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Culturally responsive evidence-based special education practice: Whaia ki te ara tika

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Introduction

This article reports on research recently undertaken to determine the key components of culturally responsive evidence-based special education practice for the indigenous (Māori) people of Aotearoa[i] New Zealand (S. Macfarlane, 2012). An underlying debate is the contention that conventional perspectives are regularly incongruent with perspectives that are held by Māori.

Background

Māori learners and their whānau (family) are entitled to receive responsive and effective special education services; a foundational obligation derived from our nation's founding document, Te Tiriti o Waitangi 1840 (The Treaty of Waitangi). A wide array of legislative documentation, strategic plans and policies unanimously espouse commitment to Māori educational achievement. Despite these guarantees, and the proliferation of literature and research that continues to mount, disparities for Māori in all spheres of education remain.

In comparison to many education systems worldwide, the top 80% of New Zealand students are performing at world-class standards (Hattie, 2003). However, the bottom 20% (referred to as the 'tail') are falling behind at a rate greater than any other country. Māori are disproportionately overrepresented in this cohort (Ministry of Education, 2011). Increasing pressure is being asserted on government-funded sectors to provide services that draw from the most effective research, are timely, outcomes focused, and fully accountable (Hammersley, 2001). Within the Ministry of Education Special Education (SE) service, increasing onus is being placed on practitioners to be critical consumers of research; to discerningly evaluate and interpret the best available information, tempered with practitioner skill and experience (Christiansen & Lou, 2001).

In recent years, Māori epistemology has been increasingly acknowledged by researchers and educators alike as having integrity and being worthy of recognition (Durie, 1997; Ministry of Education, 2005, 2008). There is also an increasing expectation that special education professionals develop a more authentic awareness of

Māori knowledge, concepts and values; that they are able to appreciate the significance of *kaupapa Māori* (Māori ideology and philosophy). Given that special education professionals are tasked with assessing and analysing the needs of Māori in order to shape culturally responsive programmes, then this expectation is not at all unreasonable.

Evidence-based Practice (EBP)

The link between research, policy and practice is the foundation of EBP (Cashmore, 2003). EBP spread through the health sector in the early 1990s as a way to augment clinical expertise with the best available evidence and provide a judicious method for approaching casework (Holm, 2000). It has now permeated the education sector in this country in response to the increasing demand for accountability, and managing for outcomes. The challenge for SE practitioners is to ensure that the best evidence is considered through drawing from a combination of three types of evidence: research, practitioner knowledge, and client participation.

Key queries include 'What constitutes evidence—and who decides?' 'How do Māori evidences inform EBP?' 'What sources of knowledge and evidence should guide practice?' 'Is Māori knowledge and research deemed to be of equivalent value to conventional western knowledge and research?' Clearly, the word 'evidence' means different things to different people, and respective interpretations appear to be influenced by factors that include ethnicity, culture, worldview perspectives, and lived experiences.

Hammersley (2001) suggests that the very name (EBP) has the rhetorical effect of discrediting opposition, as there is an inherent implication that opposition can only be illogical. He reiterates the anomaly that exists when research evidence is viewed as providing its exclusive foundation. Hammersley contends that the process of defining what constitutes evidence will be forever fraught with difficulty should the privileging of particular research evidence over evidences from other sources result. The ongoing debates that surround EBP may emanate from belief systems that appear to be talking past each other (Metge & Kinloch, 1984).

Listening to culture

Wearmouth, Glynn and Berryman (2005) contend that people's perceptions of reality are framed according to what they regard as actual, apparent and achievable; that reality-formation is patterned on time-honoured experiences, belief systems and ways of thinking, feeling and behaving. These conceptualisations and patterns of life extend from the past and are inherent in the logic, narratives, and beliefs that form a people's worldview (Marsden, 2003).

