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Editorial: Culturally responsive pedagogies as transformative praxis

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Introduction

I begin this editorial by re-considering three views of learning that are taken from the literature but that I have also learnt about from two of my mentors and through my own research. I then use these views of learning to connect with the seven different papers that have come together in this special section of the *Waikato Journal of Education* on culturally responsive pedagogies/methodologies. I conclude by synthesising a number of principles about culturally responsive pedagogies that are common across the papers.

Learning from the literature

Much has been written about how learning can be understood. Jerome Bruner (1996), for example, proposes a view of the mind as an active agent in learning with learning being closely interrelated to the contexts in which that learning occurs. Bruner calls this view of the mind *culturalism*. However, he also proposes another view of the mind that likens learning to the way in which computers operate in their processing of information. He calls this a computational approach. He contrasts his perspective on culturalism against this computational view and raises implications for education. Culturalism is part of what might broadly be termed a *constructivist* approach, in that it assumes that knowledge can be constructed by individuals. Within this approach there is a very strong focus on how and where learning is situated and the contexts within which learning occurs.

Wenger (1998) poses education as the opening of identities; therefore, schools and educators play a critical part in shaping students' beliefs in their own ability to initiate, engage with and successfully complete learning actions and tasks. The ways in which schools mediate student success and/or failure is crucial to the development of each student's sense of personal agency (Bruner, 1996). The sense of belonging to, or marginalisation from, education affects every aspect of participation and, therefore, learning within it. This in turn affects students' behaviours and their self-perception. Failing to support the development of students' understanding and ability to act in a social context risks marginalising and alienating young people and rendering them incompetent (Wearmouth, Glynn, & Berryman, 2005).

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(pp. 3–10)

The interdependence of interpersonal and intellectual learning lies at the heart of sociocultural understandings of human development and learning (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bruner, 1996; Glynn, Wearmouth, & Berryman, 2005; McNaughton, 2002; Vygotsky, 1978). Understandings such as these promote a view of learners as active agents who come to know their world in terms of their own operations within it, especially through their use of language in contextualised *social* interactions with others. This view of learning recognises that from birth learners can be active agents in their own learning and that parents and families are important facilitators in this process. The implication is that students themselves can ultimately be responsible for their own learning. They can do it for themselves. Wenger (1998) goes so far as to suggest that students "are no fools: once they have actual access to the practice, they soon find out what counts" (p. 156).

Vygotsky (1978) conceived of children as learning through supportive scaffolding provided by an adult, which is then gradually removed, leaving the child working independently. In contexts such as these feedback and feed-forward can help to take the learner to the next level of learning. Feedback to students is most effective when it

- focuses on the tasks and the associated learning, not the student;
- confirms for the student that he or she is on the right track;
- includes suggestions that help the student (that is, that scaffold their learning);
- is frequent and given when there is opportunity for the student to take action;
- is in the context of a dialogue about the learning.

(Ministry of Education, 2005, p. 16)

When feedback connects directly to specific and challenging goals that relate to students' prior knowledge, experience and cultural understandings, students are better able to focus more productively on new goals and next learning steps. In this situation students are more likely to acknowledge their own skill levels and/or gaps and identify where they need and want to take their learning in the future.

Others have allowed children greater agency in their own learning. Rogoff (2003), for example, has proposed the concept of *guided participation* to highlight the different ways in which children learn as they take part in, and are guided by, the practices of their own communities. Lave and Wenger (1991) construe learning as a process of change in the degree to which individuals can actively participate in and be included in *communities of practice* where there is regular and sustained interaction with more-skilled individuals around genuinely shared activities (Wearmouth & Berryman, 2009). Genuinely shared activities are those that are meaningful and authentic for students and also for their scaffolders, guides and collaborators. Regular interactions around these shared activities can lead children to develop and refine their knowledge and skills within specific domains such as literacy, with speaking, reading and writing, for example. Sustained participation in these activities also affirms and extends positive social relationships. These important interactive and social learning contexts have been described as *responsive social contexts* (Glynn, 1985; Glynn, Wearmouth, & Berryman, 2005).

