

# “We Know What You Need ...” and other Misconceptions about Māori Learners<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

This paper challenges some of the ill-informed and misleading assumptions made about Māori students and their whānau, and about Māori teachers and education professionals. In particular it examines four prominent assumptions that impact on Māori, namely:

We are all New Zealanders; We know all about Māori students and praise; We know what whānau needs are, and how to meet them; and we know what an effective partnership with Māori looks like.

It is argued that non-Māori need to invest more time and energy into gaining an understanding of the worldviews and lived experiences of their Māori colleagues, students and whānau they work with. They also need to better understand how taken-for-granted Western European worldviews impact upon Māori. Deeper understanding of both issues will enable non-Māori to build close personal as well as professional relationships with Māori, and so avoid forming and acting upon untested assumptions about “Māori needs” and how they should be met.

## Research

### Keywords

*Culturally appropriate strategies, inclusive education, Māori students, parent school relationship, positive reinforcement, Resource Teachers Learning and Behaviour, teacher development.*

## INTRODUCTION

In this paper the authors draw on their personal and professional experiences and research to identify four prominent, ill-informed assumptions that impact on Māori.

These are:

- “We are all New Zealanders”.
- “We know all about Māori students and praise”.
- “We know what whānau needs are, and how to meet them”.
- “We know what an effective partnership with Māori looks like”.

## “WE ARE ALL NEW ZEALANDERS”

This is a favourite positioning statement oft used by politicians. At a superficial level the statement is true, in that there are many different peoples, from different cultural backgrounds now living and working in New Zealand, and regarding New Zealand as home. However, there is a sub-text to “we are all New Zealanders”, and that is an assumption that “we are all the same.” Such assumptions marginalise and minimise difference. Māori hold a unique and Treaty-defined position as tāngata whenua.<sup>2</sup> Māori language, cultural values and practices are connected to this land in a way that is different from those of other peoples living here. Similarly, the social structures of whānau-hapū-iwi-waka<sup>3</sup> support individual and collective identities among Māori that are different from the individual and collective identities of other New Zealanders. An assumption of sameness can obscure our understanding of difference: in this case, the importance of Māori beliefs, values and preferred ways of thinking and acting for the identity, wellbeing and achievement of Māori in their own country. An assumption of sameness can lead to trivialising and disrespect for the knowledge bases, languages, preferred pedagogies and lived experiences of Māori New Zealanders. Emphasising sameness can lead also to moving attention away from questions like: “Who, and what needs to change if better educational outcomes for Māori are to be achieved?” Further, emphasising sameness can lend support to assumptions that there is little non-Māori need to learn or understand about Māori and that there is little need to change the way non-Māori position themselves in relation to Māori.

In sharp contrast to this was the strong desire of the reference group of Māori kaumātua<sup>4</sup> and special education professionals who advised the universities consortium on the Resource Teachers: Learning and Behaviour (RTL B) training programme. Knowing that the vast majority of RTL B would be non-Māori, the reference group wanted this programme content to represent Te Ao Māori<sup>5</sup> faithfully in terms of knowledge and pedagogy, and to respect the mana<sup>6</sup> and the wairua<sup>7</sup> of Māori students.

<sup>1</sup> Summarised version of an invited Keynote Address, Ministry of Education, Special Education National Leadership Conference, Wellington, New Zealand, January 24, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> People of the land, original inhabitants

<sup>3</sup> Extended family, subtribe, tribe, canoe

<sup>4</sup> Elders

<sup>5</sup> The Māori world

<sup>6</sup> prestige, influence, authority

<sup>7</sup> spirit, spirituality

The programme began with what was, for many non-Māori RTLB, a first look into a living and contemporary Māori language and culture, containing different views and positions on issues facing New Zealanders, and very different views on human development and pedagogy. This provided a distinct challenge to assumptions held by a number of RTLB of a pre-colonial Māori world, located in the distant past, and lacking a distinctive present or future orientation and relevance.

