

DEVELOPMENTS IN BRIDGING EDUCATION FOR MAORI

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Maori mainstream education is at crisis point; a situation reflected in recent figures showing that 35 per cent of Maori leave school without formal qualifications. The presenter, who works in the area of bridging education for under-qualified students wanting to move into tertiary study, believes Maori bridging programmes have a vital role to play in helping to solve this crisis. In examining current bridging education pedagogy and relating it to pedagogical theory and practice, it is concluded that mainstream bridging programmes do not cater for Maori needs and the development of initiatives intended to bridge this gap are discussed.

Introduction

This paper addresses the issue of inequity in our education system in relation to Maori education, and develops a case for bridging education based on a curriculum structured to challenge the either/or dichotomy of western educational thinking.

I will begin by outlining the present position of Maori in mainstream education and go on to discuss what I believe are some of the factors that keep education for Maori marginalised. I will then present a case for bridging education as a medium for change. In doing this I will discuss research I have carried out in this area. I will conclude with a brief overview of Maia – the Maori Development Centre – and Whitinga – the combined Puukenga-Centre for Foundation Studies bridging to tertiary studies programme.

Maori in Education

The Treaty of Waitangi guarantees Maori, in the English version, “all the Rights and Privileges of British Subjects” or, in the translated words of the Maori version, “the same rights and duties of citizenship as the people of England”. All New Zealand citizens are entitled to a certain number of years schooling as an educational right. How that schooling relates to your future as a citizen of New Zealand would appear, however, to be very much dependent on whether you are Maori or Pakeha.

A headline in the *New Zealand Herald* recently proclaimed: “Maori students at crisis point: experts”. In 1997, 62 percent of Pakeha passed School Certificate as opposed to 34 percent of Maori; 60 percent of Maori students passed seventh-form bursary, compared to a pass rate of 79 per cent for Pakeha students, and Maori students accounted for almost half of the 2336 school suspensions, although Maori comprised only 20 per cent of the school population (*New Zealand Herald*, May 6, 1998). In 1995 (the latest figures available), 35 per cent of Maori left school without any formal qualification – half the rate for non-Maori school leavers (Te Puni Kokiri, 1997: 18).

Education initiatives to entice Maori into further education become imperative if this cycle is to be broken. However, while it is all very well to entice people into courses, it is also vital that those courses are structured with the learning styles and particular needs of the target students in mind – one size does not fit all! All the compensatory education programmes in the world will not lead to equality of opportunity if they are imposed on students with the aim of making them conform to the norms of the dominant culture.

The power of Western ideology

While we live in a society that promotes a belief in equality of rights, I would argue that democracy is, in fact, threatened by the continued inability of those who have been marginalised as Other to validate their knowledge in the public arena. The language used by those framing the discourses emanating from the centre, while often purporting to acknowledge the rights of those at the margins, is usually more intent on solidifying boundaries than attempting to cross them (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991: 64).

The discourses of education are intent on promoting learning theories based on the idealistic dream that institutes of education are places where the slate is wiped clean as the students walk through the door each day. This system, devised as it was by the powerful centre and aimed at maintaining its ideals, denies the validity of individual difference by ignoring the place each student's particular history plays in his or her ability to learn (Trewartha, 1993: 58). If we continue to teach in a climate that promotes values in the context of an either/or dichotomy, why are we surprised when students show little interest in relating to the curriculum – a curriculum that alienates them as Other by refusing to acknowledge, much less validate, their realities.

Bridging education as a medium of change

In providing second chance education, bridging education would, ideally, be the place for Maori to develop programmes that cross the boundaries. In 1997, having taught on a bridging education programme at a large New Zealand technical institute for two years, I started to question why there were so few Maori students on our programme. When talking about this with other tutors, it seemed to me that the boundaries were well and truly entrenched i.e. most people based their ideas for changing this situation on the deficit model – a belief that more of the same type of education would lead to educational improvements for 'them' by making 'them' more like 'us'. 'They' just had to realise that this was what was necessary. Encouraged by my Maori colleagues, I decided to carry out some research to find out what really was needed for Maori to succeed in bridging education programmes.

The goal of my pilot research project was to develop an understanding of the pedagogy most likely to lead to successful bridging programmes for Maori students. My objective was to determine the nature and extent of the theoretical foundations of bridging education programmes at three tertiary institutes in New Zealand.

Research

I started by carrying out a literature review to examine current pedagogical theory in the area. I wanted to know what pedagogies the theorists, and people currently working in the area of

bridging education, had discovered worked best, and to identify the philosophical underpinnings of those pedagogies. Focused interviews were then used to interview administrators, lecturers and students in the three programmes. The key pedagogical/philosophical foundations identified by these interviewees were then analysed to determine congruency with the programme mission statements, and also to ascertain to what extent they reflected current theory in providing the basis for successful bridging education programmes.