Angus Macfarlane (2003) declares that "the cultural reality of Māori people remains strong … it is vital; it is meaningful" (p. 12). According to Hilliard (2001), one must be in a position to observe it, whether living it or working within it. The notion of 'listening to culture'—of understanding cultural realities—reiterates the importance of professionals, across societal disciplines, modelling the expression of respect for cultural difference, power-sharing, equity and inclusion. Hardman, Drew and Egan (1999) believe that an inclusive education system must draw from indigenous cultural realities in shaping knowledge bases and pedagogies within and across programmes.

Durie (2003) states that "culture is a convenient way of describing the ways members of a group understand each other and communicate that understanding" (p. 2). Culture is described by Winzer and Mazurek (1998) as something that grows out of the past, but functions in the present. This perspective engenders a sense of longevity by inferring that culture has a history, and that this history influences current realities. According to Zion (2005), culture is "the system of shared beliefs, values, customs, behaviours, and artefacts that the members of society use to interact with their world and with one another" (p. 3). Culture is therefore related to behaviour and environment, and the attitudes, values, goals and practices that characterise a social group.

Research undertaken in Aotearoa New Zealand indicates that Māori student achievement is affected by the degree to which their culture is respected by the education context, and by the degree to which there is congruence between the culture of the community and the values of that context (Nash, 1997). Bevan-Brown (2004) contends that whānau are seeking both effective education provision and provision which values and enhances culture and identity. This reinforces the contention that "culture counts" (Bishop & Glynn, 1999) when co-constructing educational provision for Māori learners.

According to Berryman (2008), cultural competency refers to the ability to learn from, relate to and interact respectfully with people from your own and other cultures. Durie (2003) states that "cultural competence is the acquisition of skills so that we are better able to understand members of other cultures in order to achieve best outcomes.…" (p. 2).

Sue (2001) argues that cultural competency is about practitioners having the "awareness, knowledge and skills needed to function effectively in a pluralistic democratic society … to communicate, interact, negotiate, and intervene on behalf of clients from diverse backgrounds" (p. 802). Sue asserts that organisations must support this concept by engaging in actions and creating conditions that maximise the development of inclusive and equitable systems for clients and professionals. Cultural competency requires practitioners to extend their cultural understanding, knowledge and skills, but must also be supported by policies that enable these new learnings to be actualised in practice.

Walker and Shea (1999) propose that educators' perceptions of, and beliefs about, young people will largely determine the psychological and social interventions that are implemented. If special education services are solely based on western theories and are not cognisant of culture and ethnicity, then they are clearly inadequate if the intention is to enable and enhance positive education outcomes for Māori students who are referred for support. Hardman et al. (1999) believe that when special education services do not satisfactorily accommodate diversity, they effectively marginalise the preferences and aspirations of minority groups, and are inadequate and bereft. Howitt and Owusu-Bempah (1994) warn that the lack of attention to alternatives to mainstream knowledge (which is eurocentric and typically focused on middle-class beliefs and practices) will leave psychology and education services impoverished**.** This warning is positively reframed by Angus Macfarlane (2003), who declares that by paying attention to alternatives psychology and education provision will be enriched.

The politics of policy

The outcomes that are achieved by *tamariki* (children) and whānau are heavily influenced by policies that guide professional practice. Sullivan (2009) talks about "colour blind public policy" (p. 5) whereby political discourses post the year 2000 have rejected the notion of ethnicity as an important variable in policy development. Sullivan contends that this stance effectively renders Māori invisible by invalidating significant cultural and historical markers that define and articulate understandings for and about Māori. Colour blind policy unrealistically assumes that diversity and disparity between groups of people do not exist. Diversity, Sullivan declares, is an inclusive concept that includes the recognition of ethnicity and indigeneity, which is why it matters in policy.