The pōwhiri,<sup>8</sup> through which RTLB were welcomed onto the course, was presented and understood as a metaphor of inclusion. Pōwhiri begin by acknowledging and respecting differences. (*He tāngata ke koutou, he tāngata ke mātou*).<sup>9</sup> This is represented by the formal encounter between two sets of people (manuhiri<sup>10</sup> and tāngata whenua). The independence and uniqueness of each group is mutually acknowledged and respected, as evidenced in the karanga,<sup>11</sup> whaikōrero<sup>12</sup> and waiata<sup>13</sup>. After acknowledging differences between groups, and recognising how important these differences are for the identity and wellbeing of each group, pōwhiri move on to more inclusive processes such as hongī,<sup>14</sup> hariru<sup>15</sup> and kai,<sup>16</sup> leading on to shared discussion and working together. Having acknowledged each other's uniqueness, and renewed relationships of trust and respect, the two groups can address a common agenda and develop collaborative plans of action. (*He iwi kotahi tātou*).<sup>17</sup> Through this experience in contexts where Māori cultural and knowledge bases prevailed, RTLB were challenged to understand inclusion as a far deeper and more complex process than simply dealing with issues of access and participation.

Only after ensuring that RTLB understood the integrity of this metaphor of inclusion based on acknowledgment and respect for the language and cultural experiences of Māori did the programme turn to bicultural issues and Treaty relationships. This is a key pathway for non-Māori to follow in understanding and supporting tino rangatiratanga.<sup>18</sup> Firstly, space needs to be created for Māori colleagues and whānau to define and determine their preferred curriculum and pedagogical goals. Secondly, non-Māori need to work alongside and support Māori to achieve their goals. Both responses require non-Māori to take an "unknowing" position, rather than an "expert" position, and to recognise the limitations and inadequacies of their knowledge and experiences of things Māori. In the context of the RTLB programme this required RTLB to re-position themselves. First learn more about your treaty partner, learn who they are, where they come from, what are their beliefs and their values, learn to respect their identity and their integrity, learn to seek out their voice, and learn not to speak and act for them. This positioning is vital to successfully maintaining any close personal relationship. It is also a key component of the very powerful Te Kotahitanga<sup>19</sup> professional development programme for teachers of Year 9 and Year 10 Māori students who present challenging behaviour within their classes and schools (Bishop, Berryman, Richardson & Tiakiwai, 2001).

For teachers to assume that because their urban Māori students present difficult and challenging behaviours in class, they have no knowledge or understanding of te reo<sup>20</sup> and tikanga Māori<sup>21</sup> is to risk doing considerable harm to their mana and wellbeing. For a school principal to assume that if he needs to have a school kaumātua, then he can just appoint one is to show major ignorance of tikanga. For another principal to assume that it will be all right to expect the school's kapa haka<sup>22</sup> group to conduct a pōwhiri for international visitors, but then to return to their classes without sharing in the refreshments provided for the visitors is to show ignorance of tikanga. To assume that one Māori teacher can effect cultural change within a whole school or organisation without a commitment from all staff to re-position themselves as learners and to be willing to change their own ways of relating and responding to their Māori students and whānau also indicates ignorance of tikanga. When schools or organisations do this, they put that Māori teacher in a very unsafe position, with respect to both his/her own culture and the power structures of the school.

### "WE KNOW ALL ABOUT MĀORI STUDENTS AND PRAISE"

The following set of assumptions concerning the use of praise with Māori students illustrates how mistaken information and inappropriate generalisation can lead to actions that may cause harm, despite being well-intentioned:

- Māori children do not like to be singled out
- Māori children will become whakamā<sup>23</sup> if they are praised individually
- Public praise of Māori children is culturally inappropriate
- Māori parents don't praise their children.

These assumptions are regularly voiced by well meaning, "culturally sensitive" educators who note how they avoid publicly praising Māori children in case this causes them to become whakamā. Little thought is given to how these children feel when their Pākehā<sup>24</sup> classmates receive regular public praise while their own best efforts appear to go unnoticed. Similarly, it is claimed in a number of academic texts that because Māori culture is a group-oriented culture, any practice that "singles out" people is culturally inappropriate. However, group orientation does not imply group sameness. Timutimu-Thorpe (1988) believes that being a strong individual and a co-operative member of a group are roles that did not clash in traditional times and nor do they today. Hare Arapere, referring to gifted Māori children being actively discouraged from "standing out" stated:

This myth should be confined to the grave, the more it is used, the more it becomes a truth. This view has been largely promulgated by Pākehā academics and Pākehā teachers and educators act accordingly. I have a fear that future researchers may trace a relationship between this and the tall poppy syndrome thereby placing the blame on Māori for this kiwi disease. (Bevan-Brown, 1993, p.127)

<sup>8</sup> Welcoming ceremony  
<sup>9</sup> You are a people, we are a people  
<sup>10</sup> Visitors  
<sup>11</sup> Call  
<sup>12</sup> Speeches  
<sup>13</sup> Song, singing

<sup>14</sup> Press noses  
<sup>15</sup> Handshake  
<sup>16</sup> Food  
<sup>17</sup> We are one people  
<sup>18</sup> Tribal authority, chieftainship  
<sup>19</sup> Unity

<sup>20</sup> The Māori language  
<sup>21</sup> Māori protocol, custom  
<sup>22</sup> Māori cultural, performing arts group  
<sup>23</sup> Shyness, embarrassment  
<sup>24</sup> Person of predominantly European descent

Educators often cite their own experiences as proof of the accuracy of the previous assumptions, relating examples where praising Māori children both publicly and privately resulted in the children becoming embarrassed, uncomfortable, withdrawn or even belligerent. However, they are challenged to look beyond the cultural inappropriateness of praise as an explanation for this challenging behaviour. The child may have felt the praise was undeserved. Perhaps s/he did not know the teacher well enough to feel comfortable with the praise or maybe it was delivered in an overly effusive or false manner.

Butterworth (2004) investigated Māori children's interpretation of, and response to teacher praise in a small-scale project. Participants were nine Year 5 and Year 6 Māori students in a bilingual class in a decile 2, mainstream urban primary school where Māori comprised 70% of the roll. A questionnaire and semi-structured individual interviews were used to explore students' feelings and views about being praised. All nine students reported feeling "very glad" or "glad" and "very proud" or "proud" when their teacher praised them. Six students reported feeling degrees of shame/embarrassment as well as feeling glad when they were praised by their teacher. However, when these students were asked if they would rather not be praised because they felt both shame and pride, all were adamant that they would still rather be praised. One student, despite feeling *whakamā* on being praised, added that he preferred to be praised in front of the whole class rather than quietly and individually by the teacher: "In front of the whole class so they know I'm da bomb!"

Butterworth (2004) believes a possible explanation for the dual feelings towards being praised relates to the Māori concept of *hinengaro*<sup>25</sup> where thoughts and feelings are inextricably connected to form "a distinctive Māori way of thinking, feeling and behaving" (Durie, 2001, p.86). The interlinking of emotional and cognitive domains may lead to a continuous interpretation and re-interpretation of praise and may result in a duality of responses to it. Another possible explanation relates to Māori students' lived reality. Durie (2001) suggests that most Māori learners are located at the interface of *Te Ao Māori*<sup>26</sup> and *Te Ao Whānui*<sup>27</sup>. At this interface, with its conflicting values, standards, and "ways of being", Māori students may struggle as they seek the meaning of praise. If a teacher's praise message conflicts with messages received from the wider environment, confusion and mixed feelings are highly likely. However, whatever the cause of some students' duality of feelings about teachers' praise, their desire for this praise to continue was a very clear message from this research.

The students' teacher also reported a range of responses to praise and noted that the children's responses had changed as the year progressed:

I know at the beginning of the year when I've said, "well done", they'd just put their head down ... [later in the year] their smile comes up and also the rest of the class helps with the praise. They either clap or they're also praising the student as well in their group.

This teacher did not interpret the initial negative response to praise by some children as indicating they did not want to be praised, nor that the giving of praise was culturally inappropriate. Rather, she believed the students' responses arose from unfamiliarity with her, with their new class group and with teacher praise in general. The students were unsure as to whether her praise was genuine or not. She continued to use praise and as the students gained confidence and trust in her, their negative responses to praise decreased markedly. Stunned and surprised looks and hanging heads were replaced by smiles and raised heads.

