

The Moral Imperative of Bi-cultural Leadership: The Leader Laid Bare.

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Abstract

This paper explores my experiences as a principal undertaking practitioner based, auto-ethnographic research, as I seek to appropriate new ways of leading that will ensure equity of educational outcomes for Māori students at Rangiora High School, a large state secondary school in the South Island of New Zealand/Aotearoa. This study was prompted following an analysis of our National Certificate of Educational Achievement [NCEA] student achievement data which highlighted unexpected and unacceptable disparities between Māori and Pākehā. Over the course of two years I collected the narratives of students in my school and used these to examine hegemonic imperatives that underpinned deficit thinking in our institution. Using that new knowledge I made deliberate changes to my leadership practice and then measure the effect my altered practice had on those around me. The work is important because, while there is a plethora of educational research around principal leadership, there is little if any auto-ethnographic research focussed on principal leadership, in a uniquely New Zealand context, underpinned by an examination of bicultural perspectives. This paper offers a unique opportunity to advance our understandings of the changing context within which qualitative inquiry may be practiced as well as the implications of such practice on raising achievement levels for Maori students.

Keywords: autoethnography, practitioner-based research, insider research, Māori achievement, cultural safety, indigenous inquiry

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Tīmatatanga¹ Ehara taku toa, he takitahi, he toa takitini

I was appointed to the position of principal at Rangiora High School, a large semi-rural coeducational state secondary school located in North Canterbury, New Zealand in May 2003. The school was one hundred and nineteen years old and I was its tenth principal and the first woman to hold the position. The school's ethnic composition included 82% New Zealand European/Pākehā, 10% Māori, 3% Asian and 5% students classified as 'Other.'

One month after my arrival in June 2003 the school was reviewed by the Education Review Office,² as part of their published cycle of review of state funded schools. The review, published in November of that year, reported a lack of a professional engagement on the part of some staff, a general lack of student achievement, limited student engagement with quality learning opportunities and regular incidents of student bullying. The school's suspension and stand down rates were identified as higher than those of schools of a similar size and decile³.

The report made recommendations that my Board of Trustees⁴ and I used to formulate a blueprint for school improvement (Stoll 1999). My clear mandate from the Board was to raise student achievement levels to above national norms and create a vibrant learning environment that met the needs of all students. I began by focussing on strengthening leadership capacity across the school. (Robertson 2008). Deal and Peterson's (1990) assertion that 'success is unlikely unless reforms are linked meaningfully to the daily realities and deep structure of life in schools' (p.12) resonated with me at this time. I discussed this challenge with staff and was buoyed up by the shared sense of commitment staff had to improving our school's overall performance (Fullan 2006). As with all change most staff were committed to the new systems and structures as we planned and introduced them. This carefully orchestrated and strategic approach saw us achieve significant gains over the next three years. The staff were energised, the students' engagement rates improved and our community celebrated the school's notable successes and as a result the school's roll grew steadily from 1276 students in 2003 to 1547 students by 2006.

A cursory look at our student achievement data at that time showed that our students were enjoying improved academic success however the reality was that success was a façade, a construct underpinned by hegemonic systems, institutional structures and general perceptions. The reality was we were a cruising school (Stoll and Fink 1988), perceived by our community as successful but not really performing to our true potential. This was clearly demonstrated in 2009, when we undertook a national

¹ Tīmatatanga: The Beginning. [My success should not be bestowed onto me alone, as it was not individual success but success of a collective].

² The Education Review Office (ERO) is the New Zealand Government Department that evaluates and reports on the education and care of students in schools and early childhood services within the state school sector.

³ <http://www.minedu.govt.nz/Parents/AllAges/EducationInNZ/SchoolsInNewZealand/SchoolDecileRatings.aspx>. Deciles assist the New Zealand Ministry of Education allocate Operations funding to schools. A decile is a 10% grouping. There are ten deciles and around 10% of schools are in each decile. Decile rating indicate a school's socio-economic ranking. Decile 1 schools are the 10% of schools with the highest proportion of students from low socio-economic communities. Decile 10 schools are the 10% of schools with the highest proportion of students from high socio-economic communities.

⁴ Every state school and state-integrated school in New Zealand has a board of trustees. School boards are usually made up of three to seven elected parent representatives, the principal as the board's chief executive, professional advisor and educational leader, an elected staff representative and an elected student representative (in schools with students above year 9). Boards of Trustees are accountable to parents and caregivers, their local communities, the Minister of Education and the Ministry of Education, other government agencies and the public, for their actions and performance.

NZCER⁵ research survey into leadership. On reviewing the findings I was surprised that a significant number of staff saw the principal as minimally effective in ensuring that the school's strategic/long-term goals were seen as important to Māori students and their whanau; and in ensuring that clear school-wide targets for the academic achievement of Māori students were made explicit.

On the back of this NZCER survey data our NCEA⁶ achievement data also challenged my assumptions about my efficacy as an educational leader. While analysis of our student achievement data clearly showed improved levels of attainment to above national norms, as we drilled down, the data exposed a disparity in our Māori students' achievement when compared to their Pākehā peers. This disparity mirrored the national data on Māori student achievement and came as a shock to me given my assumptions around the gains we had made since my appointment. Even though my focus had been on building our leadership capacity to raise student achievement, and there was empirical evidence of overall success in that endeavour, the reality was Māori students did not achieve to the same degree as their Pākehā peers.