Durie (2004) contends that it is illusionary to function as if ethnicity and indigeneity are non-existent, and that it is misleading to develop policies and approaches that perpetuate this myth. He highlights several reasons why ethnicity and indigeneity are strong rationales for policy in their own right, and insists that unless they are explicitly acknowledged, covert policies will mask diversity, compromise best outcomes, promote individuality at the expense of collectivity, and foster assimilation. Durie advises that tensions within the policy discourse should not conflate all people as a single group as this obscures inequities between groups, and fosters a set of messages that are likely to perpetuate marginalisation and disparity. According to Phillips (2005), an irony exists when policy that is intended to positively guide actions and practices pays little attention to Māori cultural perspectives. She argues that this not only marginalises Māori knowledge, but effectively renders policy culture-less when it is actually intended to target disproportionate numbers of Māori.

Linking research, policy and practice is explored by Cashmore (2003), who posits that these imperatives are in fact "three cultures in search of a shared mission" (p. 12). She argues that research (the driver of policy) focuses on what we don't know, policy focuses on what we should do, and practice focuses on what we do, and reasons that these cultures differ in terms of their understanding of what constitutes 'evidence' and the influence of beliefs and values. Salmond (2003) suggests that an evidence-based approach, which gainfully connects research and policy, must investigate the aspirations of particular segments of the Māori population, in order to capture their perceptions, their actual and desired relationships with others, and the social and cultural outcomes that shape their lives. She declares that this would inform the research inquiry, the research evidence and the policy that is derived—the acculturation of policy.

The research design, participant selection and data gathering

This study drew from the traditions of qualitative research methodology and utilised a grounded theory inquiry approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The design and approach were heavily influenced by kaupapa Māori research methodology, which worked from the premise that the values, beliefs and favoured practices of *te ao Māori* (a Māori world/worldview) are legitimate (Smith, 1992).

Informed by the Māori concept of *mana* (dignity, status, integrity)*,* the EBP framework currently in use in SE (Bourke, Holden, & Curzon, 2005) was used to guide participant selection. For each of the three evidence circles (research, practice knowledge, whānau wisdom) six Māori-affiliated participants experienced in the area of kaupapa Māori were chosen. Of the total 18 participants, six were working in senior

academic Māori-focused research positions in universities across Aotearoa New Zealand. The remaining 12 had amassed a wealth of practical special education experience; six had worked in practice leadership as managers and/or specialists, and six had worked closely alongside whānau in the area of advocacy and brokerage.

The study explored two questions:

1. What are the key components of *culturally responsive* SE service provision for Māori?

2. What are the key components of an *evidence-based practice* framework that would be relevant for Māori?

Three methods of data gathering were employed:

- a questionnaire
- one-to-one (face-to-face) interviews
- a focus group discussion (two representatives from each domain)

Key themes from the research

Six themes emerged from the research data:

1. **Mātauranga Māori**: The centrality of Māori knowledge.
2. **Whanaungatanga**: The centrality of relationships.
3. **Rangatiratanga**: The centrality of self-awareness.
4. **Research in context**: The centrality of relevance.
5. **Honouring the Treaty**: The centrality of power-sharing.
6. **Cultural competency**: The centrality of enabling potential.

In the individual questionnaires and interviews, the two research constructs (culturally responsive and evidence based) were continually referred to as interchangeable and synonymous terms across the three groups. In the focus group discussion a more in-depth deliberation highlighted the need for Māori to gain access to resourcing and opportunities to enable the research evidence base to grow. Participants also felt that the research methodology and methods need to be culturally congruent with Māori demographics and aspirations, and that whānau need to be more involved in the research design and development. The six themes will now be explored in more detail.

Theme One: Mātauranga Māori: The centrality of Māori knowledge

All participants felt strongly that Māori knowledge (values, beliefs, practices and language) was regularly undervalued and marginalised in research, policy and practice. They discussed the concept of 'monocultural' thinking that relegates Māori knowledge to the periphery. This is in tandem with the work of Ermine, Sinclair and Jeffrey (2004), who contend that eurocentric hegemony has promoted the western body of knowledge as the singular and privileged consciousness. Shiva (1993) discusses the notion of hostility being unleashed on indigenous cultures, whereby indigenous knowledge systems are simply rendered invisible in research policy and practice. Aluli-Meyer (2008) believes that the enduring nature of indigenous knowledge, which is regularly

passed down over successive generations through an oral tradition of knowledge transmission and communication, is testimony to its integrity.

