

Can culturally responsive policies improve Māori achievement?

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Abstract

This article analyses research literature and policy texts to investigate the extent to which culturally responsive education policies can improve Māori achievement in schools. It presents a snapshot of current levels of Māori inequity, which is followed by an account of the history of Māori education policy to illustrate the origins of the current situation. Contemporary policies for Māori education, based on cultural responsiveness, are analysed in terms of their potential to succeed in overcoming Māori inequity. While it is important for teachers and schools to engage in culturally responsive practice, blind faith in these policies as “the solution” to Māori underachievement is unrealistic, and has the potential to place unfair responsibility for raising Māori student achievement on schools and teachers, rather than on government or policy itself.

Introduction

At the national level in Aotearoa New Zealand, there are significant disparities in the educational achievement of the Māori student population, which have been in place for as long as national assessment data have been recorded. Given the nation’s commitment to egalitarian visions of society and the school system, Māori inequity has been a focus of national education policy for many years, but despite a steady parade of initiatives through the decades, the ethnic achievement gaps have not closed. Since the curriculum is the vehicle for teaching and learning, Māori underachievement is also a curriculum question. Schools and teachers are responsible for curriculum development at a local level, and for enacting curriculum in ways that are culturally responsive. But individual teachers and schools operate within a wider policy framework, and there are several curriculum-related policies to guide practice in schools; in particular, the documents on which this article focuses.

This research follows the principles of critical discourse analysis, or CDA (Locke, 2004), whereby a text is closely read in order to carefully distil its key ideas, which are then put into conversation with relevant contextual information, concepts, and perspectives, and statistical evidence. This form of CDA draws on the theoretical concept of “discourse” as power–knowledge, delineated most famously by Michel Foucault (McHoul & Grace, 1998). This form of CDA provides a way of conducting politically activist research into complex educational questions using secondary sources of data. CDA is more powerful and effective for investigating complex educational questions such as Māori equity than the usual empirical small-scale qualitative research studies.

The school curriculum is an inheritor of the Enlightenment “knower” in relation to knowledge, and is caught up in the knowledge debates that have characterised the post-World War 2 era of postmodernity, in which the inherent imperialism of the academy is challenged by women, indigenous peoples, environmentalists, and others who are disenfranchised under the prevailing power arrangements (Herrnstein Smith, 2005). In the wider sense of “curriculum” as referring to *everything* that is learnt at school, Māori inequity is also a curriculum question in terms of the Māori “struggle” for the right to attend “educational institutions in which their culture, language, values and knowledge constitute the norm” (Openshaw, Clark, & Hamer, 2005, p. 215).

The next section provides a brief snapshot of current Māori inequity in schooling, followed by a synopsis of the key historical phases of Māori education policy, which illuminates the origins of the current situation. Next comes a detailed examination of the major current “bicultural” policies for Māori education, and analysis of the potential ability of these policies to achieve their stated goals. This analysis concludes that teachers should be aware that, while it is imperative for them to adopt culturally responsive practices, these cannot, on their own, overcome the effects of large-scale socioeconomic processes.

The current status of Māori achievement

The state of current Māori educational disadvantage is outlined in a briefing to the incoming Minister of Education, produced after the 2017 national elections (Ministry of Education, 2017). Disparities begin with attendance,

where statistics reveal a significant gap in the number of Māori learners who attend school regularly, defined as 90% plus attendance. In primary schooling, 61% of Māori learners attend school regularly, compared with 71% for all learners. In secondary schools, the regular attendance rates are 43% for Māori learners, and 60% for all learners. Māori students are also over-represented in the statistics for chronic transience, which has a significant negative impact on educational outcomes. At Year 4 of primary school, Māori students are statistically half a curriculum level behind New Zealand European students in reading, writing, and mathematics, and this gap widens as students age. As school leavers, 66.5% of Māori students attain Level 2 NCEA or higher, compared to 80.3% for all students. Only 19% of Māori school leavers achieve University Entrance, compared with 44% of New Zealand European, and 67% of Asian students.

These educational inequalities result in a stark contrast in access to the professions that provide the greatest financial rewards and social status, such as medicine or law. Nationally, students from the most deprived 30% of schools make up only 6% of the graduates from these courses (Johnston, 2018). This statistic reports a decile-related differential, but relates to Māori because the Māori student population is concentrated in the lower decile schools.

