

# Spotlight on the culture of the classroom:

## *An interview with Mere Berryman*

Sarah Boyd

**B**efore I can ask the first question Mere Berryman wants to know about the children's art on my walls. Then we're deep in a conversation about how children learn and how they get around to doing things when they're ready. That's the sort of educational researcher she is. When she left teaching in 1995 to become a researcher, it took her years to get over missing the kids.

Mere Berryman, of Tūhoe descent, is the Tauranga-based manager of the Ministry of Education (Special Education) Poutama Pounamu Education Research and Development Centre. She is a well-known and respected researcher here and internationally, particularly in the area of Māori student achievement, where her work has helped inform the Te Kōtahitanga project. She draws many of her understandings from sociocultural theories of learning, and acknowledges the importance of looking at learners in social situations where they have the chance to create knowledge and learn alongside others.

Her own background provides an instructive example. Both her parents spoke fluent Māori but never in front of their children. A brother who was brought up by her grandparents speaking te reo was sent home as soon as he started school and told not to come back until he spoke English. The message about the path to educational success was clear and it did not embrace te reo:

My parents had very high educational aspirations for all our family. For some of us, we were able to achieve those aspirations but for others in my family, they were not. And I think I've learnt a lot since then about why that was.

Mere looks back on her schooling as having been strongly shaped by the dominant beliefs at the time about what Māori students were capable of achieving. Though she was unusual among Māori students in making it to the "professional" strand at secondary school, she never

believed she had the ability to set her sights on university, opting instead for teachers' college and entry into primary school teaching:

The aspirations for Māori students at the time I received my secondary school education were for boys to get an apprenticeship, and for girls to be trained to be a good mother and housewife, or a nurses-aide, or—if you were really good—a teacher.

She taught for 20 years before moving into research. The move forced her back to tertiary education, which felt like a huge step. But in fact, as she completed her degree and worked through her master's degree and on to her doctorate, she found it more fulfilling and achievable than she had anticipated:

I don't want to devalue it but I guess I'd built up a sense of the difficulty and challenge that tertiary education would present to me. Actually there was a really big difference between the grades I managed to achieve at teachers' college and the grades I achieved later on.

She remembers that during that time she encountered one of her teachers' college lecturers, who was still at the college 20 years on:

He said to me—after all my years of teaching practice—'You need a damn good dose of theory.' I remember thinking, 'I theorise every day about my teaching.'

A lesson she carried with her from her own education and her teaching experience remains one of her key messages: the importance of listening to learners. She says at times that requires teachers to stand back a little from the learning, and to talk less:

You are there to mediate the children's learning, not to dominate or overpower what the child has to offer. If you don't stand back, you fail to see some of the most amazing things that go on when children really engage with learning. You have to learn to listen to the students with open ears, and when they talk, to listen to both what they say as well as to the spaces in between.

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It's something she didn't catch on to as a parent—"I was far too busy and organised and trying to be the best mother"—but has relished as a grandparent. She often cares for her granddaughter and has been fascinated again by the learning process:

I've learnt so much about how she constructs learning out of things I would never think of, and how she determines which bits of new learning she takes on and when she takes them on.

She thinks it is vitally important to create a safe and culturally responsive environment for learning to occur. In the classroom, that means a place to which students can bring their prior knowledge and experiences, and in which they can apply them as the basis for unpacking and understanding new learning. She has a suggestion for teachers faced with a new class full of children from many different cultures and backgrounds:

Provide an opportunity for the students to talk about who they are. Let them bring in photos and stories and things from home and put them up on the wall. That way, you make the classroom theirs. And you learn so much.

She says such an approach can help set in train a fundamental rethink of traditional classroom dynamics—she cites the concept of *ako*, *Rose Pere*, and the reciprocity of learning—and help build a strong relationship of trust with students, which in turn enables them to play with and test out ideas, and to be wrong in a supportive environment in which they can collaboratively construct new understandings and knowledge.

But there's a lesson for the teachers: they need to be prepared to share something of themselves. That is the nature of the relationship, and it means teachers gain a great deal: "One minute you can be the teacher, the next the learner. A relationship of trust emerges."

It's an important thread in *Te Kōtahitanga*, which she has been involved with since before its inception as a project. The work grew out of *kaupapa* Māori methodologies and also from observing effective literacy teachers in Māori-medium education. She thinks it is crucial that the key idea—the

rejection of deficit theorising about Māori as the sole cause of their own underachievement—is taken up across the education sector.

She says many teachers are ready for the changes that *Te Kōtahitanga* brings about, while a few others are resistant, blaming the student or their socioeconomic circumstances for their failure in the classroom. Her response is her third message to teachers: teachers need to take responsibility for making changes in the areas they can change, rather than deficit theorising about those things over which they have little or no control:

If teachers actually don't want to do something, then they have huge control in the classroom. But if teachers want to do something, and we can unleash that power, then we have an awesome ability to make change in New Zealand classrooms and to New Zealand society as a whole.

### Three key messages:

- Listening to learners is important. Sometimes teachers need to stand back a little from the learning, listen more, and talk less.
- Teachers must be prepared to share something of themselves with their students if they want to develop relational trust with students.
- Take professional responsibility for the areas where you do have the ability to make a difference.

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