

The place of Cultural Standards in Indigenous Education

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Abstract: This article explores the development of cultural standards in Aotearoa New Zealand as a basis for enhancing the learning pathways of Māori children through the infusion of indigenous history, language and culture in the curriculum and milieu of primary schools. Rather than employing an *ad hoc* attachment or merely incorporating experiences of localized knowledge, an infusion of indigenous perspectives in every segment and module of the curriculum accepts the role Māori people have played in the history and culture of Aotearoa New Zealand. The cultural standards plan offers a unique opportunity for schools, Māori tribes and communities to develop a truly inclusive education for all children. It provides a way of consolidating an identity as Māori and/or New Zealander within the context of Aotearoa New Zealand. Furthermore, the development of a cultural standards plan brings into sharp focus the gaps in education where so many children are educated without knowing the history of the land, language, environment, flora and fauna specific to Aotearoa/ New Zealand. This paper highlights the issues and concerns that are highly topical, but which have received little attention in the literature.

Keywords: cultural standards; indigenous education; Māori education; tribal education development

Introduction

The place of indigenous cultural standards in education in Aotearoa/New Zealand is explored within a historical and contemporary political context. In particular the scoping efforts of the Project Team of one tribe, Ngāti Kahungunu, to plan the development of tribally specific cultural standards for primary schools as a positive approach to realising the aspirations of the tribe in building a culturally strong generation for the future. By and large this is a response by Ngāti Kahungunu to the crisis in Māori education in general and in their tribal district in particular. It is argued that since most Māori children are located in state schools the infusion of localised indigenous history, language and culture in the curriculum and school milieu is intended as a means of enhancing the learning pathways of all children and strengthening their identity as Māori and/or New Zealander. Scoping the Project Plan was developed from a kaupapa iwi perspective but its eventual implementation will depend upon the commitment of predominantly non-Māori educators and their dedication to the overall objective. In developing cultural standards in Ngāti Kahungunu, the principles of invitational education offers a theory of practice for educators and communities alike to work towards an inclusive and democratic approach to education that also corresponds with Māori centred principles and practice.

Why cultural standards?

The development of cultural standards in indigenous education in North America and in New Zealand has evolved largely as a response to nation-state education systems that, for the most part, are culturally and epistemologically disconnected from indigenous communities. The cumulative effect of this disjunction between the school habitus and that of the communities they serve is a system of schooling that continues to generate consistently high levels of poor

achievement rates and deficient educational outcomes for indigenous students when compared with all other students. Government tolerance of indigenous underachievement remains high. This level of tolerance is reinforced by decades of poor outcomes for indigenous education as a result of state schooling and evident in official documents, government funded reviews, research reports over many decades of recorded disparities. In short, indigenous children receiving nation-state education are located at the 'tail-end' or bottom 20 percent of achievers (In Hattie, 2003).

This is not to say that governments have not tried intervention strategies targeted at greater participation, increased literacy and numeracy levels, reduced truancy and suspension rates and other indicators that contribute to education success. Despite these measures, indigenous communities view state sponsored interventions as adhoc, top-down, one-size-fits all attempts, while schools typically subject indigenous children to mainstream values, ideals, and interpretations of reality (Abu-Saad & Champagne, 2006; Battiste, 2000; Fenelon & LeBeau, 2006). Furthermore, indigenous education outcomes are inevitably compared with, and measured against national and international norms, benchmarking tests and surveys embedded in western hegemonic values and ideals. Indigenous outcomes are analysed and recorded in statistical fields which forecast the distribution of social indices across nations that result in pathologising indigenous education including health, social, and economic status. These are among reasons why state education is perceived by indigenous communities as alienating systems, over reliant on a uniform provision of education services that are bureaucratic, hierarchical and unresponsive to the needs and aspirations of indigenous peoples (Fenelon & LeBeau, 2006; Tomlins-Jahnke, 2005).