Since schooling today is equally available to all families in New Zealand, inequity of educational outcomes for some ethnic groups may seem to exist for no reason. By ignoring historical realities, responsibility for educational inequity can be located with students themselves and their families. Seeing the contemporary situation as a result of past policies and practices is necessary to understand the current educational inequality suffered by Māori. Reviewing the history of Māori education highlights the fact that Māori inequality has been a permanent feature of New Zealand education, which demonstrates that Māori colonisation is an ongoing process, underwriting the thinking behind education policy, and maintaining Māori socioeconomic disadvantage (Walker, 2016).

History of Māori education policy

Māori education policy can be divided into phases according to changing policy goals, starting with mission schools for conversion to Christianity, followed by the goal of assimilation to British culture, later giving way to

integration, and in more recent decades turning to Taha Māori, biculturalism, multiculturalism, and tino rangatiratanga (Walker, 1996).

Mission schooling

European-style schools for Māori were first established by missionaries, starting in 1816. The missionaries aimed to convert Māori to Christianity (Stephenson, 2008; Walker, 2016) and create a Christian community, though they did not necessarily seek to fully impose European culture on Māori society. The Māori leaders who supported the establishment of Pākehā schooling are conjectured to have had very different expectations from the aims of missionaries: they wanted to adopt useful Pākehā knowledge for their own ends (Jones & Jenkins, 2008). Schooling was one wave in a growing tide of cultural invasion of the Māori world (Anderson, Binney, & Harris, 2014, p. 190).

Early Māori literacy

Starting from about 1820, the written form of te reo Māori was developed in collaboration between the missionaries and the rangatira, whereby Māori learnt to read and write, and missionaries learnt te reo Māori. “Enthusiasm for reading [among Māori] was evident as soon as printed material in the Māori language became available” (Anderson et al., 2014, p. 194). Instruction in mission schools was in te reo Māori and literacy, regarded as a skill of substantial mana (prestige), spread quickly beyond the areas influenced by British. Māori literacy in te reo Māori was becoming useful in Māori political life, with many rangatira using letter-writing to build political alliances (Anderson et al., 2014, p. 196). It is believed that the rate of literacy among Māori was higher at this point in colonial history than among the Pākehā then living in the country. This historical fact should put to rest any racist assumptions about the Māori inability to learn European skills.

Education as a tool for assimilation

Once the Treaty of Waitangi was signed, an increasing number of Europeans settled in New Zealand, and the colonial government was established, developing its educational policy. Native schools continued to be established, and Māori communities displayed strong interest in education as a means of their advancement, despite the divergence between their aspirations and those

of the settler government (Anderson et al., 2014, p. 286). Policy was based on racist beliefs about the inherent intellectual inferiority of Māori (Walker, 2016). The language of instruction became English, mandated by law, and te reo Māori was systematically suppressed. The schools took an assimilationist approach, but some Māori communities were able to subvert that intention, and the schools instead became a focal point for community pride and activity.

The Education Act of 1877 established effectively two separate educational systems in New Zealand, one for Māori children that was rural, with a restricted assimilatory curriculum, and the other for the children of Pākehā settlers, which was academic and based on the British public-school system. This two-tier colonial educational system, aimed at assimilating Māori to the lower ranks of New Zealand society, continued, albeit with some changes, including a change of name from Native Schools to Māori Schools after World War 2, until the whole system was finally dismantled in 1969. Schools of the times systematically marginalised access of young Māori to full participation in politics and the economy.

Following World War 2, the Māori population underwent a rapid process of urbanisation, changing from 80% rural in 1939 to 80% urban by 1986 (Meredith, 2012). Urbanisation meant the end of the Māori Schools system, as more and more Māori children enrolled in their local board schools. Urbanisation and education in mainstream schools weakened the connection of Māori children to tribal communities and further undermined intergenerational transmission of te reo, as mainly young people moved to urban centres (Anderson et al., 2014, p. 64).

The colonial education system succeeded in converting most Māori to Christianity and in damaging te reo Māori almost to extinction. It did not, however, achieve its goal of fully assimilating Māori into British settler culture: Māori refused to assimilate, and New Zealand never became fully monocultural. Under Pākehā domination, Māori culture has been marginalised and attenuated, but never fully extinguished.