Theme Two: Whanaungatanga: The centrality of relationships

Establishing and maintaining respectful relationships is a means of gaining a greater insight and understanding of Māori realities. The process of whanaungatanga is an essential component of culturally responsive evidence-based SE practice; it requires skill, time and investment, and needs to be acknowledged as integral to service delivery. The participants felt strongly that for SE professionals who are working with Māori, the process of whanaungatanga needs to be premised on a deeper understanding of kaupapa Māori philosophy, specifically in terms of the ways in which protocols of engagement need to be facilitated in order to bring people together and maintain ongoing connections. It must also be responsive to spiritual dimensions. The range of factors that comprise whanaungatanga include being respectful, showing empathy, not judging, listening more than speaking, avoiding the use of jargon, using appropriate body language, upholding the mana of others and remaining humble. Durie (1997) asserts that whanaungatanga is fundamental to all professional interactions with Māori, and should not be minimised or overlooked by professionals who are inept or who are merely working in haste. He declares that whanaungatanga engenders collective responsibility for others' wellbeing through a commitment to sharing knowledge and information within a group for a common purpose.

Theme Three: Rangatiratanga: The centrality of self-awareness

SE professionals need to know and understand who they are themselves first and foremost, as a pre-cursor to self-empowerment and the development of the pre-requisite skills and competencies for working effectively with Māori. It is essential for professionals to have a realistic understanding of their own worldview perspectives, and of their own social and personal identity. From a practice perspective, the participants believed that professionals must reflect on any cultural biases, stereotypes or beliefs that they may hold about Māori so as to recognise the potential impact of their own culture on their professional interactions with Māori. They reiterated the damage that can be done to Māori when strongly held negative assumptions may effectively minimise the realities that Māori are dealing with on a daily basis as a result of historical, environmental, social, political and economical influences associated with the process of colonisation.

The deliberate self-examination and in-depth exploration of one's own cultural biases, stereotypes, prejudices and assumptions is an enabler of cultural awareness (Campinha-Bacote, 2007), a precursor to the development of cultural competency, which Cross, Bazron, Dennis and Isaacs (1989) assert requires professionals to accept and respect diversity. A process of self-exploration is able to alert professionals to the legitimacy of diversity, which in turn manifests a capacity to honour one's own culture, as well as the culture of others (Zion, 2005).

Theme Four: Research in context: The centrality of relevance

The participants expressed anxiety and frustration that particular research evidence that emanates from other contexts is continually privileged over what they described as "the

legitimate and valid evidences" that emanate from the lived realities of Māori. They felt that Māori voice is silenced by the commonly preferred large scale domestic research studies within which Māori are a small sub-group. Their preference was for smaller and repeated Māori-focused research projects, undertaken within meaningful contexts and which draw from the actual and lived experiences of Māori. Like Barkham and Mellor-Clark (2003), they discussed the notion of practice-based evidence (PBE) being a relevant source of information, and an area of untapped potential. The participants were also disconcerted by the expectation that they were regularly directed to culturally enhance western programmes in order to achieve a closer cultural alignment for their use with Māori.

Angus Macfarlane (2011) contends that there are many kaupapa Māori programmes that are not deemed to be 'evidence based' from a western perspective, and are consequently not funded or mandated for use with Māori; however they may be culturally effective and have the potential to achieve positive outcomes. Conversely, he asserts that there are many western programmes that are described as 'evidence based' and are therefore mandated for use with Māori; however they may not be culturally effective and limit the potential for better outcomes. This highlights an anomaly that exists when using terms *evidence based* and *effective*; clearly they are not necessarily synonymous terms. For Māori what is important is that a programme or approach is culturally relevant; that it is premised on, initiated through and instantiated via kaupapa Māori philosophy (Durie, 2007; A. Macfarlane, Glynn, Grace, Penetito, & Bateman, 2008).

