individuals are non-dominating. To ensure non-domination, “their relations must be regulated both by the institutions in which they all participate and by ongoing negotiations among them” (Young, 2004, p. 177). Therefore, the implications of this position are that educational institutions and classrooms should be structured and conducted in such a way as to seek to mediate these potential tensions by actively minimizing domination, co-ordinating actions, resolving conflicts, and negotiating relationships. In Young’s terms, this

is an education where power is shared between self-determining individuals within non-dominating relations of interdependence.

### *Discursive (Re)Positioning in the Classroom*

To illustrate how useful it is to theorise from a relational rather than a culturalist or structuralist discourse, we can examine the problem as it was presented to us by many teachers in our 2001 and 2005/6 interviews (Bishop et al., 2003, 2007) about why they, with the best intentions in the world, were frustrated in their attempts to reach Maori learners. From a relational positioning, Bruner (1996) offers a solution by identifying that when teaching occurs, progress is decided upon and practices modified as “a direct reflection of the beliefs and assumptions the teacher holds about the learner” (p. 47). This means that “. . . our interactions with others are deeply affected by our everyday intuitive theorizing about how other minds work” (p. 45). In other words, our actions as teachers, parents, or whoever we are at that particular time are driven by the mental images or understandings that we have of other people. For example, if we think that other people have deficiencies, then our actions will tend to follow this thinking, and the relationships and interactions we have with such people will tend to be negative and unproductive. That is, despite our having good intentions, if we lead the students with whom we interact to believe that we think they are deficient, they will respond negatively. We were told time and again by many of the interview participants in 2001 (Bishop & Berryman, 2006) and again in 2007 (Bishop et al., 2007), that negative, deficit thinking on the part of teachers was fundamental to the development of negative relations and interactions with students, resulting in frustration and anger for all concerned. In 2001, the students, their whānau, the principals, and the teachers gave us numerous examples of the negative aspects of such thinking, the resultant problematic and resistant behaviors, and the frustrating consequences for both students and teachers. The teachers spoke of their frustration and anger; the students spoke about negative relations being an assault on their identity as Maori people and their basic need to be accepted. They told us that they aspired to learn but said that negative actions by teachers precluded them from participating in what the school had to offer.

Such understandings have major implications, both for teachers hoping to be agentic in their classrooms and for educational reformers. Elbaz (1981, 1983) explains that understanding the relationship between teachers’ theories of practice about learners and learning is fundamental to teachers being agentic. The principles teachers hold dear and the practices they employ develop from the images they hold of others. To Foucault (1972), the images that teachers create when describing their experiences are expressed in the metaphors that are part of the language of educational discourse. That is, teachers draw from a variety of discourses to make sense of the experiences they have relating to and interacting with Maori students.

Therefore, rather than being anything inherent or even biological within the students or even the teachers, it was the discourses teachers drew upon to explain their experiences that kept them frustrated and isolated. It was not their attitudes or personalities. It was what Foucault termed their “positioning within discourse.” That is, we are not *of* the explanations; rather, by drawing on particular discourses to explain and make sense of our experiences, we position ourselves within these discourses and act accordingly in our classrooms. The discourses already exist; they have been developing throughout our history, often in conflict with each other in terms of their power differentials, and, importantly for our desire to be agentic,

in terms of their practical importance. Some discourses hold solutions to problems, others don't.