The Hunn Report: Constructing Māori underachievement

The Hunn Report (1961) was the first government document to explicitly identify Māori student underachievement. The Hunn Report introduced a

new phase of educational policy of integration to replace assimilation, but the integration approach was still based on the dominance of European culture, and assumed the two cultures would merge (Bishop & Glynn, 1998). The Hunn Report ushered in the dismantling of Māori Schools in 1969, which meant Māori students were finally included in the national education statistics of academic achievement. The unified school system showed up the significant disadvantage suffered by Māori students, which in turn heralded the beginnings of the local field of Māori education research—a research tradition predicated on deficit. Explanations of Māori educational inequity included genetic, linguistic, and cultural deficiency (Bishop & Glynn, 1998).

After a period of post- World War 2 prosperity, the first oil shock of the 1970s marked the start of an acceleration in the growth of economic inequality in New Zealand that disproportionately affected Māori. Combined with renewed political activism by generations of urban Māori, this led to the establishment in 1975 of the Waitangi Tribunal, tasked with redressing breaches of the Treaty of Waitangi. Māori education policy began to move towards biculturalism. Ranginui Walker (2004) explained educational underachievement of Māori students as arising from cultural alienation within the Eurocentric schools. Similar ideas were expressed by NACME, the National Advisory Committee on Māori Education (Hokowhitu, 2004).

Taha Māori was introduced in schools in 1975 to counteract the cultural alienation of Māori students, and to safely expose non-Māori students to cultural diversity. Taha Māori was purported to embrace traditional tikanga Māori, but was really quite superficial, restricted to things like the use of Māori greetings and decorative elements in the classroom (Walker, 2016, pp. 30–31). “Essentially, Taha Māori represented a version of Māori culture so Eurocentric that Māori barely recognised it as their own” (Hokowhitu, 2004, p. 198). True to the prevailing monocultural mindset, many teachers resisted even such tokenistic inclusion of Māoritanga in school life, while some accepted it as a first step towards biculturalism.

The introduction of neoliberal policies in New Zealand education

The policies inaugurated by the 1984 Labour Government were based on neoliberal economic principles, and sought to rein in the burgeoning costs of the welfare state on which New Zealand based its reputation for egalitarianism

and good “race relations”. The reconfiguration of education and other public policy happened in a rapid process known as the “New Zealand experiment” (Kelsey, 1997), which has had ongoing negative impact on the Māori population over the decades since (Carpenter & Osborne, 2014).

Neoliberal reform of education entailed a thorough overhaul of educational administration, which happened under the banner of Tomorrow’s Schools (New Zealand Department of Education, 1988). Schools were now required to operate under a competitive business model, and education in general was framed as an economic or private commodity (Stewart, 2018b). This meant that schools in communities where trustees lacked business acumen suffered: just one example of how these policies seemed designed to further disadvantage impoverished families.

In principle, the new governance model offered Māori communities the opportunity for input into the running of their schools, but this proved illusory since few Māori were elected to school boards of trustees, owing to the deadweight of monoculturalism. The new arrangements for school governance also shifted control of policy implementation from the Ministry of Education to the school communities, or general public, who were often sceptical about bicultural initiatives (Hokowhitu, 2004).

Having been implemented, neoliberal policies have proved difficult to reverse, and continue to dominate New Zealand social life today, including education (Carpenter, 2014). Neoliberal policies and politics prioritise freedom of choice over fairness, competition over co-operation, and private over public interests (Thrupp, 2007). During this time, gaps have increased in educational achievement and so have incomes between people from high or low socioeconomic backgrounds, leading to a situation where education has little impact on upward social mobility. Decreasing opportunities for upward social mobility are particularly harmful to Māori, since they are over-represented in the lower socioeconomic strata.

Cultural responsiveness: Contemporary policy responses to Māori inequity

Current policy for Māori education is based on the central concept of cultural responsiveness, which follows the understanding that injustice and racism

towards Māori in education is the result of lack of awareness of cultural difference. By this reasoning, the inter-ethnic conflict is reduced to a chain of misunderstandings to be overcome by cultural competency training. The following subsections delve in turn into the main current Māori education policy documents.

