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They don't care how much you know until they know how much you care: Optimal learning environments for Indigenous students

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Background

In the compulsory schooling sector Ministry of Education (MoE) publications over time have demonstrated an awareness and concern for the underachievement of Maori students (Indigenous peoples) (MoE, 2006, 2008). In 2005, only 33% of Maori students attained National Certificate of Educational Achievement Level 2; 25 percent of Maori school leavers left secondary school with little or no formal attainment; and only 73% of Maori stayed in secondary school until Year 12. Participation, retention, and exam success for Maori at secondary school enable or disable Māori enrolment at tertiary levels.

State funded Foundation tertiary programmes, which scaffold learners into tertiary learning, are a partial response to concerns based on unsatisfactory secondary school statistics. Such programmes teach literacy, language and numeracy to prepare enrollees for successful study at tertiary.

The Ministry of Education in New Zealand commissioned a literature review on Foundation programmes. This research (Benseman, Sutton and Lander , 2005) noted an absence of indigenous based studies. A subsequent MoE funded project was designed to fill the gap in knowledge about adult Mäori learners in Foundation programmes in Aotearoa New Zealand (McMurchy-Pilkington, 2009). This paper reflects on the findings of that project.

Research Questions

The key question that the study asked: What constitutes an optimal learning environment for indigenous minority learners in Foundation programmes?

Methods

This paper's nemesis was a larger study which explored optimal learning environments for adult Māori in Foundation Programmes (McMurchy-Pilkington, 2009). In the current study participants were from twelve providers of Foundation programmes including traditional providers (Universities and Polytechnic Institutes), PTEs (Private Training Providers), iwi providers (learning providers who are tribally based) and whare wananga (Indigenous Universities) in a range of cities and towns in New Zealand. Nearly 100 students were interviewed in 12 focus groups, while 8 tutors and 5 Chief Executive Officers were interviewed individually. Full ethics approval was gained from the university ethics committee where the researcher was located.

This research project is based on a Kaupapa Mäori research methodology. Kaupapa Mäori methodology arises from a critical theory approach as it examines resistance and struggle, and is emancipatory. Additionally Kaupapa Mäori takes for granted the validity of Mäori knowledge, Mäori language and Mäori ways of 'doing' with an expectation there will be exercise of Mäori agency (Smith, 2003).

Many Mäori feel a sense of frustration and powerlessness at having limited control over their lives (Smith, 1999). Critical theory both provides enlightenment and is emancipatory, as it brings about a deeper awareness of one's reality (Gibson, 1986). There is a commitment in critical theory to making changes towards a more just and fair society. Whilst funded by MoE this research engaged Mäori researchers to explore what might support and enhance tertiary learning for Mäori adults. Connecting with Mäori voices enabled the researchers to gain a deeper awareness of the reality of study

experiences for Måori. Through articulation and self-reflection this research project both made visible the realities of the Måori learners and also enlightened policy makers. Self-reflection can lead to what Freire describes as liberation (Freire, 1972).

Frame

Research examining effective learning and teaching strategies for Maori medium education points to the importance of Maori being secure in their identity and this appears to be an important overall factor for academic success (Bishop, Berryman, & Richardson, 2001). Writing about culturally responsive pedagogy Macfarlane (2004)argues that infusing the five Māori concepts of whanaungatanga (relationship building), manaakitanga (an ethic of caring), rangatiratanga (teacher effectiveness), kotahitanga (bonding), and pumanawatanga (classroom morale and teacher attitude) are likely to have a positive impact on students' learning and on teachers' teaching.

Various studies have asserted the importance of relationships in the teacher/learner interaction (Hattie, 2002). This is especially important when students are members of minority ethnic or marginalized groups (Bishop et al., 2001; Carpenter, McMurchy-Pilkington, & Sutherland, 2004; Hawk, Cowley, Hill, & Sutherland, 2002). It appears that, whatever the age group of the ethnic minority learner, it is preferable that a relationship is established with a teacher prior to any formal instruction taking place. Such a prior relationship better facilitates successful learning outcomes.

The literature reveals there are a growing number of New Zealand based research studies on foundation learning programmes. None to date focus on Māori adult learners. This project's purpose was to capture the perspectives of learners, tutors, and providers as to how foundation programme experiences could be optimised for Maori learners.

Research findings

The findings were that an optimal learning environment for Adult Māori learners in Foundation programmes is one which is holistic, where there is a strong sense of belonging and connectedness – where there is interdependence between the physical, emotional, cultural, and academic elements.

The physical space requires a designated room, choice on how to structure it (physical connectedness), small, intimate, and feeling comfortable.

The emotional space requires relatedness, positive relationships (emotional connectedness), being cared for, respected and valued, a family atmosphere, interdependence and co-operation (working together of a family), with personal responsibility fostered.

The cultural space requires identity affirmation, which is incorporated into pedagogical practices (cultural connectedness).

Academic connectedness means that the environment is success oriented, real life contexts are utilized for academic learning, such that teaching connects to students' lives. Academic learning is holistic and incorporates social skills, personal skills, culturally skills, survival skills and connects to their wholeness as Māori.

It is intended that the outcomes of this study will raise the consciousness of tertiary educators of Måori learners. There are also strong pedagogical messages for all teachers of Måori learners.

In determining policy for Mäori it is argued that government policy makers should listen to the voice of Måori learners made visible in this study. Change appears necessary if we are to increase the participation, retention and success of Måori learners. It is argued that implications of this study have relevance to indigenous learners in international contexts.