The crucial implication from this analysis is that the discursive positions teachers take are the key to their ability to make a difference for Maori students. Therefore, prior to in-class type professional development to promote new quality teaching classroom practices, as culturalist theorists promote, teachers need to be provided with learning opportunities where they can critically evaluate where they discursively position themselves when constructing their own images, principles, and practices in relation to Maori students. Such an activity is necessary so that they can critically reflect upon the part they might play in the wider power plays that mediate Maori participation in the benefits that education has to offer. As we identified in 2001 when we commenced Te Kotahitanga<sup>4</sup> in secondary schools, the most teachers we spoke to at that time were positioned in discourses that limited their agency and efficacy. In particular, the discourses were those suggesting that the deficiencies posed by students, families, schools, the education system, and society create situations and problems that are far beyond the power of teachers to address in the classroom. The learning opportunities offered to teachers in the professional development programme needed to provide them with an opportunity to undertake what Davies called *discursive repositioning*, which means they need to be offered an opportunity to draw explanations and subsequent practices from alternative discourses that offer solutions instead of reinforcing problems and barriers. This approach is supported by Mazarno et al. (1995), who have identified that most educational innovations do not address the “existing framework of perceptions and beliefs, or paradigm, as part of the change process—an ontological approach” (p. 162), but rather assume “that innovation is assimilated into existing beliefs and perceptions” (p. 162). They go on to suggest the reforms more likely to succeed are those that are fundamentally ontological in nature, providing participants with an “experience of their paradigms as constructed realities, and an experience of consciousness other than the ‘I’ embedded in their paradigms” (p. 162). Or as Sleeter (2005) suggests,

[i]t is true that low expectations for students of color and students from poverty communities, buttressed by taken-for-granted acceptance of the deficit ideology, have been a rampant and persistent problem for a long time. . . therefore, empowering teachers without addressing the deficit ideology may well aggravate the problem. (p. 2)

According to Burr (1995, p. 146), we are able to reposition ourselves from one discourse to another because, while we are partly the product of discourse, we have agency that allows us to draw from other discourses to change the way we see and make sense of the world. We are free agents and we have agency; what is crucial to understand is that some of those discourses limit our power to activate our agency.

In Te Kotahitanga (Bishop et al., 2003, 2007), we use narratives of the experiences (Bishop & Berryman, 2006) of all the people most closely involved with the education of Maori students, including the young people themselves, to provide teachers with the opportunity to reflect upon the experiences of others involved in similar circumstances to themselves, including perhaps for the first time, the students. Sharing these vicarious experiences of schooling enables teachers to reflect upon their own understandings of Maori children's experiences, the nature of knowledge production, and upon their own theorizing/explanation and practice about these experiences and their likely impact upon Maori student achievement. We are

seeking to provide teachers with the opportunity to critically reflect upon their own discursive positioning and its implications for their agency and for the Maori students' learning. Where necessary, teachers are able to discursively reposition themselves from discourses that limit their agency to those where they can be agentic.

As we began to implement what became Te Kotahitanga, we also learned that positive classroom relationships and interactions were built upon positive, non-deficit thinking by teachers about students and their families. This thinking viewed the students as having many experiences that were relevant and fundamental to classroom interactions. This agentic thinking by teachers means that they see themselves as being able to solve problems that come their way; they have recourse to skills and knowledge that can help all their students to achieve, no matter what. We learned that this positive thinking was fundamental to the creation of classroom learning contexts where young Maori people are able to be Maori; where Maori students' humor was acceptable, where students could care for and learn with each other, where being different was acceptable, and where the power of the Maori students' own self-determination was fundamental to classroom relations and interactions. Indeed, it was the interdependence of self-determining participants in the classroom that created vibrant learning contexts which were, in turn, characterized by the growth and development of quality learning relations and interactions and increased student attendance, engagement, and achievement, both in school and national-based measures (see Bishop et al., 2007; Timperley et al., 2007).

Of course, discursive repositioning, while a necessary condition for educational reform, is not sufficient to bring about that reform. However, in theorising from within a relational discourse that addresses the limitations of both the culturalist position (limited consideration of the impact of power differentials within the classroom, school, and society) and the structuralist position (limited consideration of the agency of teachers, school leaders, and policy makers), all levels of education can develop a model that promotes effective and sustainable educational reform drawn from a relational discourse.