Historical and political contexts

In Aotearoa/New Zealand Māori have focussed on how the disparity in positive education outcomes for Māori students might be addressed. Historically Māori have had little say in decisions that have helped shape schooling. Uptake of new technologies in the 19th century led to high literacy levels among tribes including the proliferation of tribal newspapers, large scale economic ventures in trade, industry and shipping. Education and schooling was considered a high priority. However, the dimensions of internal colonisation that beset indigenous communities elsewhere curtailed Māori prosperity through strategies of assimilation within the dominant settler society.

On a global level the dimensions of internal colonisation (Tully, 2000) are useful to explicate here because they provide the historical context within which contemporary indigenous development, including education, is located. Briefly, these dimensions include population decline through introduced diseases, wars and state policies; the usurpation of customary forms of government through various forms of assimilation and governments of dominant societies; the building of western societies on appropriated territories and vacated spaces through the displacement of decreasing indigenous populations and increasing immigrant population and capitalism for trade or resource extraction; and the modification of the processes of internal colonisation through treaty-making thereby creating 'relations of cooperation' (Tomlins-Jahnke, 2005; Tully, 2000).

The Treaty of Waitangi is one such agreement reached in 1840 between Māori tribes and the British Crown that gave permission for British entry and settlement in Aotearoa New Zealand, and ceded the responsibilities of governance to the Crown. In terms of relations of cooperation, the Treaty is a covenant between parties ostensibly "... to act in good faith towards one another in the future governance of the nation" (Tipene-Matua & Dawson, 2003, p. 61). Until the mid 1980s the Treaty had rarely been honoured by successive governments or the courts but it has remained a critical reference for Māori. As the founding document of

Aotearoa/New Zealand the Treaty of Waitangi is a key domestic human rights instrument to which Māori consult in the pursuit of social justice in education and other social and economic imperatives and for holding the Government accountable politically and morally (Iorns-Magallanes, 1999).

The incorporation of Treaty principles into legislation and New Zealand law effectively gives the principles the same binding force as any other statutory rule. In education such legislation as the Māori Language Act 1987 recognised the Māori language as a 'treasure' and subsequently declared Māori language an official language of New Zealand. The Māori Education Act 1989 enabled the establishment of a range of alternative Māori education providers; in particular, Māori language immersion preschools, elementary schools, secondary schools and Māori centred tertiary education providers.

Recently the positive inroads to Crown/Māori relations in recognising the principles of the Treaty in legislation and policy documents have been undermined by white backlash engendered by political opportunism led by the former conservative leader of the opposition Dr Don Brash. By perpetuating an illusion of Māori privilege, Dr Brash championed a policy of 'erasure' by calling for the elimination of so called 'race-based' policies (policies based on equity and justice) in favour of a 'needs based' 'one law for all' approach. The fallacy of race-based as a categorisation obscures the genuine concerns of Māori and other non-Māori experts in education, health and social policy. Labelling equity-based policies and programmes as race based confuses race with ethnicity rather than seeing such programmes as a systematic approach to focussing on Māori as the subject. This approach deflects attention from the facts and ignores the burgeoning body of empirical evidence which highlights the link between ethnicity and poor health and education outcomes including access and participation (M.O.H., 2004). Brash's policy of 'erasure' has served to obfuscate the reality of Māori people's lives by raising anti-Māori sentiment that has increased Pakeha anxiety and feelings of insecurity and hysteria against Māori assertiveness.

A major consequence of this has been the Governments political expediency in appeasing the populace by supporting Brash's policy. This is clearly articulated by the government's introduction of *The Principles of the Treaty of Waitangi Deletion Bill* currently before the New Zealand parliament, which seeks the removal of all references to the Treaty of Waitangi in legislation. In a move seen as pre-empting this bill the new draft curriculum for schools was released in 2006 with all references to the Treaty removed. This contrasts with the previous curriculum adopted in 1993 where the Treaty was one of nine guiding principles which explained that the Treaty recognised 'the unique position of Māori in New Zealand society' (Collins, 2007; MaoriParty, 2006). Widespread concern among Māori leaders and other New Zealand leaders and organisations, individuals, complaints to government and strong feedback in submissions to the Ministry of Education has resulted in the Ministry rethinking its position and admitting that it made a mistake by removing Treaty references from the draft curriculum. The Ministry has since given an undertaking to have the principles reinstated.

