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How Effective are (Bi)culturally Responsive Pedagogies at Improving Educational Outcomes for Māori Students in Mainstream Secondary Schools?

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Kei hopu tōu ringa ki te aka tāepa, engari kia mau ki te aka matua.
*Cling to the main vine, not the loose one.*¹

Introduction

Disparities in educational outcomes between Māori and non-Māori students remain a concern in New Zealand (Bishop, 2012; Bolton, 2017; Donaldson, 2012; Lourie, 2021; Ministry of Education [MoE], 2020). Recent policy documents framed through notions of ‘effectiveness’ (e.g., Education Council, 2011; MoE, 2013, 2020) champion culturally responsive pedagogies (CRPs) to address the “achievement gap” (Turner et al., 2015, p. 55) in mainstream secondary schools.² Here, I interrogate this claim through close analysis of the Te Kotahitanga project led by Russell Bishop which, despite extensive government support, including a \$42 million investment to restart the initiative (MoE, 2019), has limited conceptual and empirical grounding. I then consider broader understandings of effectiveness that might better capture the benefits of CRPs but argue, drawing on social realist criticism, that some practices may paradoxically lead to *poorer* educational experiences for many Māori students by restricting access to disciplinary knowledge. I conclude that CRPs have variable effectiveness and are unlikely – on their own, at least – to greatly improve educational outcomes for Māori.

Relationships between culture and Māori educational achievement

The ‘culture thesis’ (Cooper, 2012) or simply ‘culturalism’ (Chandra & Karem, 2018; Lourie & Rata, 2014; Openshaw, 2007a, 2007b) posits that cultural differences between Māori and non-Māori are essential to explaining and resolving educational disparities. Bishop (2003) identifies a pattern of Pākehā hegemony in New Zealand schools, with Māori language, customs, and knowledge having long been suppressed, leading to “a loss of cultural esteem” (Marie et al., 2008, p. 184). Teachers’ failure to respond to the

unique characteristics of Māori learners, proponents argue, sustains current inequities (Bishop, 2003; Bishop et al., 2009; Cooper, 2012). Rather than view Māori students as lacking resources or abilities needed for success on par with Pākehā – a stance Bishop and others label ‘deficit theorising’ (Bishop, 2003; Bishop & Berryman, 2009; Bishop et al., 2009; Macfarlane et al., 2014) – teachers should utilise the knowledge and strengths Māori students provide through CRPs, thereby channelling students’ cultural assets into enhanced learning (Bishop, 2012; Bishop & Berryman, 2009; Bishop et al., 2009).

A major exploration of what this involves is Te Kotahitanga: a five-stage research project evaluating the effectiveness of CRPs designed for New Zealand’s bicultural milieu. Using interviews with 70 Māori students about their experiences (Phase 1) and international research on CRPs, Bishop et al. (2007, 2009) constructed an intervention aimed at equipping teachers to demonstrate bicultural responsiveness through an ‘Effective Teaching Profile’. The scheme was piloted in three schools (Phase 2), then implemented in 12 secondary institutions from 2004–2006 (Phase 3) (Bishop et al., 2007). Refinements were made before introducing the programme to 21 new schools in 2007–2009 (Phase 4) and an additional 16 in 2010–2012 (Phase 5) (Bishop et al., 2011; Alton-Lee, 2015). The authors reported overwhelmingly positive results for Māori students – though still with large gaps between them and their Pākehā peers – across the final three phases, including reduced problematic behaviour and suspensions, greater levels of school satisfaction, and higher percentages achieving NCEA³, alongside other measures (Alton-Lee, 2015; Bishop et al., 2009, 2014). Given the impressive breadth of the research programme, it arguably constitutes the most extensive evidence presently available for the effectiveness of CRPs in New Zealand.⁴

There are, however, limitations with Te Kotahitanga and its culturalist underpinnings, particularly that research exploring Māori achievement suggests ethnicity is not the sole relevant predictor. Marie et al. (2008) analysed data from 984 participants in the Christchurch Health and Development Study and found that while identifying as Māori was related to various measures of educational underachievement, adding socioeconomic covariates to the model reduced all but one association to statistical non-significance.⁵ Comparable results were obtained in a study of 654 Christchurch secondary students by Wall (2010), who reported that “ethnicity is not significantly related to achievement once socio-economic factors are controlled for” (p. 121). Recent work by Pomeroy (2016), though, found that ethnicity *and* socioeconomic status were both significant predictors of educational outcomes among 425 secondary learners.⁶ Strathdee (2013), Thrupp (2014), and Pomeroy (2020) each argue that excessive focus on ethnicity as a determinant of student achievement risks detracting attention from socioeconomic factors that disproportionately affect Māori learners. Bishop’s emphasis on educators’ cultural ineptitudes and blanket dismissal of explanations involving non-school reasons as deficit theorising creates what Thrupp (2014) calls a ‘politics of

blame' towards teachers, impairing the potential for CRPs to be implemented more effectively if accompanied with broader strategies to improve outcomes for Māori.