In contrast, traditional pedagogies, as experienced in many classrooms, often focus on learners as *individuals* and knowledge as discrete chunks of reified information. For example, an insight into the way many schools view pedagogy is provided by a five

year old whose home-cultural knowledge and experiences prior to going to school had modelled that good learners learn by participating, they are able to question, to examine and to contribute their own thinking and symbols to others for feedback. She also knew that good learners try things out and that *not knowing* was an important and acceptable part of this. By her fifth week of formal schooling she had learned that learners who were quiet and who sat up were far more valued, that the teacher's questions were the only really important questions in the classroom and that more often than not, these questions had either a correct or incorrect answer. She quickly learnt that the correct answers were valued most, which reinforced the importance of learners being quiet and introduced a new concept of learning as being a fairly risky business. One thing she could not quite understand, however, was why "teachers ask questions what they already know the answers to". This is an important question indeed, especially when considering what culturally responsive theories and practices or praxis might be and what they might not be.

Traditional transmission pedagogy may well come at the cost of understanding the learner as a member of different social and cultural communities of practice and knowledge as able to be socially constructed. When engaging in any classroom learning activity, children and teachers bring to that activity not only their own prior experiences, knowledge and understandings, but also the experiences and understandings they have shared with others in their families and communities. Certainly many Māori students may enter English-medium learning settings with competencies in the performance of tribal literacies such as haka, action songs and customary forms of greeting, as well as being able to recite parts of their own genealogy and oral history. However, a student's identity as a successful learner may depend upon whether or not these home-culture knowledges and lived experiences can safely be brought into classroom and used as the basis of new learning. When these home experiences are affirmed and legitimated though the learning relationships and interactions between teacher and peers and also amongst peers, the student's identity as a learner is more likely to develop on a positive trajectory towards success.

Culturally responsive pedagogies for learning

This conversation continues with a paper by Emeritus Professor Ted Glynn from the University of Waikato. In his paper, *From responsive social learning contexts to culturally responsive pedagogy: Contributions from early New Zealand research*, Ted returns to a statement he made in 1984 to reflect again on his appreciation of the work of human development and socio-cultural theorists such as Bronfenbrenner, Bruner, Vygotsky, Rogoff, Lave, McNaughton, Smith and others. He then revisits some of his early research on children's literacy learning to reiterate what he considers to be some of the defining features of responsive social learning contexts. In a discussion of two more recent New Zealand research studies, again on children's literacy, Ted explores the importance of including *culturally* located values and pedagogical practices within responsive social contexts for learning. In these studies, Ted highlights the importance of building and maintaining equitable relationships between teachers and learners, and between schools and their communities that respect the culturally located identities, values and pedagogies of Māori learners. Ted acknowledges the repeated calls from Māori, that Māori preferred literacies and pedagogical practices need to be acknowledged, respected and incorporated in the teaching and learning interactions and

relationships within their classrooms, especially if Māori students are to enjoy and achieve education success as Māori.

Ted's current understandings position children as acquiring intellectual knowledge through experiences, not simply as passive, receptive learners, but as active learners exercising agency within interactive contexts that are essentially *social* and *cultural* in nature. As such, educators who seek to provide responsive social learning contexts have a vital role, especially in their learning to also be relational and culturally responsive.

Therese Ford, who affiliates to the iwi of Ngāi Takoto in the Far North and who is a member of the Te Kotahitanga research and development team, affirms the importance of culture. In her paper Therese considers culturally responsive pedagogies alongside education policy. Using her own personal experiences as a Māori learner who achieved educational success, but not as Māori, she responds to the Ministry of Education's *Me Kōrero—Let's Talk* document (2012). Therese's response to the Ministry's invitation to share ideas about "what works well for Māori learners so that they are able to enjoy and achieve education success and be proud and happy being who they are as Māori" (Ministry of Education, 2012, p. 30) forms the basis of her paper, *Applying culturally responsive practices: Implications for mainstream education*.

Therese merges her own personal and professional experiences as a student, teacher, school leader and education researcher to posit culturally responsive pedagogies as a potential response to the question of how the performance of the New Zealand education system can be improved so that Māori students can indeed achieve and enjoy education success as Māori. Therese contends that while teachers must be able to understand and implement a clear commitment to the culture of their students through their pedagogy, their *critical* challenge as teachers is to create contexts for learning where Māori students can themselves bring their own *cultural toolkit* (Bruner, 1996) into their learning rather than have this defined by others. From Therese's paper it is clear that if we are serious about developing a high-performing education system where disparities between Māori and non-Māori no longer exist, the repositioning of power to create metaphorical and literal spaces for Māori to determine their own "values their identity, language and culture" (Ministry of Education, 2013, p. 6) is the critical challenge.