Theme Five: Honouring the Treaty: The centrality of power-sharing

The participants viewed the Treaty as a foundational and abiding agreement that needs to underpin all aspects of SE core business. They felt that a bicultural partnership approach needs to be adhered to at all levels of authority within the organisation, and that any failure to do so by SE (as a representative of the Crown) is a direct breach of the Treaty obligations. Discourses about inequitable power-sharing and power imbalances emerged repeatedly, and permeated the other emerging themes. These themes included **hegemonic practices** that questioned the legitimacy of Māori knowledge and programmes; **inequitable resourcing** and support to enable the advancement of a more culturally relevant research evidence base; and, the marginalisation of Māori in **decision-making** processes at all levels of SE, specifically research, policy development and practice approaches.

The Treaty continues to retain a central role for Māori; it is as real and as meaningful today as it was when signed over 170 years ago. In the study it was apparent that the Treaty heavily influenced how perceptions about fairness, partnership, respect and status were interpreted and articulated by the participants. One stated: "We are definitely the junior partner in this Treaty relationship"; another commented: "Knowledge is power, so when your knowledge is not valued you have no power." The equitable distribution of power at all levels of SE decision-making therefore has the potential to prevent monocultural hostility being unleashed on Māori (Shiva, 1993).

Theme Six: Cultural competency: The centrality of enabling potential

Trimble and Thurman (2002) believe that many social services professionals may lack basic knowledge about a client's cultural and historical background, and that this has the potential to severely hinder the professional/client relationship as it directly influences how the professional perceives and interacts with the client. The participants described the need for SE professionals to have a prerequisite level of cultural competency in order to work with Māori, and felt that the cultural dimensions of practice were as important as the clinical aspects. They mentioned how important cultural competency was for enabling the potential of Māori tamariki and whānau, and discussed the idea of the organisation embedding a cultural attestation process as a key component of professional performance appraisals, wherein progression was contingent on achieving (evidencing) particular competencies.

He Ritenga Whaimōhio: A framework to guide culturally responsive EBP

The research findings have raised many questions about how 'evidence' is defined, and how differing interpretations may effectively marginalise cultural evidences that Māori recognise, value and know innately to work. The current EBP framework, although encompassing three worthy *kete* (baskets) of evidence (research, practitioner skill and whānau voice), has the potential to be a barrier to the actualisation of culturally responsive evidence-based special education practice. The parameters of each kete are ultimately defined by a dominant worldview discourse that honours particular evidences, and so simultaneously excludes others that are not deemed creditable. In its current form, it is potentially a 'culture-less' framework.

The **research evidence** kete privileges western knowledge that has been gathered, recorded, published and disseminated; evidence that has been derived from contexts that potentially do not include, or are irrelevant to, Māori. It excludes a great deal of knowledge, literature and evidence that is culturally grounded and relevant to Māori. Ultimately, it hinders access by Māori to the richness of mātauranga Māori. The **practitioner evidence** kete values the clinical aspects of professional practice, and therefore does not enforce an expectation that practitioners must acquire, and then display, pre-requisite levels of cultural competency. The **family/whānau evidence** kete acknowledges the importance of whānau as participants in all of the practice interactions; however it does not necessarily reflect the centrality of enabling their genuine participation; of paying regard to whanaungatanga as a core construct of whānau involvement.