Ka Hikitia

In 2008, the Ministry of Education released its Māori education strategy, *Ka Hikitia* (Ministry of Education, 2008), with broad aspirational goals for Māori success in education, general society, and te ao Māori (the Māori world). The Ministry interprets the phrase “ka hikitia” as meaning to “step up”, “lift up”, or “lengthen one’s stride”—a call for urgent action to counter Māori underachievement (Berryman & Lawrence, 2017). This policy originated from research associated with the Te Kotahitanga programme of research and professional development for secondary school teachers, which aimed to unsettle deficit thinking patterns that were found to be prevalent among teachers (Bishop, Berryman, & Wearmouth, 2014). This policy clearly signalled the Ministry’s intent to transform Māori education outcomes, and was acclaimed by international commentators (Goren, 2009).

Mere Berryman and colleagues (2015) reviewed the implementation of *Ka Hikitia* in secondary schools, finding its success was limited, despite good will from school leadership and teachers. Introduction of the policy alone was insufficient to disrupt traditional pedagogy, which was claimed to maintain Māori underachievement. These authors prescribe three elements needed for *Ka Hikitia* to succeed in reducing Māori underachievement, namely, that school leadership and teachers must (i) deliberately engage with policy, (ii) learn from research what works for Māori learners, and (iii) possess “a relentless moral imperative for change” (Berryman et al., 2015, p. 65). These elements accept the policy as sound, and locate responsibility for Māori educational success within schools, particularly with school leaders.

Teachers and school leaders are expected to understand the principles of *Ka Hikitia* and strive to fulfil the core vision of the strategy: “Māori enjoying and achieving education success as Māori”. Accomplishing the goals of this strategy depends on teachers in schools, because it works on the theory that teachers are fundamental to improving Māori students’ achievement.

Evaluations have shown a lack of uniform understanding of the phrase “enjoying educational success as Māori”. Such lack of shared understanding, and the finding that few teachers prioritise learning about Māori culture and history, do not bode well for successful implementation of the *Ka Hikitia* policy.

Ka Hikitia has been updated since its initial release and is still current (in 2019). The 2013 version listed the following goals for realising Māori potential:

- Sustained system-wide change
- Innovative community, iwi and Māori-led models of education provision
- Māori students achieving at least on a par with the total population.

(Ministry of Education, 2013a)

Māori students achieving at least on a par with the total population is a laudable aspiration, but *Ka Hikitia* offers no clear advice as to how this might be achieved. “Sustained system-wide change” implies the ambition to address structural (i.e., economic inequity) and institutional racism. These macro-level societal issues are beyond the control of schools and individual teachers, and in the globalised economy, perhaps even beyond the control of the national government. As a high-level policy strategy, *Ka Hikitia* is the basis for other Māori education policy documents, in particular *Tātaiako: Cultural Competencies for Teachers of Māori Learners* (Ministry of Education, 2011) and *Tau Mai Te Reo* (Ministry of Education, 2013b). How do these second-tier texts support the goals of *Ka Hikitia*?

Tātaiako: Cultural Competencies for Teachers of Māori Learners

Tātaiako was developed to assist with the implementation of *Ka Hikitia* and claims to “support” teachers (Ministry of Education, 2011, p. 4), yet takes the form of a highly problematic set of descriptors of cultural responsiveness to Māori, against which teachers are to be appraised (Stewart, 2016). It is based on a small number of profound Māori concepts that are so oversimplified in the documents that they become caricatures, with little likeness to Māori understandings, making it unlikely the policy can offer any help to Māori students or their teachers. The document is not suitable as a checklist of competencies because the words used for the “competencies” signify “values

and cultural frameworks, not specific knowledge or skills” (Stewart, 2016, p. 94). Lack of reference to the literacy and educational underachievement of Māori is consistent with avoiding saying anything that can be interpreted as deficit theorising. “*Tātaiako* provides no more than a starting point for a teacher who wishes to investigate Māori history and culture in order to more successfully teach Māori students” (Stewart, 2016, p. 95).