Pedagogical Theory

An examination of the literature lead me back to earlier research I had carried out on critical theory and the development of liberatory pedagogies. Lather states, that “All pedagogies are situated – specific and contingent to the cultural fields within which they operate” (1992: 121). The task of liberatory pedagogy is not only to unmask knowledge that has been deliberately hidden; its task is also to unmask the political agendas informing social practices that have condoned the continued elevation of the knowledge of the dominant culture as superior to the knowledges of the Other.

Maori students come into the bridging education classroom after, at the very least, frustrating, and at the worst, deeply alienating, experiences in the classrooms of the traditional education system, where their knowledge is classified as Other and disregarded in favour of that promoted by the dominant Pakeha culture. How, then, can Maori move from the position of Other in the Aotearoa educational system to a position where the “Rights and Privileges”, guaranteed to them under the Treaty of Waitangi, are not solely those of the Pakeha majority? Addressing this issue Graham Smith speaks of a “a new theory of change” that “has emerged ... out of ... Maori resistance initiatives”. This new initiative, developed from within the Maori community and “generalised under the label of Kaupapa Maori”, ... “advocates excellence” within both Maori and Pakeha culture – “It is not an either/or choice – they want full access to both cultural frameworks” (Smith, 1997: 388). Kaupapa Maori is the “inclusive term which Maori people themselves employ to describe: ‘A Maori way of thinking and doing things which feels culturally appropriate and which takes seriously our [Maori] aspirations’ – (Fieldnotes: Maori secondary school teacher, 1990)” (Smith, 1997: 96).

From this, all too brief, foray into the world of pedagogical thought, elements I believe a Maori bridging pedagogy might consist of include: a commitment to questioning the values of the dominant Pakeha society, situated in a context that validates Maori ways of working and Maori values; a curriculum, based not only on Pakeha knowledge but incorporating the best thinking of both cultures; a “culturally democratic environment” (Darder, 1991: 71); and teachers who work with students to produce understandings of the complexities of knowledge.

Bridging Programmes

In carrying out my research, the first programme I looked at (Programme A) is a bridging programme aimed at helping women, who have been out of the education system for some time, or who feel the education system has not previously met their needs, to explore education and career options.

The statement of values in the programme outline includes the following: a commitment to “honour and implement the Treaty of Waitangi” within a “bicultural perspective which recognises the rights of the Tangata Whenua” and “acknowledges that there is a power structure within New Zealand society ... where values of one culture frequently override that of another”, and an undertaking to value individual differences and people’s past life experience and knowledge as “formal study” including “the cultural expression of every individual”.

The teachers I interviewed all voiced a strong belief in Freire’s pedagogical theory, and in holistic principles of learning and there was evidence in the curriculum of respect for all knowledge as a valuable tool in developing political consciousness.

The second programme (Programme B), is exclusively for Maori students and is primarily designed to “strengthen the academic base” of Maori “who are considering undertaking a degree”. This programme caters for students who require bridging to further tertiary study and aims to provide “a context which acknowledges, validates and strengthens students’ identity as Maori”.

On this programme the two teachers I interviewed agreed that their philosophy was embodied in the Maori principles of whanaungatanga (taking time to come together as one) and manaakitanga (caring for people). They believe that students share ownership of the knowledge and that teaching in a Maori context will enhance learning.

While these first two programmes have a narrower focus, in that the first one is for women and the second for Maori, the last of the three (Programme C), situated in a large polytechnic, has a much broader clientele. The programme charter states that its mission is to: “Prepare students academically and socially for further education, training and employment”. Tutors interviewed spoke of a desire to provide the best possible environment for students, and voiced the belief that students’ previous failures were often the result of an inequitable educational environment. They could not, however, cite any particular philosophy or pedagogy they believed the programme was based on, other than a belief that pastoral care was an important aspect of the programme. Nobody mentioned the commitment to biculturalism in the programme charter and neither was this evident in any of the programme material I examined.

This is, necessarily, only a brief overview of my research. However, I believe that it does provide enough material to reflect on the role of philosophy and pedagogy in bridging education programmes and, in particular, the role they play in providing a safe learning environment for Maori students.

While students on all the programmes were glowing in their praise of the commitment tutors provided in supporting them, Programme C does not attract Maori students. I believe this is because there is no pedagogical commitment in this programme to provide a learning environment based on Maori values. It would appear that Maori students are more likely to enrol in programmes where there is evidence, in the programme outline and course content, of a commitment to a pedagogy based on Maori values.