Implications of demographic projections

The pattern of consistent Māori underachievement evident in statistical fields of state data collected and filed over many decades seems to confirm a certain level of Government tolerance of the crisis in Māori education (O'Regan, 2007). The 2005 Ministry of Education school leaving statistics show that 53 percent of Māori boys, and just under half of all Māori have left school without a qualification (MaximInstitute, 2007). This situation has serious implications for the country's future. The demographic projections to 2021 show that Māori, Pacific, and Asian populations in Aotearoa/New Zealand will grow at a faster rate than the

European population. Moreover, higher fertility rates of the Māori and Pacific populations project higher than average growth rates. Declining European growth rates, a higher old age structure presage a lower future growth momentum for the European population compared with Māori and Pacific populations (StatisticsNewZealand, 2003) pointing to a ‘browning’ of the nation. The proportion of the population that is Māori is expected to increase while the non-Māori population is set to decrease which makes Māori education increasingly important as the population of Māori children in Aotearoa/New Zealand grows over the next two decades (MaximInstitute, 2006).

Most Māori children in Aotearoa New Zealand are located in state mainstream schools where for many there is a disjuncture between the culture of the home and that of the school, between the lived realities of family and the school habitus. The term mainstream is a euphemism or code word for schools that privilege a western/Euro-centric education tradition. Mainstream schools in Aotearoa/New Zealand are controlled by those who have political, economic and cultural power and where western values, knowledge, culture and the English language are the central focus of the school habitus. Schools incorporate aspects of Māori language and culture as additions rather than core components of the curriculum or school knowledge.

In this context what counts as school knowledge, the way school knowledge is organised, resourced, taught and evaluated, the underlying codes that structure such knowledge, access to and legitimation of school knowledge is determined by the dominant culture (Giroux, 1992; Giroux & Aronowitz, 1985; Tomlins-Jahnke, 2006). Values underscore all of these considerations, so that what values count and how values are understood, practiced and legitimised are important considerations when questions are raised about the purpose of education.

Māori tribal groups within Aotearoa/New Zealand are very clear about the purpose of education. The purpose includes the enhancement of tribal capacity and identity, the revitalisation and maintenance of Māori language and culture, and positive education outcomes for Māori children. It is about the advancement of Māori people generally and tribal aspirations in particular. The move by some tribes to develop tribal-specific cultural standards in education as part of their education plans is a response to the current crisis in Māori education and a strategy to enhance the educational outcomes and wellbeing of Māori children and their families. It is a strategy that makes clear to the education community, policy makers and politicians alike what tribal expectations are for students, their families, the community, the teachers, the curriculum and the operation of schools.

Cultural standards benchmarks

Within Māori tradition, the value attached to cultural standards is one that is associated with quality and excellence. The carved meeting house Te Hau Ki Turanga at Te Papa the Museum of New Zealand, offers a 19th century benchmark for excellence in art against which contemporary practices in carving and lattice weaving may be measured. The biennial Te Matatini festival is an opportunity for groups to demonstrate excellence and quality in the art of contemporary composition and practice in language, music and dance. The annual Secondary Schools speech competition, Nga Manu Korero, sets a contemporary measure of standards in the art of oratory. The Māori Made Mark of excellence is a standard of peer review across all the creative arts associated with Māori language, composition, oratory, art practice and literature.

For Māori, the benchmark for cultural standards in education is the perceived efficacy of kohanga reo (Māori language immersion early childhood centres), kura kaupapa Māori

(Māori language immersion elementary schools), wharekura (Māori language immersion high schools) and wananga (Māori tertiary institutions) on the lives and wellbeing of Māori children. Although less than 10% of all Māori children receive education within the Māori language immersion and bilingual sector, research shows the sector can have positive effects on the performance of Māori pupils (Murray, 2005) including success at engaging parents at school (ERO, 2002). Suspensions and expulsions appear not to occur at all. Preliminary results of a national survey comparing 1000 Year 8 students in Māori immersion settings with those Māori students in English language settings suggest children in immersion are doing as well as children in mainstream English language settings (Crooks and Flockton 2002). The challenge for many public elementary and secondary schools in Aotearoa/New Zealand however, is to account for indigenous ways of thinking, learning and doing if education is to be relevant and worthwhile and if Māori children are to enjoy successful education outcomes.