Figure 1, He Ritenga Whaimōhio (S. Macfarlane, 2011), literally means 'informed practice'. As an EBP framework, it is reflective of three concepts that are highly regarded by Māori: *tika* (right, true, correct), *pono* (fair, just, honest) and *aroha* (care, compassion, love). This framework shows how these three concepts are able to broaden the parameters of each of the three current evidence kete, so as to facilitate the inclusion of Māori cultural evidences. Te ao Māori and Te Tiriti o Waitangi surround the kete, reminding professionals of the importance of Māori worldview perspectives, and the three Treaty principles of *partnership*, *protection* and *participation*.
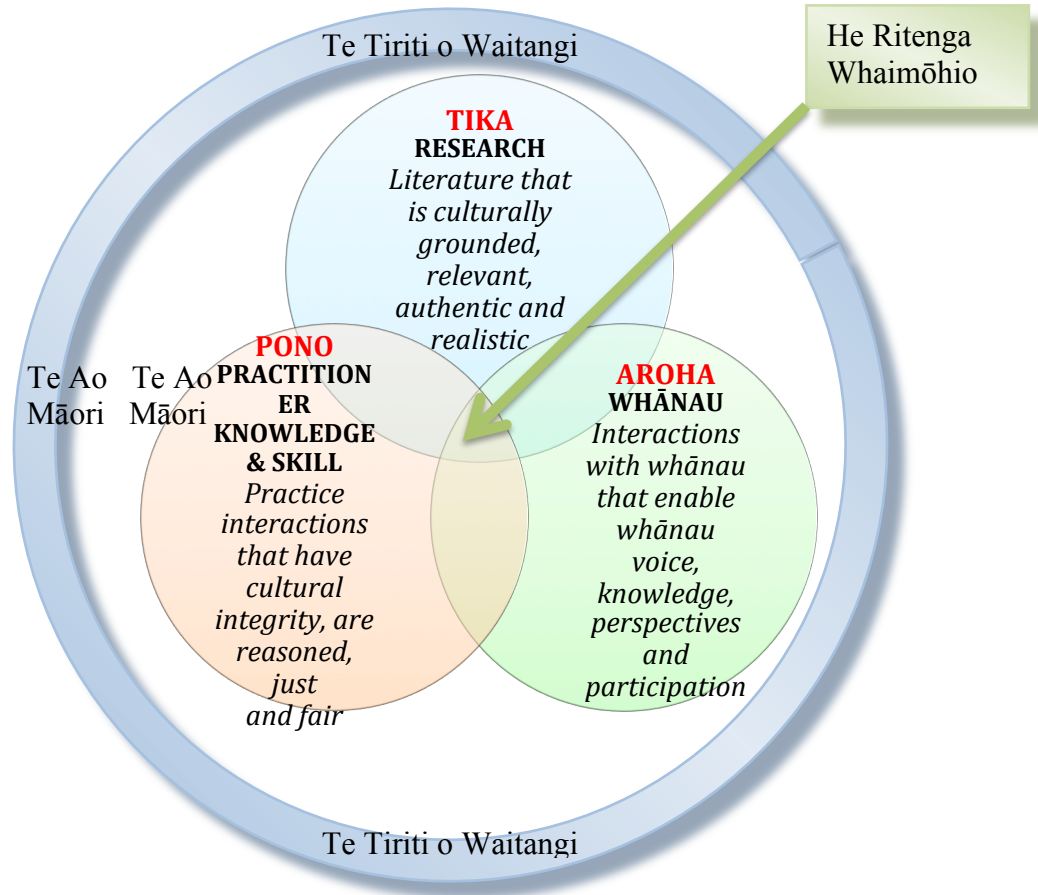
Figure 1. He Ritenga Whaimōhio: Culturally responsive EBP (S. Macfarlane, 2011)

Summary

The participants in this study believe that cultural responsiveness is at the essence of being Māori. It is what Māori do as a natural part of being Māori, which means thinking and doing things in kaupapa Māori ways, including catering for spiritual needs (Durie, 1994; Ratima, 2001). They stated that cultural responsiveness is not a static, compartmentalised approach or prescriptive service that a practitioner is simply able to uplift when working with Māori tamariki and whānau. The participants described it as being an invisible and protective *korowai* (cloak) adorned with *wairuatanga* (spirituality), mātauranga, and *māramatanga* (enlightenment). Each strand of this metaphorical korowai was portrayed by them as having significance, being constructed from the threads of *kōrero* (stories), *whakapapa* (ancestry), *waiata* (songs) and *karakia* (prayers)—evidences that Māori value highly. The participants talked about the *whatu* (woven) patterns of the korowai representing the diversity of experiences and conversations that are regularly encountered by Māori.