Annie Siope, who also works as part of the Te Kotahitanga team, is of Samoan descent. In her paper, *A culturally responsive pedagogy of relations: Coming to understand*, Annie also merges her own personal and professional experiences to synthesise what she has come to understand about *a culturally responsive pedagogy of relations* (Bishop, Berryman, Cavanagh, & Teddy, 2007). Annie takes this learning from her work in Te Kotahitanga as a research assistant, from the literature and from her own Samoan cultural knowledge and experiences. In coming to understand, she considers not only what culturally responsive pedagogy is but also what it is not.

In this paper Annie shares part of a recent classroom observation she undertook of a secondary school teacher. Annie identifies this teacher as being a high implementer of culturally responsive and relational pedagogy. With the teacher's permission, Annie uses some direct quotes to explicitly reveal the learning relationships and interactions between this teacher and some of her Pasifika students. Throughout these collaborative experiences, Annie reflects upon what she has learned from this observation as part of her coming to understand relational and culturally responsive pedagogy.

In line with the challenge posed in Therese Ford's paper it is interesting to see how this teacher, in spite of a topic that is considered by many to be very challenging, has clearly created a context for learning where students feel confident and able to bring their own cultural experiences into the learning and have these experiences valued by their teacher and their peers. As this happens it is the teacher who in turn is also able to become the learner and the students who become the teacher.

The fourth paper is written by Edith Painting-Davis, who has tribal affiliations to Te Whare Tapu o Ngāpuhi. Edith is a secondary school teacher who has been a Te Kotahitanga lead facilitator and is studying for her Masters in Education. In her paper, *Discursive repositioning: The impact a group of Te Kotahitanga teachers within a mainstream secondary school had on one student*, Edith presents a case study in which she highlights the importance of teacher positioning if a culturally responsive pedagogy of relations is to work effectively for the teachers themselves, as well as for Māori students, their whānau and potentially the whole school.

This case examines Te Kotahitanga as a relational and culturally responsive intervention involving a group of agentically positioned teachers who over time collectively support Māori students to succeed as Māori. It also reveals the positive influence this teacher agency had on a severely *at risk* student and his whānau. Importantly, it also highlights the challenges of implementing policies and school-wide reform targeting Māori students' educational success when not all those participating are agentically positioned to face the *critical* challenge.

The next paper is written by Dr Sonja Macfarlane of Ngāi Tahu descent and Professor Angus Macfarlane of Te Arawa descent. Both work for the University of Canterbury. Their paper reports on research recently undertaken to determine the key components of culturally responsive, evidence-based special education practice for Māori. These research findings raised many questions about how *evidence* is defined, and how differing interpretations may effectively marginalise cultural evidence that Māori recognise, value and, from experience, know works for them. This research cautions that cultural responsiveness is not a static or reified *thing*, nor should it be seen as a compartmentalised or prescriptive approach that a practitioner simply uplifts and conveniently applies when working with specific groups. Rather it should be seen as an eclectic blending of te ao Māori (the Māori world) and te ao whānui (the wider contemporary world) that always seeks to construct knowledge from an understanding that there are multiple legitimate voices and connections that must be heard and listened to.

An underlying debate in their paper that certainly links to the previous papers is the contention that conventional mainstream perspectives are regularly out of sync with perspectives that are held by Māori. Within culturally responsive pedagogies, the critical challenge continues to be who should be the one to define knowledge and experience within culturally responsive pedagogy and then how should this happen?

This same theme continues strongly into the next paper, *Crossing Borders: At the nexus of critical service learning, literacy, and social justice*, by Associate Professor Fatima Pirbhai-Illich from the University of Regina in Saskatchewan, Canada. In a substantial review of the literature Fatima combines issues of prejudice and power with racism and discrimination to clearly locate culturally responsive pedagogy alongside critical pedagogy and social justice. It is her contention that, in Canada at least, individuals from minoritised groups are not only subjugated to individual instances of

racism and discrimination but also institutional racism continues to thwart their integration, upward mobility and progress in society.

Fatima's paper reports on research she undertook with a group of pre-service teacher candidates to identify what they learned from their experiences in a critical service-learning practicum working with adolescent youth of First Nation descent. Throughout this work, the pre-service teachers were provided with opportunities to engage in literacy instruction while simultaneously engaging in critical reflections on their own subjectivities and positionalities.