The assumptions upon which the development of cultural standards in Aotearoa/New Zealand is premised include the commitment by tribes to the transmission of relevant tribal knowledge in educational contexts and institutions and the central role tribes have in facilitating stakeholder relationships with the state. For some tribes this includes upholding not only the interests of tribal beneficiaries, but of all children and their families who reside in their tribal districts (Tomlins-Jahnke et al., 2006).

The development of tribal specific cultural standards is complex and involves the challenge of accounting for diverse tribal interests and expectations. Invariably questions are raised regarding the terms of such standards including who defines what cultural standards are, how they are constituted, measured, by whom and on what basis? Some tribes have chosen to adopt Māori terms which describe more precisely what they understand cultural standards to mean (Whanganui Authority, 2005). The notion of standards associated with a national curriculum and state schooling is highly contested generally and is particularly contentious for Māori. Standardised tests and public examinations are among the chief sorting mechanisms for evaluation and assessment procedures in schools that are usually set against highly selected, taken for granted sets of 'acceptable norms'. It is within such a system that indigenous children are ranked, ordered and differentiated as the 'tail end' against rigidly fixed norms and a national curriculum. The curriculum, as Richard Johnson explains,

"...always rests on cultural foundations of its own, it will put pupils in their places, not according to 'ability', but according to how their cultural communities rank along the criteria taken as the 'standard'" (In Apple, 1996, p. 33).

A national curriculum and national testing in Aotearoa/New Zealand has not ameliorated the underachievement of Māori children. Quite the opposite in fact because in the absence of relative human and material resources the cultural foundation upon which such a system is based is designed to exacerbate differences including those of class and gender (Apple, 1996). The New Zealand National Party's policy to introduce compulsory tests for school children from the age of five if it becomes the government (Watkins, 2007) will entrench Māori underachievement by "itemizing their relative failure rather than their positive strengths" (Bernstein, 1990, p. 63). However, an important point that should be emphasised is that evaluations and assessments per se may not be the problem, but what counts as 'acceptable norms' and faulty or inappropriate measures may well be.

Cultural standards as guiding principles

Internationally, the work of the Assembly of Alaska Native Educators is an exemplary model for the development of cultural standards that has informed tribal processes in Aotearoa/New Zealand and which have been adapted by some tribes as a basis for their plans. There are at

least three reasons why the Alaskan indigenous model has resonated with Māori tribal communities. Firstly, the sets of standards they have developed in Alaska offer schools and their communities' ways to measure their effectiveness in providing for the educational and cultural wellbeing of the students in their schools.

Secondly, the standards are predicated on the assumption that grounding in the heritage language and indigenous culture specific to a place is fundamental to the cultural health and wellbeing of the students and communities who live or are associated with that place.

Third, rather than producing standardization in the manner of the 'No Child Left Behind policy' (Bracey, 2005; Margaret Maaka, 2005; Margie Maaka, 2006), schools in Alaska and their communities are encouraged to develop appropriate standards that accommodate local circumstances based on the rich and varied traditions still practiced throughout Alaska. In other words, and this is an important factor for Māori, the emphasis is on connecting what students experience in their lives out of school with what they experience in school (AlaskaNativeEducators, 1998). Rather than prescriptive, the standards are described in ways approximating guiding principles with sets of indicators that can be adapted to fit local needs. The principle of 'culturally knowledgeable students', for example, has an expectation that students are well grounded in the cultural heritage and traditions of their community. Among listed indicators that measures whether students have met this cultural standard is their ability to recount their family genealogy and history (AlaskaNativeEducators, 1998).

