

The importance of Conscientisation: Learning About Privilege From the Voices of Māori Students

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Abstract

This paper provides an autoethnographic view of the influences that have changed my perceptions and helped me to make better sense of the world that I live in, and my place in it. It is a story of personal, ongoing critical reflection. A story of unlearning and conscientisation that changed how I came to understand myself, my teaching practice and Aotearoa as a bi-cultural nation.

Position Paper/Personal Reflection

Keywords:

autoethnography, conscientisation, critical reflection

INTRODUCTION

I am a fifth generation New Zealander, a descendant of colonial immigrants. My identity is steeped in a small town on the east coast of New Zealand where my father attended the first secondary school and my Scottish, Irish and English descendants became firmly established amongst the colonial settlers. This paper presents some of the voices of Māori students who helped me to learn about my own sense of privilege in order to make better sense of the world that I live in today, and to understand my place in it. It is a story of my personal, ongoing critical conscientisation.

LOOKING BACK

I understand now that my forefathers deemed the stories of the past unimportant in our lives as they settled purposefully into their new country. I have some family trees and an old bible of my great grandmother as testament to my colonial past. As a Pākehā woman, I grew up knowing that my forefathers from Scotland, Ireland and England were among the first colonial settlers in New Zealand. On my father's side, they were what I would describe as 'thinkers'. We talked about socialism, communism, politics of the world, the effects of war, the psychology of mankind and being able to reflect on our actions and thoughts. I am now aware of what we did not talk about; about what was 'invisible' for us. We did not

talk about racism, we did not talk about the structures that society built to marginalise Māori, and we did not talk about the history of the people whose land we were living on as immigrant settlers. We did not talk about the land wars and the implication for Māori, as their land was confiscated by the Crown. We did not talk about Māori not being entitled to the same grants and welfare rights as non-Māori.

Consedine and Consedine (2012) state that, "Immigration, assimilation, and integration policies directly benefited Pākehā and marginalised Māori, yet these systemic structural benefits remain invisible to most Pākehā" (p.200). For my family, it seems that these structures were not recognisable as racist, that instead, they were thought of as proper and right, and an accepted part of who we were. In my white world, there was a discourse that Māori were lucky to have electricity and all the good things that the settlers (us) had introduced for them. There was also an implied discourse around Māori needing to 'man up', to make the most of things, and get on with it. There was no conversation that there was privilege, inequity or racism in our system.

Implications Today

In a report for the Ministry of Education, Else (1997) stated that, "Māori students as a group spend less time in the education system, and do less well in it, than non-Māori students as a group" (p.1). The reasons that were regularly touted were that Māori are somehow less academically capable, don't try hard enough or don't attend school often enough, therefore the status quo of disparity for Māori in schools continues. Consedine and Consedine (2012) discuss the impact of colonisation for Māori and non-Māori. They talk about, "the 'invisibility' that privilege maintains to benefit those who benefit from it most" (p.200). It's a phrase that has had a huge impact on my thoughts about the impact of colonisation.

Robyn D'Angelo (2018) sums up my colonial ancestors' thinking that they and others passed on through generations of living in Aotearoa, when she argues that:

... at the same time that whites are taught to see their interests and perspectives as universal, they are also taught to value the individual and to see themselves as individuals rather than as part of a racially socialized group. Individualism erases history and hides the ways in which wealth has been distributed and accumulated over generations to benefit whites today. (p.59)

This concept of individuality contributed to a position whereby the laws that were put in place, that discriminated against Māori, were not able to be pinned on an individual. Therefore, my family (as settlers) did not have to take responsibility for them. They (the laws) were designed by someone else, and we could ignore the implications for Māori and distance ourselves from the consequences of the laws that created injustice and hardship for Māori while benefiting the colonisers. Freire (2000) discusses this inability of humans to recognise and critically reflect on the inequity of power, privilege and oppression around them, when he explains the concept of conscientisation:

It is as conscious beings that men are not only in the world but with the world together with other men. Only men as "open" beings are able to achieve the complex operation of simultaneously transforming the world by their action and grasping and expressing the world's reality in their creative language. (p 39)

One reason for my ancestors' lack of understanding may well have been because they were *in* the world but not *with* it as they lacked self-knowledge and knowledge of the world around them. I know that, along with many other New Zealanders, I am a product of that environment. Freire (2000) also talks about the 'culture of silence' which he describes as "a relational phenomenon that gives rise to different ways of being, of thinking, of expression, those of the culture of silence and those of the culture that 'has a voice' (p.44). It is obvious to me now that I came from the culture that had a "voice"; a voice that lacked a real awareness of the world around them and contributed to my shallow understanding of te ao Māori (the Māori world) in Aotearoa.