Tau Mai Te Reo

One of the cornerstones of current culturally responsive policy in education for Māori is the commitment to strengthening the presence and use of te reo Māori in all schools. *Tau Mai Te Reo* is the policy document that outlines how support for te reo Māori in education will be pursued (Ministry of Education, 2013b). It explains the benefits and therefore the rationale for striving to be bilingual:

As an official language, the Māori language offers cognitive, cultural, educational, economic, social and linguistic benefits for all New Zealanders. These benefits support the development and celebration of our national identity, while at the same time protecting the distinctiveness of the indigenous people, increasing family and whānau (and community) cohesion, and contributing to economic opportunities.

(Ministry of Education, 2013b, p. 7)

But the two goals of using te reo Māori and, by implication, Māori culture—(i) for forging national identity for all New Zealanders; and (ii) to protect the uniqueness of Māori people—seem to contradict each other. Moreover, the value of the language is commodified in this statement by tying it to economic opportunities.

Te Ahu o Te Reo Māori

To implement the *Tau Mai Te Reo* strategy, the current government has committed \$12.5 million (between 2019 and 2023) to *Te Ahu o te Reo Māori*, a programme of professional development for active teachers and non-teaching staff in schools. In its first years, the programme will run in four regions (Waikato, Taranaki–Whānganui, Kapiti–Horowhenua–Porirua, and Ngāi Tahu, i.e., the South Island) with the highest projected growth of Māori populations, but is envisaged to eventually be rolled out across the

country. This programme goes some way towards providing time for teachers and other school workers to learn te reo Māori and is open to all schools and to school employees with all levels of existing competency (Ministry of Education, 2019).

The programme has ambitious objectives: to equip school staff to integrate te reo Māori into the education of all students in New Zealand, and enable an education workforce to use te reo Māori correctly every day. The documentation presents the belief that achieving this aim will improve learning outcomes and relationships for all students (Ministry of Education, 2019). The programme will be delivered by providers associated with local iwi and grounded in communities, in hopes of creating stronger connections between schools and Māori communities, and enabling greater influence by those communities on teaching and learning. It is hoped this programme will contribute to systemic change that will lead to te reo Māori being valued and prioritised in schools.

The *Te Ahu o Te Reo Māori* programme is part of the Government's wider policy aim for te reo Māori to be part of all students' education by 2025, though this aim lacks detail and does not specify exactly what part te reo Māori will play in students' education. The policy does *not* envisage te reo Māori being a compulsory subject in schools. Furthermore, it does not explain how it will help equalise Māori achievement in English-medium school subjects.

Can culturally responsive policies ameliorate Māori underachievement?

Some scholars maintain that culturally responsive policies are effective for improving the educational achievement of Māori students and should be continued, while others question their effectiveness because they do not address the larger socioeconomic disparity that drives underachievement. The statistics presented above clarify that 30 years of culturally responsive policies have not achieved the objective of lifting educational outcomes for Māori to the same level as the whole population of Aotearoa New Zealand. The current trends in educational policies go further than ever to promote culturally responsive pedagogies as a panacea for Māori underachievement, in an atmosphere in which it is becoming increasingly difficult for teachers to question the

effectiveness of those policies: their actual failure, and any possible alternative approaches, are seemingly becoming undiscussable (Zerubavel, 2006).

Reports by the Auditor General's office on *Ka Hikitia* are optimistic about the intent of the policy, but less so about the actual outcomes to date; nevertheless their final report has a section titled *Every school needs to implement Ka Hikitia* (Berryman & Eley, 2017). At the time of its conception, *Ka Hikitia* was expected to produce transformational improvements for Māori in education. The Auditor General attributes its failure to achieve the expected results to several factors, including reliance on goodwill and devolved responsibility; and ineffective communication from the Ministry of Education to schools. In retrospect, this finding signals the recent move towards compulsion for all teachers to engage with *te reo* and *tikanga* Māori. On the school side there was (and probably still is) uncertainty about the meaning and application of the central vision of *Ka Hikitia*. These findings confirm what is widely acknowledged: there are no quick fixes for ethnic inequity of educational outcomes. When Māori students were surveyed about their experience of secondary school, there was no significant improvement between 2001 and 2015, indicating that *Ka Hikitia* had not only failed to improve achievement, but had also failed to disrupt systemic racism within the education system (Berryman & Eley, 2017).