Ngāti Kahungunu aspirations are outlined in the tribes twenty-five year strategic plan, that includes 'building families who live as Māori, are culturally strong and who enjoy good health and standard of living' (NKII, 2002b). The development of cultural standards for elementary schools in the region supports that vision. Connected to this is an underlying assumption that knowing the language and culture of Ngāti Kahungunu is essential for the cultural and educational wellbeing of its children, as well as other children in schools in the district. However, a more significant motivating factor is the status of Māori education in the Ngāti Kahungunu district.

A government sponsored report in 2003 on the status of Māori education in Ngāti Kahungunu based on an analysis of Ministry of Education statistics, found there were high participation levels in early childhood and primary education but there is no way of assessing the effects of primary education on Māori children in mainstream schools generally. However, when compared with national trends, Māori education at the secondary school level was characterised by low participation rates and high suspension and truancy rates. Of all Māori students aged 16-18 years an estimated 62.4% (the median across Ngāti Kahungunu) had left school essentially reducing their access to national qualifications, entry to tertiary education and assured employment opportunities. The report concluded that high attrition rates indicate a crisis in Māori secondary schooling in Ngāti Kahungunu. (Tomlins-Jahnke, 2003). These 2003 findings mirror the much publicised research report released recently which showed 53 percent of Māori boys left without the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) in 2005, compared with 20 percent of non-Māori boys. The statistics were described as depressing and represented a future 'time-bomb' of problems (MaximInstitute, 2006). The combined weight of generations of evidence from the state education sector about Māori achievement levels support the contention that Māori education is in crisis.

The project team

Preparation of the Plan for the development of cultural standards in the tribal region of Ngāti Kahungunu, relied on a collaboration between representatives of the Ministry of Education and a Project Team of researchers affiliated to Ngāti Kahungunu drawn from a range of

education sectors and the community. Membership of groups or committees derived from tribal affiliates is an important strategy to lend credence to government sponsored projects among tribal constituents. Tribal affiliation is a 'value added' component in the formation of expert committees simply because it guarantees an individual's obligation to tribal aspirations. Confidence is strengthened if tribal constituents are satisfied that the Project Team are experienced at the 'chalk-face', are experts in their field, grounded in the Māori world and not isolated from the realities of what it means to be Māori within the education system. This does not preclude outside expertise, Māori or non-Māori, being co-opted onto such teams at the discretion of the tribe to suit local purposes.

Government sponsorship in terms of funding, invariably means the state 'calls the shots' and decides on the terms of reference in their relationship with tribes (Tomlins-Jahnke, 2005). Māori bureaucrats employed by the state are often charged with the responsibility of taking the lead and brokering Crown/tribal relationships. This is a challenge for those individuals who must balance a sense of professional loyalty to their employer as public servants with a deep seated sense of connection and obligation to Māori and/or their own tribes without undermining either parties or their own integrity in the process. In the case of the Ngāti Kahungunu Project Team, Māori members of the Ministry of Education experienced in engaging with tribes, occupied an integral role in negotiations. Confidence in the process was strengthened because the Māori members of the Ministry demonstrated their cultural competence and experience working with Māori.

Methodology

The Project Team agreed very early in the scoping exercise that its task did not include defining cultural standards which will be the task of Ngāti Kahungunu experts and their communities. There is no single approach adopted by tribes in the development of cultural standards in education in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Nor is there a single definition regarding what constitute cultural standards because these are dependent on tribal priorities and aspirations. Thus the various methods and processes employed differ across tribes and are at varying stages of development or implementation

The process of developing the project plan for Ngāti Kahungunu began with a series of scoping meetings held over several months, in which time a two-phased approach consisting of interconnecting platforms or objectives, and applied strategies was conceived. The scoping process was informed by a review of the cultural standards literature (AlaskaNativeEducators, 1998; Ilutsk, 2002; WhanganuiAuthority, 2005), relevant tribal research reports (Chase, 2001; NKESC, 2002; NKII, 2002a; Tomlins-Jahnke, 2003), qualitative data from a series of consultative community meetings (Jackson, Pitman, & Ruru, 1999) and the combined experiences and expertise of the Project Team. It was also necessary to ensure linkages and alignment with the Ngāti Kahungunu strategic direction outlined in the 25 year Plan; in particular the health strategy, the Māori language strategy including the governments Community Based Māori Language Initiative. Aimed at the revitalisation of the Maori language this is a government programme that supports families learning the language with speaking Maori language in their homes. Integrating the cultural standards development with other tribal initiatives was necessary for consistency and efficiency. Consistency in terms of over-lap between the various tribal initiatives in education, health and social services, and efficiency regarding the tribes longer term goals and priorities. For example rather than developing cultural standards for Māori language in schools in isolation from other community orientated programmes, the schools language strategy will be strengthened by taking into account the government's programme for supporting Māori language in homes thus contributing to the longer term goal of future tribal members who are fluent in Māori language and 'culturally strong.'