MY TE KOTAHITANGA EXPERIENCE

My process of conscientisation began in 2008 when I attended a hui (meeting) as part of a school contingent that was joining Te Kotahitanga phase 5. Te Kotahitanga was a professional development programme based on the 'Effective Teaching Profile' trialled in 2004 and spread across forty nine schools in New Zealand. It aimed to improve

the educational achievement of Māori students in secondary schooling, initially by listening to Māori students themselves. Before the hui we were asked to read *Culture Speaks* (Bishop & Berryman, 2006) in which researchers had gathered the voices of Māori students, whānau, school principals and teachers in mainstream secondary schools in 2001.

The book was deceptively simple to read. However, I found the voices of the Māori students and their whānau, unpalatable, unbelievable, and very confronting. For one who had been teaching Māori students for years, their accusations of racism and their obvious dissatisfaction with schooling did not ring true for me. The intrinsic make-up of many teachers in Aotearoa is a belief in their own importance and values. As teachers, we like to believe that we are doing a good job and that we care for students. Therefore, a book that reveals the inequities of our education system is not an easy read. At the hui we were encouraged to discuss the book and its findings with our colleagues. At the time, I was teaching in a school with a Māori colleague and friend. We had both attended the school that we were teaching in. I discussed with my colleague, T, the concepts of the book. The conversation went something like this:

Me: It wasn't like that at our school was it?

T: What do you mean? Of course it was like that.

Me: What! (Shock! Not the response I was expecting) We went to school together and now we teach together. I didn't see any of that.

T: No but it was always there for us Māori kids.

Me: Really? I.... But ... (I am lost for words)

T: It's still there ...

T continued to tell me of his experiences and perspectives while attending the same school as me, and I realised then that I was living in an alternative world to Māori and that I knew very little of their experiences of oppression, of which I may well have been a part. It was a humiliating and challenging position to accept, especially as an experienced teacher who believed that she had great relationships with her students. Te Kotahitanga referred to this procedure as 'discursive repositioning' and for me repositioning was a painful process that questioned many of my personal beliefs and values. I read *Culture Speaks* (Bishop & Berryman, 2006) again, more carefully the second time, and tried to put away my bias, racism and privilege. I began to notice more around me and make a different kind of sense to the world that I was living in.

STUDENT VOICES FROM 2001

In *Culture Speaks*, Māori students, both engaged and non-engaged, have similar perspectives. They talk frankly about the racism they have experienced, the importance of relationships, identity, the stereotyping of Māori, and the cultural divide that is a part of their schooling experience. They also had opinions on how best to teach them, about what works and what does not work. In 2001, racism was not a word that was bandied around easily, certainly not by white people anyway. In my experience, we skirted around the edges of racism in fear of the tidal wave of emotions that it could fuel. However, these students (Bishop & Berryman, 2006) talked openly about racism and the stereotyping of them as 'Māori':

They're racist. They don't understand Māori kids. Some teachers pick on us Māori. Some teachers and kids are racist. (p.13)

When questioned further about what racism meant to them, they responded with what they were experiencing from their teachers and peers:

We're thick. We smell. Our uniforms are paru. They shame us in class. Put us down. Don't even try to say our names properly. Say things about our whānau. They blame us for stealing things when things go missing. Just 'cause we are. (p.13)

Students in *Culture Speaks* (Bishop & Berryman, 2006) expressed their frustration at not being accepted or valued because of their Māori heritage. They talked about the importance of understanding who they are and their prior experiences in order to be a part of the education:

Some teachers who aren't Māori try to tell us what Māori do about things like a tangi. It's crap! I'm a Māori. They should ask me about Māori things. I could tell them about why we do things in a certain way. I've got the goods on this but they never ask me. I'm a dumb Māori I suppose. Yet they ask the Asian girl about her culture. (p.60)

Teachers and students had contrasting views about the importance of relationships. Many teachers talked about the negative influences of Māori students' homes and their not wanting to achieve, and lack of discipline. Teachers said:

There is absolutely no respect for teachers by the current generation of [Māori] students. I think it's the way society has gone. The students are far more aware of their so-called rights. (p.156)

In contrast, students asked for a relationship with the teacher as someone who shared power, who respected their identity as Māori and someone who was prepared to learn about what that means:

It would be cool if a teacher.... you know how they are higher than we are, but like if the teacher could come down to where we are and teach us and not think that they are all high and mighty, and you have to listen to them or you get in trouble. But, like teachers that are just there for the kids and not just the money. Yeah. (p.76)

What pisses me off is if the classes were interesting, no one would be naughty. (p.68)

WE'RE ALL THE SAME

On a personal note, this teacher's comments rang true for me:

I've got one class that would be predominantly brown. I can't tell you whether they are Māori or Polynesian because I don't go to the bother of trying to find out because they are students who are here to learn. (p.161)

Although I nurtured positive relationships with my students, I will have been heard to express my belief that I 'didn't see colour' and that I 'treated all my students in the same way regardless of what they looked like or where they came from'. I was proud of this and I believed it was a strength. My dismissal of culture and identity in my early days of teaching is a wonder to me now. As my school entered into Te Kotahitanga I was challenged to look more deeply at the relationships and interactions that I had with my students. Understanding and learning about the whakapapa (genealogy) and whānau of my students has raised my own expectations for them and resulted in a greater awareness of them as individuals and as part of a wider whānau. In turn, this has led to improved outcomes for students in my classes. These outcomes have been wide-ranging, increased attendance, higher academic achievement, or an increased confidence, which has led to a willingness to try new things. Alton-Lee (2015), reporting on the effectiveness of Te Kotahitanga 2010-2012, concluded that:

Te Kotahitanga Phase 5 generated major new knowledge about the conditions required to achieve implementation fidelity when taking an intervention to scale, and to institutionalise school-led improvement (p.71)

Certainly, Te Kotahitanga had a major impact on my teaching and was the beginning of an iterative process of conscientisation that has reshaped my way of doing and being and thinking.

New Voices in 2015

Ka Hikitia, the Māori Education strategy, had a central vision of “Māori enjoying and achieving education success as Māori” (Ministry of Education, 2013). In 2015, the voices of Māori students were gathered at nine marae from the far North to Bluff. Māori students across 58 schools shared their perspectives of what “enjoying and achieving education success as Māori” had meant for them. These voices are in a series called *Ngā Huatau Taiohi* published on the Poutama Pounamu website. The themes mirror the voices in *Culture Speaks* some fifteen years before with some subtle differences that include a shift in perspective from the students that were interviewed. These students believed that they had achieved success ‘as Māori’. In a comparison of the 2001 narratives from *Culture Speaks* (Bishop & Berryman, 2006) and the 2015 study of these voices, Berryman and Eley (2018) acknowledged that many of the successful students maintained their identity as Māori, despite the systemic hurdles they had to overcome:

... these students knew that their experience of success was not the experience of all Māori youth and they were deeply saddened by that knowledge. Their strongest message was that to be successful as Māori within the school system, they had to be able to resist and overcome other people's low expectations and negative stereotypes about them being Māori. (p.112)

They were very aware of the racism and the negative expectations for Māori that were still evident in their schools. The following voices come directly from the website and, as such, are referenced to the marae where their voices were heard rather than by page number:

Success as a Māori student, for me, is breaking the stereotypes of not succeeding and not doing as well in school. For me, Māori is my strongest subject. But it doesn't get acknowledged as much as if you got endorsed with Excellence in English. So, to break the stereotypes for a Māori student, is to succeed well and be acknowledged, just as much as succeeding in a non-Māori based subject. (Omaka Marae)

Their voices were explicit about the importance of culture and identity in determining their success as Māori at school:

People never thought that I was Māori. They just thought I was a typical white boy, and I was like: “No, it's just I'm a white Māori.” And it was like: “Oh that's not a real Māori.” Well it is to me. (Pūkaki Marae)

The importance of knowing our learners resonates with this voice. Students are telling us that teachers require a deep understanding of where our students come from and an acceptance of who they are and where they belong:

It's realising who you are and where you came from, and just carrying that through your schooling. (Te Rau Aroha Marae)

When we have pride in being Māori and are not whakamā [embarrassed], you can show that you can succeed. Still have the tikanga to be humble, but you can say, “I'm proud to stand here as a Māori and receive this. (Pūkaki Marae)

Sadly, schooling is still a challenge, a struggle, something to be endured. Students tell us that according to people's perceptions of them, being Māori is a hindrance to their education; that they have to overcome racism and stereotypes and that their identity as Māori in our education system can be easily dismissed but never forgotten. They understand that they do not have the ‘privilege’ of being accepted for who they are, but that it is something to work towards.