Butterworth's (2004) research revealed also that students regularly told their parents of their achievements at school, a practice actively encouraged by the teacher who checked that they had taken their certificates and tokens home to share with their parents. She also informed parents during classroom visits and at parent interviews. The parents' response was to reinforce their child's achievements with their own praise and rewards. This strengthened the teacher praise messages and further enhanced the children's belief in themselves as effective learners. By being kept informed of their child's learning successes, parents' aspirations and expectations for their child's academic achievement were increased. Parental expectations of children's performance have been shown to effect the child's commitment to their work at school (Hill & Yeung, 2000, cited in Biddulph, Biddulph & Biddulph, 2003). In this research, teacher praise added not only to the students' positive self concept but also to their parents' view of themselves as competent parents and supporters of their child's learning – a real win-win situation!

These findings are contrary to the contention that Māori parents avoid praising their children because they fear being considered *whakahihi*<sup>28</sup>, or because their praise may contribute to their children becoming *whakahihi* (Metge, 1995). Butterworth's (2004) study showed that within their own *whānau*, where there was no risk of praise being misinterpreted as *whakahihi*, parents openly praised and encouraged their children. Similar practices were identified in research on giftedness from a Māori perspective (Bevan-Brown, 1993).

Butterworth (2004) cautions against over-generalising about the effects of praise on Māori students, and emphasises the importance of seeking out and listening to student voices and learning of the complexities involved in their understanding of and response to teacher praise. It appears that the effectiveness of teacher praise and its cognitive and emotional impact on Māori students is strongly dependent on the quality of the relationship the teacher has built up with students over time, and on the relationship built up between the teacher and *whānau* members. Building respectful and trusting relationships takes time, but this is time well spent since it is within these relationships that praise takes on specific cognitive, emotional and cultural meanings.

<sup>25</sup> Seat of thoughts and emotions

<sup>26</sup> The Māori world

<sup>27</sup> The wider global society

<sup>28</sup> Vain, conceited, arrogant

## “WE KNOW WHAT WHĀNAU NEEDS ARE AND HOW TO MEET THEM”

Examples of where professionals have mistakenly assumed they knew what Māori children, parents and whānau needed and how these needs should be met are not hard to find. The following story was told by a Māori child's Pākehā grandmother who was the principal of the school she attended:

I have found the biggest problem with Māori children and my grandchildren in particular, was the perception of the teachers. Often they haven't been to preschools so the teachers say, “Oh, they have had no experience.”

*[Interviewer: And not acknowledging what other experiences they have had, do you mean?]*

That's right, like going to a tangi<sup>29</sup> or travelling around the countryside, or being with your parents or whatever, are not these an experience? ... They got the Resource Teacher of Reading to come and have a look at her .... She claimed that Tessa didn't have the language. She didn't know what to say. She wasn't able .... She didn't have any life experiences. She'd never been anywhere. She didn't know the relationship between her and me. That's when I really went mad. She'd just been to Wellington, been to Auckland and she was involved in athletics, Colgate National Games. I said, “I've got a photo of her from a statue at Paraparaumu. She's been out to the airport. If you have a look at some of your other children they haven't had the experiences that she has had”, but she wasn't going to share it with this woman. That is a Māori choice. They've got to be real comfortable before they will share that .... The Resource Teacher of Reading said she needs some experiences to draw on. What else can I do short of sending her around the world, what else can I do?! (Bevan-Brown, 2002, p. 268)

In the same study a mother reported that she was very happy with the services her son with multiple disabilities received from his teachers and Ministry of Education, Special Education workers. However, she always dreaded Individual Education Programme meetings that followed any holiday period. Invariably she was told that his “development was set back” in the holidays: “I say to them, ‘Are you telling me that I am not teaching him anything? But I do different things at home than you do in the classroom’” (Bevan-Brown, 2002, p.280). The message she received was that the professionals knew best what her son needed and how these needs should be met. Her priorities and efforts were not acknowledged or valued.

Often professionals' assessment of children and whānau needs does not take reo and cultural factors into account, as the following two stories illustrate:

My child's disability is a social disability ... The psychologist came in to observe him playing in the playground at lunchtime. Her observation of the socialisation that was going on was that he was appearing to be having a really good time but that he needed to develop some functional skills for cricket.