The Ngāti Kahungunu Project Plan for the development of cultural standards was conceived as a framework consisting of at least two phases (implementation time-frames) comprising several key interconnecting platforms (objectives) and applied strategies. The platforms encompass essential elements which include; key processes for the development of cultural standards (defining, identifying, selecting and constructing); systematic communication transfer and transmission; strengthening school/community participation and relationships; school/community knowledge exchange; building resource capacity and promoting the language and customs of place (Tomlins-Jahnke et al., 2006).

A way forward: kaupapa Māori and invitational education

The development of cultural standards for primary schools in the Ngāti Kahungunu district will depend on a collaborative relationship between schools and their communities both Māori and non-Māori alike. These communities along with schools and educators will need to be committed to the process. The response by tribes to the underachievement of Māori children in education has been to insist on a proactive approach to the educative process and to be actively involved in decisions affecting Māori education. It is a process that offers a democratic framework for incorporating localised aspects of Māori language, culture and history as integral to the school habitus. A democratic framework supports the view that "...those affected by decisions should have a say in the formulation, implementation, and evaluation of these decisions...and that people close to the issues have something important to offer" (Purkey & Novak, 1996:8).

Ngāti Kahungunu cultural standards, the philosophy and traditions upon which these are based should underpin the education of children through inclusion in all aspects of schooling. This includes the curriculum, school practices, policies and procedures, the principals, teachers, administrators, parents and everyone else involved in the educative process in the community. The application of Ngāti Kahungunu history, language and culture as an integral part of the school habitus will enhance the learning pathways of all children in the region. How educators respond to the challenge proposed in the development of cultural standards is critical.

For example, the Ngāti Kahungunu Project Team employed a kaupapa Māori approach to scoping the Project Plan. A kaupapa Māori approach is a theory of practice based on a number of principles such as mana tangata (assumes individual rights and autonomy), whakawhanaungatanga (assumes collaborative relationships within a supportive environment), tautoko (assumes support, commitment and encouragement), manaaki tangata (assumes care, sustenance and obligations) and kotahitanga (assumes unity of purpose in the interests of all concerned). The platform that aims to strengthen school/community participation and relationships is dependant upon the tautoko (support, commitment and dedication) of schools and educators to the overall objective. This requires knowledge of and strong relationships with local tribal groups and the wider Māori community based on the principle of whakawhanaungatanga. This principle is a core value in Māori cultural contexts and promotes harmonious relationships and collegial support.

The process of strengthening relationships between schools, their constituent families, the local tribe and the wider Māori community to ensure meaningful engagement and increased participation by Māori families in the education of their children may be expressed in the principle of mana tangata (Tomlins-Jahnke et al., 2006). This is also a core value that embodies, among other ideas, the notion of upholding the dignity of a person or persons. Mana tangata extends to assumptions about continuity manifest in time past (ancestors), present (family) and future (grandchildren). Children are seen as representing their ancestors,

families and future generations who are always with them in the present. Educating a child is about educating a family in line with aspirations of the ancestors for future generations.

The principle of mana tangata assumes people will be treated as such because they are 'able, valuable and responsible' (Purkey & Novak, 1996). Education should be a cooperative and collaborative activity underpinned by the principle of trust and whakawhanaungatanga thereby leading to positive outcomes. The development of cultural standards in Ngāti Kahungunu depends on the commitment of educators, tribal groups and the wider community maintaining positive relationships, mutual obligations and a collective vision.

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