## Conclusion

The Maori students we spoke to in 2001, 2005, and 2007 (Bishop & Berryman, 2006; Bishop et al., 2007), spoke at length about the importance of *whakawhānaungatanga* and *whānaungatanga*, that is, the process of establishing relationships and the quality of the relationships that are established for their engagement with learning and eventual achievement. Similarly, the teachers who positioned themselves within the relational discourse in 2001 and 2005 emphasised the importance of relationships at all levels of the project: within the classroom, between facilitators and themselves, and also between themselves and their management, parents, and community members.

Sidorkin (2002) suggests that these people offer something very valuable to the theorising about educational reform in mainstream education. In making his case for the primacy of a pedagogy of relations, he cites Margonis, who calls for "adopting an ontological attitude towards educational relationships" (p. 86). He explains that Margonis "suggests that relationships ontologically precede the intrinsic motivation for learning and should therefore be placed at the center of educational theory" (p. 870), meaning that establishing relations is a central part of reform activities. We need to be critical of theories positioned within the discourses of individual or cultural deficiencies that assign blame to individual students' lack

of motivation, character defects, or their home's lack of scholastic preparation or support. Of course, assigning blame to individuals because of their membership in a particular group is simply unacceptable, as it is racist, sexist, or ageist. Like Deschenes et al. (2001), we also need to be critical of simply re-assigning blame to the schools or to the education system at a structural or systemic level. These latter theories identify that schools are too rigid to cater to ethnic, racial, or cultural diversity and/or that students fail because their cultural backgrounds are too different from the culture of the school. What is significant about these theories is that they assign blame outside the location where the solutions for classroom teachers lie. In doing so, they still leave teacher-student interactions and relationships of power outside the equation and focus on blaming others or, worse still, blame themselves for educational problems.

It is clear from what the students told us in 2001 and again in 2004 and 2005, that the quality of the relationships that are established in classrooms affects their attendance, learning, and achievement. This finding means that, while we cannot ignore the impact of structural impediments, such as socially constructed impoverishment, we cannot allow this analysis to disempower teachers from action. Teacher action is central to educational reform, for, as Elmore (2007) attests, the key to change is *teacher action supported by responsive structural reform*. Hattie (2003a) and Alton-Lee (2003) are clear that it is teachers who have the potential to change the educational outcomes of Maori students. So too are Phillips, McNaughton, and MacDonald (2001), who, in a study that indicated how Maori and Pasifika new-entrant students' reading scores could be improved by addressing teachers' expectations of their learning, found that "low rates of progress in literacy are neither inevitable nor unchangeable in low decile schools. Educators working in these environments can help bring children up to speed—to expected levels of achievement" (p. 10).

The model provided here suggests a means of building on these groundbreaking studies, for it is in the classroom that change begins with the discursive (re)positioning of teachers within a relational discourse. It is, then, the development of support for the range of necessary structural transformations that will bring about the reduction in the socially constructed impediments to Maori fully participating in the benefits that New Zealand society and economy have to offer.

## Notes

1. I am very grateful to David Hood for this analysis of the recent statistics.
2. In Bishop et al., 2003, we reported on the initial study of Maori secondary school students' schooling experiences, the narratives of which appear in Bishop and Berryman (2006). The second study, Bishop et al., 2007, reported on the experiences of Maori secondary school students in the classrooms of teachers who had been identified as effective implementers of the Te Kotahitanga Effective Teaching Profile by students, project facilitators, principals and data from formal observations in their classrooms.
3. Unfortunately culture is a much abused term and appears to be used in two ways in this chapter. However, both uses are covered by the definition of culture promoted by Quest Rapuara (1992) but different emphasis is given to usage of the term in this chapter. The first refers there to the sense-meaning making systems of a group of people and the second is the more descriptive notion of the culture of a school.

4. Te Kotahitanga is a New Zealand Ministry of Education funded research and professional development project that seeks to improve the educational achievement of Maori students in English-medium mainstream secondary schools. [www.tekotahitanga.com](http://www.tekotahitanga.com)

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