Further, the effectiveness of CRPs enacted in the Te Kotahitanga project is unclear. Openshaw (2007a, 2007b) questioned the methodological rigour of Phase 3 for having inconsistent measures of academic performance, misinterpreted effect sizes, a lack of standardised control groups, unexplained absent data from numerous schools, and various additional interventions (e.g., the Literacy Project) running simultaneously. Phases 4 and 5 mitigated several problems regarding missing data and comparison groups⁷ (Alton-Lee, 2015), but a remaining concern involves whether CRPs produced the achievement gains observed. Among the features of the Effective Teaching Profile are that teachers “have high expectations of the learning for students” and “use a range of strategies that can facilitate learning interactively” (Bishop & Berryman, 2009, p. 32). Such practices might reasonably be deemed culturally *compatible* rather than culturally *responsive*. Indeed, while achievement of both Māori and non-Māori students often improved, gains were sometimes greater for non-Māori, such as when the Effective Teaching Profile was most closely adhered to in Mathematics (Alton-Lee, 2015). Nonetheless, although the improvement attributable to CRPs is difficult to quantify, Te Kotahitanga does appear to have raised Māori academic performance to some unknown degree. Moreover, the initiative improved behaviour and enhanced Māori students' relationships with teachers: both valuable outcomes regardless of the learning benefits these changes may generate (Bishop et al., 2014; Alton-Lee, 2015).

Effectiveness, knowledge, and the purpose of education

While the effectiveness of CRPs on Māori students' achievement in literacy, numeracy, and so forth is somewhat uncertain, there may be other important knowledge gains that remain concealed through conventional assessment formats. Biesta (2006, 2007, 2009) argues that relying on evidence-based educational practices may lead to an undue focus on promoting traditional and easily measurable curriculum content at the expense of broader types of learning. In this vein, the latest edition of *Ka Hikitia* states that to facilitate students' “education[al] success as Māori”, teachers must “incorporate Māori identity, language and culture into the teaching and curriculum for Māori learners” (MoE, 2020, p. 6). This departs somewhat from the previous version's focus on narrower conceptions of success through the now-discarded goal that “85% of Māori students will be achieving at or above their appropriate national standard...in literacy and numeracy” (MoE, 2013, p. 58). Thus, perhaps the learning enhanced most by CRPs resides not in siloed academic disciplines, but rather, CRPs empower Māori students to acquire cultural knowledge and strengthen their identity.

Social realist scholars have problematised this approach, arguing that justice requires providing all learners with equitable access to “powerful knowledge” (Young, 2013,

p. 108) regardless of their sociocultural position (Lynch & Rata, 2018; Sitiene, 2021). Central to this argument is the distinction highlighted by Vygotsky (1962/1986) and Bernstein (2000) between *disciplinary* knowledge generated in scientific and academic fields and *social* or *experiential* knowledge pertaining to specific cultural groups (Rata, 2012a, 2016; Siteine, 2017, 2021; Young, 2010).⁸ Both serve important functions, but the abstract and generalised nature of disciplinary knowledge can better enable “critical reasoning and political agency” (Rata, 2012a, p. 103) whereas experiential knowledge may constrain individuals to the “subjective world of their own experience” (p. 119). Notably, social realist scholars acknowledge that drawing on experiential knowledge is a valuable pedagogical resource for guiding culturally diverse learners to engage with disciplinary knowledge, but must not supplant it (Rata, 2012a, 2015; Siteine, 2021).