As a result of this revelation I decided to undertake a PhD research study using a practice-based insider research methodology (Merton 1972, Hellowell, 2006). My interest in strengthening leadership capacity had morphed into an exploration of new ways of leading (Senge, et. al. 1999) that would help us, as a school, address the disparities our data highlighted and provide legitimate pathways for Māori students to achieve to their full potential. Bicultural leadership approaches and strategies (Berryman & Bateman 2008) had been invisible in my leadership journey until that point. This reorientation was a challenge for me as I had little idea about what leadership looked like when it deliberately supported and promoted policies and practices that delivered success for Māori students⁷.

I was advantaged as an insider researcher (Greene 2014) because I had a legitimate and direct involvement with and connection to my research setting (Robson 2002). My work morphed into an auto-ethnographic study (Ellis, Adams & Bochner 2010) as I focussed on narrative inquiry methods (Clendenin & Connelly, 2000). I began to explore my own journey as a principal and to track my learning over a two year period. I wrote personal narratives and collected the narratives of students and staff in my school. I distilled these stories into distinct themes, including alienation, invisibility, resistance and cultural clash (Bishop & Berryman 2006), (Bishop, Berryman, Cavanagh & Teddy 2009), (Whitinui 2011) and then I used these themes to examine hegemonic imperatives that underpinned deficit thinking in my school. Using the new knowledge I had acquired I then made deliberate changes to my own leadership practice and I measured the effect my altered practice had on me and those around me.

⁵ New Zealand Council for Educational Research - is an independent educational research organisation generating the ideas, questions, tools, products and services to meet educational needs of the New Zealand Education System in the 21st century.

⁶ The National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) is the main national qualification for secondary school students in New Zealand. NCEAs are recognised by employers, and used for selection by universities and polytechnics, both in New Zealand and overseas.

⁷ <http://www.ero.govt.nz/National-Reports/Promoting-Success-for-Maori-Students-Schools-Progress-June-2010>. Promoting Success for Māori Students: Schools' Progress (June 2010)* : 05/10/2010

Māramatanga⁸ He waka eke noa

One narrative that will illustrate this approach explores the themes of resistance, alienation and taitama⁹ Māori. Kaharoa Manihera [Ngai Tahu, Ngāi Tūhoe] a young Māori teacher on my staff had attended Rangiora High School in the 1980s. His narrative tells the story of his experiences as a sixteen year old high school student who was asked to leave the school because of his continual disobedience and defiance. The catalyst for that chain of events was an altercation with a Pākehā teacher who, while taking the class role one day, mispronounced Kaharoa's name. When the Pākehā teacher had found it difficult to pronounce Kaharoa's name he then insulted him by insisting publically that he would call him Karl instead because his "Māori" name was too hard to say. This highly intelligent bi-lingual young Māori male, who was fluent in his native tongue and was the repository of 2000 years of his tribe's whakapapa [oral history] refused to acquiesce to this instruction. His visceral response to the teacher, in full view of the class, ultimately cost him his place at Rangiora High School. Kaharoa's narrative is a story of exclusion and alienation, a story retold a thousand times over in the 150 year history of the New Zealand education system.

Kupu Whakatepe¹⁰ Naku te rourou nau te rourou ka ora ai te iwi

The real test of the value of this autoethnographic research project is seen in its positive impact on my practice as a principal and the changes I have made as a result of my experiences as a practitioner researcher. Fullan (2003) talks about moral purpose saying 'school leaders with moral purpose seek to make a difference in the lives of students' (p.17). As a result of the new knowledge I acquired I have a moral obligation to lead bi-culturally. With conscientization (Freire 1998) comes a moral imperative for all educational leaders and educators to provide culturally safe schools (MacFarlane, Glynn, Cavanagh, & Bateman 2007), where Māori student engagement and achievement is a priority. As principal I sought to make a difference in the lives of the students in my school. Initially I had failed Māori students and my sense of failure was profound. It was this epiphany that motivated me to look for new ways of leading that would enhance Māori student engagement and achievement. It did not matter how successful I had been as a principal in a mainstream setting if Māori students were not enjoying equity in educational achievement.

Whakahau Matatika¹¹ He wahine manawa kaha a Peggy, 'he matatika hītawetawe tōna'.

It is not enough for educational leaders to look for strategies that don't disadvantage Māori within the school system. The paradigm which underpins our education system and educational leadership in New Zealand/Aotearoa must clearly advantage Māori students. Both must allow for Māori students to succeed as Māori and both must celebrate that success as normal and not an anomaly. That is the moral imperative for change.

⁸ Māramatanga - enlightenment, insight, [A canoe which we are all in with no exception].

⁹ Taitama - to be a young man.

¹⁰ Conclusion. [With your basket and my basket the people will live.]

¹¹ Moral Imperative – [Peggy is a woman of strong character and high moral values.]

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