The eclectic blending of te ao Māori (the Māori world) and te ao whānui (the wider contemporary world) was described by the participants as being an enabler which allowed them to move in and out of the past, present and future with relative ease, always seeking to construct knowledge and understanding, and legitimate multiple voices and connections. This blending was described by a *kaumātua* (senior Māori) who participated in the focus group discussion as something "uniquely indigenous", given the innate synchronicity that indigenous cultures have with the celestial world to which they aspire, the material world in which they live, and the world after death that unites them with those who have passed on. In that way, the kaumātua believed that Māori are able to remain grounded in who they are in the contemporary world; to access western-based knowledges and practices as and when required, as this further enhances and validates Māori practices as genuine and unique. In this sense, they described kaupapa Māori practices and evidences as being central, not at risk of being 'othered' or simply being an appendage to a western 'norm' (Aluli-Meyer, 2008).

It was the participants' view that the two research constructs should not be mutually exclusive, as both needed to comprise an overall set of fundamental characteristics in order to be of any real benefit to Māori. As one participant stated: "Start with practices that are culturally responsive to us, and then grow the evidence base from there; don't bring us some unknown evidence-based programme and tell us to culturally enhance it."

Special education practice derives much of its philosophy and content from western psychology, thinking and subject matter that is universally subscribed to in a frequently irrelevant manner (Nikora, 2005). Many professionals are attracted to psychology and specialist teaching because they want to make a difference to the lives of Māori tamariki and whānau. They want to explore and understand learning and behavioural challenges, culture and identity, health and wellbeing, child development, and social justice; and they want to know about these things because they are relevant, important and sometimes challenging to the everyday lives of Māori. Their understanding however, is complicated by an ideology that has an unhealthy fixation on the culturally defined and resolutely individualistic psychological paradigm that has emerged from North America and that presently dominates professional practice philosophy. This continued fixation and blind acceptance has the potential to be harmful to Māori tamariki and whānau.

A change to this entrenched position is urgently required. It seems appropriate that the philosophy inherent in western psychology be viewed as simply one stream of consciousness amongst many, with greater investment going into valuing indigenous (Māori) evidences and perceptions; acuities that are more concerned with assessing, analysing and responding authentically to Māori tamariki and whānau, rather than simply diagnosing, measuring and labelling people and issues through a blurred western lens. Nikora (2005) contends that the problem is not simply the dearth of Māori knowledge and evidence in professional practice, but also the inequitable Māori presence within the deconstruction and reconstruction of a dominant scientific paradigm. It may well be argued that Māori presence creates space for challenge and debate, but it also has the potential to inflict more visible dominance and marginalisation if change is not proactively promoted and forthcoming: a double-edged sword that Māori would prefer to live without.

A reluctance to attend to the key components of *culturally responsive evidence-based* special education services in any meaningful way is the action of a risk-averse organisation avoiding liability. The outcome will be risk-averse special education professionals who are ignorant of real world problems, and who remain bereft of the necessary cultural knowledge, skills and supports that are central to making a positive difference for Māori. Many special education professionals may maintain a tidy file, write wonderful case notes and produce impressive reports; but are they doing work that is relevant and of real value to Māori? Will their professional interventions actually make the positive difference that is needed? Will they be upholding the vision of inclusive education? The status quo needs to change. Culturally responsive evidence-based special education services are not only desirable; they are essential.

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[i] Aotearoa, the original (indigeous Māori) name for New Zealand, literally means 'land of the long white cloud'. In 1642 Aotearoa was named New Zealand after the Dutch seafearer (Abel Tasman) became the first European to sight these lands. Throughout this article, either or both names will be used depending on the historical context being discussed.