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Cultural knowledge and identity for wellbeing and success: Trying to make the connections in the north of New Zealand.

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Background

This paper argues that secure cultural identity is essential to wellbeing and cultural identity is important to Māori youth participation and success. The roles of community and schools in developing secure cultural identity are increasingly complex, as both become increasingly more culturally and ethnically diverse in many parts of the world.

The paper discusses findings from student survey data from a 2 year project 'Te Wehi Nui a Mamao: Maximising the potential of tribal marae and regional language among youth', which began in July 2008, supported by funding from New Zealand's Foundation of Research, Science and Technology. This project aims to strengthen the relevance of tribal marae and regional Maori language among Maori youth, which are identified as important to Māori cultural identity.

Inter-generational transfer of tribal marae knowledge and language is becoming more compromised. Many cultural values are defined on marae. Tribal leaders have long been concerned about disconnections between Māori youth and tribal marae, poor knowledge of regional dialect and the potential negative consequences for full participation in society. It appears that Māori youth are disconnected from regional language dialects and marae knowledge now more than ever. Reconnecting Māori youth with these two sources of tribal identity is the key to the purpose of this project.

Research Questions

The project overall examines the extent to which traditionally accepted sources of Maori tribal identity - language and marae - continue to play an important role to Maori youth and what shape this role might take in the future, in their communities, careers and also in their schooling. The research is testing the hypothesis that success of contemporary Māori youth - future guardians of New Zealand's developing cultural identity - can be partly measured as an outcome of tribal marae values and language.

The project has three main strands. One strand involves examining the meaning of tribal marae and Maori regional language to Maori youth. This is the strand of relevance to this paper in which we focus on knowledge and experiences, including schooling experiences, pertaining to Maori language and tribal marae as reported by Maori youth who are participating in the project.

A second strand involves comparing youth responses to those of tribal elders and community leaders. A third strand involves the creation of a new multi-access web 2.0 site and web-based resources that can contribute to developing the cultural capacity and capability of youth and their marae communities. A key aim of the project is to integrate the resources into school learning programmes and tribal websites.

Methods

Respect, reciprocity, contribution and responsibility are important principles underpinning the project's research methods. Our research strategy included gaining support in principle from marae and schools across four tribal regions at the proposal stage of this project. Intellectual property is one of the key issues under ongoing and ongoing discussion with tribal communities involved in the project.

The above principles, strategies and issues resonate with Kaupapa Maori methodological approaches to research (Smith, 1999).

Our data collection methods with youth participants have involved

1. written surveys; completed by 501 students, 12 to 18 years of age from 6 schools,
2. 10 focus group interviews

This paper focuses on data from written surveys. The surveys sought information from youth participants about: personal ratings of te reo Maori language abilities; experiences of Maori language in the home, in schooling, and in the community; the importance of tribal marae to the participants; and knowledge and experiences pertaining to tribal marae.

Frame

The project's theoretical framework argues for the importance of language and culture to identity, wellbeing and successful educational outcomes. It is well known that the 'mother tongue' of indigenous peoples is key to perpetuating a culture and its value system. It is also established that learning in a mother tongue provides greater likelihood of academic success (Baker, 2006). In New Zealand, national achievement results show that Maori students taught through Maori language are more likely to gain national secondary school qualifications than Maori students taught through the English language. Children who do well academically have better employment opportunities, greater potential to contribute to their communities and wider society and so on. It is also acknowledged that the use of indigenous language is a basic right (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2007). Although New Zealand is a leading nation internationally for indigenous language regeneration programmes in the national education system, there are few programmes available to build knowledge or regional forms Maori. There is potential for strengthening this important facet of identity.

The institution of the marae also important to identity and language. Marae represent a significant cultural contribution of Maori to New Zealand's sense of national identity. Many schools in New Zealand have developed marae on their grounds in recognition of this. Marae are institutions seen as a key focal point of Maori cultural and community activities of importance to lived Maori cultural identities today. If marae are to continue as critical sites then we need to ensure that coming generations have access to relevant knowledge and skills.

Research findings

There are some, not unexpected, relationships emerging between participants' responses to questions about Maori language and their responses about their tribal marae. There are also indications that the more rurally located the school participants attend, the higher the likelihood that they will view marae as very important in their lives.

One of the main differences emerging between students who saw marae as important and those who did not was their reporting about experiences of Maori language. Students who saw marae as important were much more likely to report Maori was spoken in their homes and Maori was the first language they spoke as a child than those who did not see marae as important.

There were also differences in the amount of information students supplied about their marae. Nearly two-thirds of the group who saw marae as important were able to give the names related to their marae. In contrast, just over 10% of the students who didn't see marae as important named buildings or sites.

Relationships between experiences in Māori immersion and bilingual educational settings and familiarity with tribal marae, however, were less predictable, reflecting different reasons and circumstances underlying parent choice of schooling programmes for their children. For instance students in bilingual settings were much less likely to be familiar with their marae, compared with students in immersion settings.

Emerging results reflect the important interrelationship between regular experiences of tribal marae, opportunities to learn and use Māori language in communities and schools, and developing important tribal knowledge, thus ensuring its continuity across generations. Information being collected from youth is informing the creation of web-based resources that will be made available to integrate into school learning programmes and tribal websites.