Berryman, Eley and Copeland (2017) talk about these students as being “agents of change, despite all the factors that worked against them, including their youth, their race, and the conditions of oppression under which they have had to operate” (p.491). Personally, these voices were powerful instruments that I could use to affect personal change. They inspired me to encourage students to voice their opinions and to take more responsibility for their own learning, with my role being to open the doors that served as barriers: barriers that included timetable constraints, relationships within and outside of the classroom, financial issues, lack of confidence and an acceptance of te ao Māori as a medium for learning within the curriculum.

EDUCATION MATTERS TO ME

The Education Matters to Me reports (New Zealand Schools Trustees Association & Office of the Children's Commission, 2018) asked students about their experiences in the education system. Again, these findings parallel the earlier examples. Students say:

The way Māori and Pasifika students are treated and viewed. I would employ a more ethnically diverse teaching staff and ensure that there is a wider understanding of Māori and Pasifika culture among them. (p.8)

If they can't understand me, how can I understand them? (p.9)

The racist bastards that call us brown kids pieces of poo and baa baa black sheep - schools need to get this stuff improved. (p.14)

As a classroom teacher of more than 35 years, I concur with Murrihy (2017), when she stated:

... as teachers, so much has happened to make us defensive and cynical. But we need to remove our masks of cynicism and our personas of perfectionism and honestly consider the ways in which we are each involved, however unwittingly, in perpetuating the disparities that exist for individuals and whole groups of people in New Zealand society and in our schools. (p.1)

As a euro-centric woman, I needed additional support to fully-understand the impact of colonisation on our society in order to position myself to make positive changes for my Māori students and, in turn, for all.

BLENDED LEARNING

To deepen my understanding of the history of Aotearoa, the impact of colonisation on the fabric of our society, how this has landed for Maori students in our schools and our agency as educators to improve outcomes for Māori students, I am engaging in a blended learning course. During this time my understanding has broadened as I read and listen to researchers, students and teachers about 'what is working and not working for Māori'. As part of my

learning I work with a group of my peers with whom I share my learning and create safe opportunities to discuss these issues. The importance of conscientisation, resistance and transformative praxis are integral to our work. How do I support critical thinking and self-reflection so that outcomes for their students are improved? I have found that conscientisation is the first step towards understanding the part that I play in disrupting disparity. The questions I now ask as an educator are - how do the actions I take play out for Māori students and how do I know?

Although I can talk and reflect on my position in the world and realise that my actions can impact on others through my privilege, and conscious and unconscious bias, the next step is to take more positive action. I need to ask myself - what am I going to do about it? Then I need to act. When teaching, this means asking 'critical' questions about who holds the power and who this works for. It means asking what I needed to do differently so that my students had more opportunities to flourish. The merging of my theorising and practice (transformative praxis) was the beginnings of making a more positive difference for my students.

Unfortunately, this is not a light-switch moment, where the world crystallises, and all becomes clear. I am 'privileged'. I have the ability to walk away from the issues, to engage in my busy life and to enjoy it as an individual while still believing that I am making a difference for my students. Until I am fully conscientised, 'it is not imperative that I understand the world by being "in" it' (Freire, 2000. p.69).

CONCLUSION

Making deliberate changes in my teaching practice began when I was introduced to the narratives in *Culture Speaks*. The next 15 years have been a process of conscientisation, unlearning, resistance and transformative praxis as I have sought to understand the depth of racism for Māori in our education system and to examine my 'privilege and place' within this system. The narratives of Māori students have helped me to understand how, as an educator and a person, I must 'unlearn, learn and relearn' in order to change the perceptions of my world (Wink, 2011) that are grounded in the biases of my colonial past. My sense of

'privilege' was strongly ingrained in my psyche. The process of change has been iterative, illuminating and uncomfortable. I have had to resist my natural inclination to stay safe within the boundaries of what I believed; to be open to exploring new learning, to ruminate on it and to swallow it gracefully. Listening to the voices around me has deepened my understanding of the fabric of our society and how our past, present and future are inexorably entwined. I am grateful to have had the opportunity to grow as a human and as a teacher through this corkscrew of infinite learning. As educators, I believe we can make systemic and personal changes through conscientisation, resistance and transformative praxis, but first we need to acknowledge that our education system has not worked well for Māori and an essential part of 'being' in this world is a moral imperative to work for change.

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AUTHOR PROFILE

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