The data revealed that when teacher candidates first began to investigate how power and privilege influenced the ways in which they may be constructing their students and the society in which they both lived, they went through several stages that included disbelief, confusion and conflicting narratives. Fatima contends that engaging in culturally responsive teacher education means needing to understand one's own subjectivity and positionality in relation to those with whom we teach. This requires holding the mirror up to one's own practices and engaging in critical conversations. Fatima calls for this theorising to be both about and through the deconstruction of white privilege, power and systemic racism. In her paper, Edith called this discursive repositioning; however, teachers in her case study school either participated willingly in this discursive repositioning and the implementation of culturally responsive pedagogy (agentically positioned) or they did not. This has implications for policy implementation in New Zealand as well as implications for teacher professional development.

The final paper, *University and school: Collaborative research as culturally responsive methodology*, is by Marilyn Blakeney-Williams and Dr Nicola Daly, both teacher educators from the University of Waikato. This paper also concerns research and teacher education but takes the focus into methodologies that are culturally responsive. Marilyn and Nicola explore their own experiences as university-researchers working with two teacher-researchers in a project examining the teachers' use of picture books in culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms. Together they reflect retrospectively on the collaborative and participatory characteristics of their research approach through the lens of culturally responsive research methodology. They do this by testing their research against five culturally responsive research principles (Berryman, SooHoo, & Nevin, 2013) by which they contend a relational and dialogic space was created. Importantly they learned that it was from within the relational and dialogic spaces that all parties were able to bring their own identities, beliefs and knowledge to the research conversation and consequently everyone got to learn from and with each other. This learning had mutual benefits for all, including the students in the classrooms of these teachers.

Linking to praxis

Across the seven Special Section papers, a number of consistent principles were highlighted by these authors in terms of the links between theory and practice. Firstly, culturally responsive pedagogy or practice is understood to be a social activity; therefore these authors each emphasise the crucial importance of relational pedagogy, at all levels. Relationships are linked to the perceptions and expectations that the teacher holds of their students (or case worker holds of their clients; researchers holds of their participants) and vice versa. This means that the cultural experiences of both teacher and student—or caseworker and client; researcher and participants—are important. In

education, for example, student engagement with learning is more likely to be strong when the teacher's perception of these students and the students' perceptions of their teachers are positive. This situation is more likely to promote understandings where students are able to be self-determining and successful learners. Contexts such as these are just as relevant for those working in special education or research settings. From the perspective of critical theory this requires those who have traditionally maintained power to both critically examine their own participation and privilege, then seek power-sharing relationships rather than perpetuate the more traditional impositional stance that continues to promote disparities.

Culturally responsive pedagogies therefore aim to create contexts for learning where the students' home-cultural experiences, as determined by them, can be used in the construction of new knowledge, rather than these experiences being marginalised, ignored or belittled. Interactions such as these, which are ongoing and dialogic, can provide teachers with formal and informal opportunities to notice what is happening during learning activities, recognise where the learning of individuals and groups of students is going and how they as the teacher can help take that learning further. In contexts such as these, learning conversations include responsive feedback that connects to the student's own generated evidence of learning and feed-forward to help the student identify their next most appropriate learning steps.

From these papers we see that engagement is more effective when individuals feel they are able to initiate learning interactions and when they are able to use their own cultural experiences as the basis for constructing new understandings. In responsive contexts, rather than merely acting as experts, correctors or evaluators, the teachers, practitioners or researchers can act as a responsive audience, thus ensuring that the prior knowledge and cultural experiences of all learners or participants have validity. When pedagogies or methodologies are more interactive and dialogic, learners/participants can be more self-determining about their learning and the construction of knowledge can be more actively promoted. Contexts such as these help to promote learners and teachers (or case worker and clients; researcher and participants) as being connected through the establishment of a common vision for educational excellence. The roles of teacher and learner in this type of learning context are interchangeable and reciprocal. This reciprocity is embedded in the Māori concept of ako (Pere, 1982) and in critical pedagogy (Freire, 1996) where power is shared and each can learn from and be supported by the other. Relational and culturally responsive praxis such as this is more likely to lead to positive learning experiences for both groups and thus more positive identities as learners.

The general section of the journal is an eclectic mix of articles, a book review and to round out the issue, a selection of recently completed University of Waikato doctoral abstracts.

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