CRPs recommended by the Ministry risk Māori students being inadequately provided with opportunities to acquire disciplinary knowledge. *Ka Hikitia* states that education of Māori learners should ensure that “what and how they learn reflects and positively reinforces...*what they already know*” (MoE, 2013, p. 17, my emphasis) and suggests that teachers “integrate elements of students’ identity, language, and culture into the curriculum” (p. 36). Statements of this nature can inspire potentially harmful – albeit well-intentioned – implementations in practice. Taylor (2014) found that some schools constructed non-academic science pathways for low-achieving students, who were disproportionately Māori, thereby limiting them from accessing in-depth scientific understanding. Drawing on similar observations, Lourie and Rata (2014) postulated that schools striving to be culturally responsive may opt to emphasise internal NCEA standards for Māori learners since doing so offers “greater opportunities to work collaboratively...[and] does not subject them to an assessment system that is part of a colonial school experience” (p. 24). Research by Wilson et al. (2016) corroborated this point, finding that Māori (and Pasifika) students were afforded fewer opportunities to engage with challenging texts in Level 2 English than their Pākehā counterparts and were less likely to be enrolled in external standards, leading the authors to conclude that opportunities for academic learning were restricted on the basis of ethnicity. In some cases, teachers’ attempts to respond to students’ cultural needs through CRPs may not only be ineffective, but detrimental to Māori students’ educational success.

Summary

Despite the optimism typically expressed towards CRPs, evidence for their efficacy in New Zealand is more limited than often assumed. Culturalist arguments assert that both the cause of and solution to Māori underachievement resides in the degree to which educational contexts align with students’ cultural identities, which is undermined by much empirical research. The extensive Te Kotahitanga project shows some *prima facie* promising results but is limited by methodological problems and hence provides only moderate evidence supporting CRPs as an effective means of raising achievement for

Māori learners. Moreover, social realist scholars have convincingly argued that CRPs may encourage teaching that prevents Māori students from acquiring disciplinary knowledge. CRPs certainly have benefits, but without adjustments to their present conceptualisation, they are no panacea for improving Māori educational outcomes.

Notes

¹ This whakataukī is drawn from the *New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 64).

² To narrow the scope of this paper, I omit discussion of primary settings and Māori immersion schools. (The effectiveness of CRPs in these institutional contexts has been investigated and debated elsewhere [e.g., Bishop et al., 2002; Murray, 2007; Rata, 2012b; Rata & Tamati, 2013, 2021; Siteine, 2017].)

³ Specifically, the percentage increase in Māori students obtaining NCEA qualifications for Phase 5 Te Kotahitanga schools relative to comparison schools was 10.8% vs. 4.0% for Level 1, 14.7% vs. 4.8% for Level 2, 10.0% vs. 3.4% for Level 3, and 3.1% vs. 2.7% for University Entrance (Alton-Lee, 2015).

⁴ Bolton (2017) notes that “a series of government efforts have existed over the past 15 years to increase cultural responsiveness in schools”, which have had “varying effects” (p. 44). She praises Te Kotahitanga above every other initiative listed, describing it as “a highly-successful, intensive programme for secondary school teachers to improve Māori student learning and achievement” (p. 44).

⁵ The remaining correlation after accounting for socioeconomic variables was adjusted percentage gaining a university degree by age 25. Individuals reporting sole Māori identity had a higher adjusted rate of degree attainment (16.8%) than those identifying with Māori and one or more other cultural groups (12.8%). Māori-other identification, but not sole Māori identification, was found to be different to non-Māori adjusted degree attainment (28.3%) at significant levels ($p < .05$) (Marie et al., 2008).

⁶ This finding is consistent with the latest NCEA annual report showing lower success among Māori students and those from low-decile schools. The *relative* contributions of ethnicity and socioeconomic status were not investigated in this publication, though, preventing determination of how much variation in achievement each factor accounts for (New Zealand Qualifications Authority, 2021).

⁷ Bishop acknowledges some limitations with Phases 3 and 4 of the research project in a footnote to an article published several years after many of the findings had already been widely disseminated:

“The allocation of schools and teachers to Te Kotahitanga was not undertaken randomly because it suited the Ministry of Education better to select the 12 schools in Phase 3 from those participating in the Ministry of Education (MoE) Schooling Improvement Initiative. Further, due to internal constraints upon the selection process, it suited the schools better to determine their own means of selecting teachers to participate in the project, primarily through asking for volunteers. In the case of the Phase 4 schools, the assignment of schools was through an application process that prioritised their numbers and percentage of Māori students, not their suitability for a research project.” (Bishop, 2012, p. 48)

⁸ This binary goes by various names. Vygotsky (1962/1986) employs the terms scientific/everyday, Bernstein (2000) uses vertical/horizontal, while Rata (2012a) alternates between disciplinary/social and disciplinary/experiential (see also Lourie & Rata, 2014), the latter also being used by Benade (2014). For simplicity, I will use the terms ‘disciplinary’ and ‘experiential’ to refer to these knowledge categories.

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