It was bizarre. In actual fact he hadn't been having a really good time. He had finished the game in tears because he hadn't really understood what was going on ... I came in towards the tail end and he was really, really upset ... [The psychologist] couldn't read the social moves. This idea that body language is the same no matter what culture is simply not true and so she couldn't read the body language. She really didn't know what was going on. (Bevan-Brown, 2002, p. 294)

Yet another mother told of how her child's speech problems were attributed to his bilingual education:

I said that my other two children are in bilingual education and they don't have the same problem but she just brushed it aside and I went, “Oh, you know, why bother! I am sick of hearing two languages as the reason because it's not true!” She [the psychologist] just did not listen .... It's like they are taking our skill of bilingualism and turning it into something that's negative and they shouldn't do that. (Bevan-Brown, 2002, p. 305)

A final point is that professionals' assessment of a child's needs is often too narrowly focused. A parent explains:

I am conscious that the Ministry looks at the child, not the siblings. But no family operates in isolation ... Tamati does silly things because that is part of the deal [his disability] and she [Tamati's sister] cops the flak. Nobody looked at that and said, “Maybe this kid needs time out. Maybe she needs attention” and this is the wider whānau thing ... We can't get services that look at us holistically, that look at whānau. They look at these kids in isolation. (Bevan-Brown, 2002, p. 300)

These examples illustrate occasions where professionals have mistakenly or too narrowly assessed children and whānau needs. To avoid these situations it is recommended that professionals relinquish their “expert” position and take up an “unknowing” position, and listen carefully to Māori children and whānau to find out what their needs really are. In order to do a better job as a professional, more time and effort needs to be put into establishing and maintaining personal relationships of trust and respect with whānau.

## “WE KNOW WHAT AN EFFECTIVE PARTNERSHIP WITH MĀORI LOOKS LIKE”

Most educational professionals assume they know and understand the notion of working in partnership with others – other professionals, parents, family members, and students. However, all too often, especially in interaction with Māori, the “working” part of the partnership begins after one partner, usually the stronger, the dominant, the expert, the more experienced, the more highly paid, has defined the nature of the problem or task, identified the strategies to be tried, and perhaps even prescribed the solution.

This serious power imbalance can be true of partnerships operating at all levels in education, from Treaty of Waitangi partnerships and educational policy development initiatives at national, regional and local levels through to implementing school and classroom action plans.

<sup>29</sup> Funeral

This is neither a safe, nor a respectful basis for educational professionals to establish and maintain partnerships with Māori. Just as the abuse of power and control in inter-personal partnerships can cause serious long-term damage to the less-powerful partner, so also can the abuse of power and control in professional relationships between non-Māori and Māori cause hurt and damage to the Māori partner. This occurs when educational professionals speak and act for and on behalf of Māori and claim to know how Māori think, feel, and what is best for them.

However, there is a more respectful way in which non-Māori professionals can enter into more effective and balanced working partnerships with Māori. This requires learning to think, speak and explain themselves and their work using Māori icons, images and metaphors rather than relying on their own (Bishop & Glynn, 1999; Macfarlane & Glynn, 1999). This also requires rejecting assumptions that the icons, images and metaphors of non-Māori language and culture will automatically be understood and appreciated by Māori. The first and most important step in this process is to learn to listen to the voice of Māori. This re-positioning is best achieved in contexts where the language and culture of the Māori partner is validated and affirmed, and where Māori can exercise agency through having control over procedures and protocol. In short, majority culture professionals need to put themselves in the less powerful position, to be visitors in someone else's cultural space (Glynn, Berryman, Walker, & O'Brien, 2001). Good visitors do not tell their hosts what to do and how to do it.

As noted earlier, the RTLB role is one of working in a collaborative relationship with classroom teachers, school management and school communities to promote wider use of inclusive teaching strategies (Brown, Moore, Thomson, Anderson, Walker & Glynn, 2000; Glynn, 1998). These are strategies that allow students experiencing learning and behaviour difficulties to participate more fully in regular classroom lessons. A great many of these students are Māori. Hence, a critical component of the RTLB training programme is exposure to Māori understandings of human development, experiences of growing up Māori and Māori-preferred learning and teaching strategies (Macfarlane, 2000a, 2000b; Macfarlane & Glynn, 1999). One of the course assignments includes the task of presenting a mihi<sup>30</sup> to colleagues and Māori people during an overnight noho marae<sup>31</sup> experience.