New Initiatives

As part of the background to my research, I visited Australia with a colleague who was, at the time, on the staff of Te Tari Awhina, The Learning Support Centre at UNITEC, to view bridging programmes for Aboriginal students. We were inspired by programmes at several universities, which had support centres offering a wide variety of services intended to cover all aspects of Aboriginal students' tertiary experience – from initial programme inquiries to cultural, academic and personal support. We felt this acknowledged the unique cultural and educational needs of Aboriginal students in a way that was not available to Maori students in New Zealand.

On our return my colleague, Yvonne Hawke, began working with the UNITEC administration to set up a similar centre at UNITEC. As a result Maia – the Maori Development Centre – will have its official opening later this month. Maia promotes itself as “one of UNITEC’s initiatives to improve the participation and success of Maori students on campus” and offers support services for all Maori students enrolled at UNITEC. These services are divided into three main categories – academic support, pastoral guidance and cultural support – although in practice, they will, of course, overlap. “Maia’s aim is to provide a ‘one stop shop’ for Maori students.” The staff at the centre are all Maori and the centre reflects Maori cultural values and aspirations, not only in the support services it offers to students but also in the way it is managed and promoted.

At the same time the Centre for Foundation Studies – the main provider of bridging education programmes at UNITEC – and Puukenga, the Maori Studies Centre, which runs a bridging programme to Community Studies for Maori, carried out a revision of their two programmes and agreed to combine them. Puukenga recognised a need for their programme to provide a stronger emphasis on academic skills, whereas the Centre for Foundation Studies acknowledged the research evidence indicating a need to incorporate a Maori kaupapa into their programme if they were to attract more Maori students. It is believed that this change of direction will benefit both Maori and Pakeha students as it will introduce new strategies, aimed at strengthening the goal of both centres to provide bridging education in a holistic environment. Early discussion papers laid the basis for the programme philosophy by stating: “Students will be supported in a holistic way that recognises each student’s challenges and aspirations. Manaakitanga (care and support) and whanaungatanga (relationships) will be central to this programme”.

To allow students already on the two programmes to complete their courses, this new programme – Whitinga – will begin in 2000. Elements of it will, however, be introduced next year. The core of the programme, which was developed after consultation with staff, current and past students, and representatives of faculty across the campus, will be a nine-hour course, Tertiary Studies, available at two levels. This course, which will also act as a ‘home’ group for students, will consist of Study Skills, English and Communication Skills, with the content based on a critical examination of the meaning of government and society in Aotearoa. It is expected that students who are unable to demonstrate competency in basic computing and maths will undertake courses to acquire these skills. Specialist maths options will also be available eg Maths for Nurses, and there will be a variety of other optional courses aimed at meeting students’ future educational needs.

Conclusion

The crisis in Maori education is not going to disappear and government interventions have, so far, produced little in the way of tangible results. Based on research and theory, both Maia and Whitinga are initiatives which reflect the values of a Maori kaupapa – values that are indicated as vital in programmes aimed at achieving an environment conducive to Maori educational success. Staff have agreed to employ the values of manaakitanga and whanaungatanga, not only in the delivery of their programmes but also in supporting each other in their development, so that both students and staff, Maori and Pakeha, will be working in an environment that is both challenging and supportive. It is expected that further research will provide opportunities for others to benefit from the experiences of those who have developed and worked on these programmes, and it is hoped that this cooperative effort will be a step in the direction of improving Maori educational achievement.

Finally, I want to reflect on the effect this research has had on my own teaching practice. In deciding whether I should even be researching in this area, I felt I first had to acknowledge my position as a white, middle-class, teacher trained in the discourse of the centre. I thought I ‘knew’ what it meant to be at the centre and how I could acknowledge the power that gave me, but that I could then let it go and teach in a way that crossed the boundaries. In carrying out this research I discovered that I was fooling myself. While I *said*, ‘It’s never the student’s fault’, early in the project I admitted to myself that I did believe that it was their ‘fault’ if they could not learn what I was teaching them. In other words, I was still acting as though my way was the only way. I also realised that for students to want to keep coming to bridging education programmes it is vital that they see, in those first few days, that this is a place that does not set out to judge them but values them, and all their baggage, as a person who has the ability to learn and achieve.

I had to stop blaming the system for the way I taught and acknowledge my fear of moving out of my safety zone – of crossing the boundaries. After a year of agonising over my teaching methods, I feel I am finally starting to ‘get it’ – my classes are happier places to be in and my students are sharing more of their lives with me.

As a researcher it is vital, I believe, to be able to cross boundaries and I want to thank my Maori colleagues and the teachers I interviewed for showing me how far I had to go in that direction.

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