One significant obstacle to the successful implementation of cultural responsiveness is lack of accurate teacher knowledge of New Zealand histories (Stewart, 2018a). Teacher ignorance of how colonisation works is a major stumbling block in working with Māori students. Even if not every educator in New Zealand can learn Māori language and culture, all should learn accurate national histories. Pākehā hearing Māori counter-narratives of colonisation often initially experience emotions of guilt and fear of responsibility for the consequences of oppression (Hotere-Barnes, 2015). These negative emotions can also be a barrier blocking the work required to develop decolonising practice in education.

In addition to obstacles for teachers, there are more systemic obstacles. Culturally responsive policies, on their own, can only achieve incremental improvements at best, because they do not address the core socioeconomic causes of Māori educational inequality (Thrupp, 2014). To broaden the notion of “deficit thinking” to include any reference to the influence of

Māori socioeconomic status on educational success is both unjustified and counterproductive. Such policies may even be a deliberate strategy of distraction, designed to divert attention away from economic disparity (Lourie, 2016), which is ballooning under the current housing shortages. Despite over 30 years of bicultural education policy, which has resulted in greater visibility and (apparent) inclusion of Māori culture in education settings, there is still a significant achievement gap between Māori students and their non-Māori peers (Lourie, 2018).

Public attention has been deflected by the emphasis on including Māori culture, away from the socioeconomic drivers of educational inequality, to focus on the inability of schools to accommodate cultural difference, hence attributing responsibility for Māori underachievement to schools and individual teachers (Bishop, Berryman, Cavanagh, & Teddy, 2007). Placing the blame for Māori underachievement solely on schools absolves the Government of responsibility. If socioeconomic drivers were to be fully and openly acknowledged, then a corrective action to diminish those drivers would be a logical step to take. Such logic would contradict the ideological tenets of individual responsibility that are at the core of neoliberalism (Thrupp, 2014). Culturally responsive policies have been unreasonably expected to counter Māori educational inequity resulting from increasing levels of wealth inequality.

To go on putting effort into mitigating Māori educational inequality without addressing or even acknowledging intergenerational inequities is like putting a sticking plaster on an injury without knowing its cause. The current culturally responsive policies help promote the false idea that individual classroom teachers are responsible for continuing educational inequality, rather than wider historical and social processes. If we fail adequately to identify the probable causes of observable effects, we are likely to keep trying to implement policies that are doomed to fail.

Conclusion

At the level of the national population, there is a clear ethnic disparity for Māori in school outcomes. An examination of the history of Māori education shows that Māori underachievement has been continuous since it first came into view in about 1970, as the Māori population urbanised,

and fully entered into national school statistics for the first time. Culturally responsive policies have been followed since the neoliberal education reforms starting in 1984, but have made little impact on statistical inequities suffered by Māori. This is because to acknowledge, respect, and make space for Māori culture and language in the classroom is part of good (i.e., “normal”) teaching practice, and an educational right of Māori students, rather than a transformative programme for overcoming the effects of material poverty, as suffered at a much higher rate by Māori and Pacific families than the total national population.

To what extent it is possible for culturally responsive or “bicultural” policies to improve Māori educational outcomes, and ameliorate statistical Māori underachievement? In recently announced changes to professional standards, all teachers must demonstrate their commitment to using and developing their use of te reo and tikanga Māori in their classrooms, which considerably increases the pressure on individual teachers. Yet the prospect of more teachers using te reo Māori in the classroom seems tenuously linked to the achievement of Māori students in English-medium subjects, and begs the question of whether culturally responsive policies can work if we “get it right”—or whether they can work at all? How important is it to focus on English-medium teachers learning te reo compared with, for example, learning more accurate histories of Māori–Pākehā relationships?

This article has questioned the assumption that current policies for Māori education based on cultural responsiveness can work to overcome longstanding inequities in Māori achievement. While it is imperative for teachers and schools to adopt culturally responsive practices, including using te reo Māori in the classroom, it is also important for teachers and schools to recognise their limited agency and ability to counter macroeconomic processes such as lack of employment, or the spiralling costs of housing. Responsibility for rapid recent increases in Māori child poverty, food insecurity, and homelessness must be sheeted home to the latter, not glibly handed off to schools and teachers, who increasingly act as the “ambulance at the bottom of the cliff” for children afflicted by these terrible “new normals” for Māori today in Aotearoa New Zealand.

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