A mihi involves two core elements. The first is to greet the icons, images, landscape, tribal ancestors, ancestral house, and the people present on the day. The second is to "represent" yourself in a way that "makes sense" within a Māori worldview. Both of these elements require a shift in mind set – a shift in positioning, a shift away from the familiar ways in which people are introduced within a Western European cultural context. In presenting a mihi, a respectful sense of place needs to be conveyed. RTLB were asked to consider questions like:

- Whose cultural space am I in?
- What do I know about this place, and about these people?
- How will I acknowledge this?
- What should I say about myself in this place, and to these people?
- What is it about me that these people regard important?

RTLB were also asked to try to incorporate appropriate Māori language, icons, images and whakatauki,<sup>32</sup> or at the very least, to practise their pronunciation of all key words, names of key ancestors, names of tribes and sub-tribes, names, of landscape features, and names of people present. They were encouraged to seek help and guidance from Māori. This help and guidance was given unstintingly by Māori colleagues and friends who respected the intent and purpose of their colleagues and of the task.

However, the trainers were stunned by the level of resistance, defensiveness, animosity, anger and frustration this assignment engendered amongst some non-Māori RTLB. Despite assurances that this assignment, together with its mode of assessment, had been devised and planned with the full collaboration of the Māori reference group and the caucus of Māori staff from the three universities involved, the trainers were strongly challenged by non-Māori RTLB on a number of fronts:

- The whareniui<sup>33</sup> was being used for inappropriate purposes.
- Non-Māori pedagogies were being imposed onto Māori.
- If this assignment were to go ahead at all, it should not be marked or graded, because to do so would be belittling or degrading to Māori.
- The assignment was mere tokenism.
- The assignment was not relevant to their work because they worked in areas where there were very few Māori students.

The strength of this resistance, defensiveness and even panic indicated the level of fear that some RTLB had of being required to move out of their cultural comfort zone, and of being asked to learn to change their own, dominant partner behaviour. Despite these protests the assignment went ahead. RTLB presented their mihi in marae all over the country. Without exception, the mihi presented by non-Māori RTLB were graciously received and warmly responded to by local kaumātua, whānau members, Māori teaching staff and whāea<sup>34</sup> and kuia<sup>35</sup> from Poutama Pounamu.<sup>36</sup>

The experience turned out to be emotionally charged and highly challenging, but also warm and highly affirming for all RTLB. Feedback from around the country for this assignment has been, and still is, overwhelmingly positive. Typical feedback was that initially some RTLB found the assignment frightening and stressful. Nevertheless, on completion of the

<sup>30</sup> Introducing oneself

<sup>31</sup> Sleeping/staying on the same

<sup>32</sup> Proverbs

<sup>33</sup> Meeting house

<sup>34</sup> Mother

<sup>35</sup> Elderly woman, grandmother

<sup>36</sup> Māori Research and Development Centre

assignment they reported it had been extremely positive, worthwhile and very transformative. The experience had focused their attention on how little they knew or understood about just how different Māori worldviews are from Western European worldviews, and just how much they had felt out of their comfort zone. For many, the experience facilitated their first step towards building a personal and more respectful relationship with Māori colleagues, students and whānau.

## CONCLUSION

Education professionals will find it very difficult to build relationships with people they know very little about. They will find it even more difficult if the starting point involves assumptions of sameness, and assumptions that their cultural values and practices around teaching, assessment and intervention will “make sense” for everyone, so that there is little for them to learn from Māori students and whānau, and from their Māori colleagues. It is essential for educational professionals to build relationships of trust and respect with Māori colleagues and whānau, and to understand how contemporary Māori society “works”. This means moving beyond present comfort zones, and engaging and participating comfortably with Māori in authentic cultural contexts where te reo Māori and tikanga Māori can prevail.

### He kanohi kitea A face seen is a message understood.

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