Reducing Māori Student Disengagement in Education:
Profiling the Critically Conscious, Culturally Responsive Educator

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Abstract

Māori learners as minority students in New Zealand are over-represented in the negative disengagement indices in mainstream secondary education, despite Māori only representing 17.4% of the New Zealand population. Compared with non-Māori students, Māori are more likely to receive disciplinary action excluding them from mainstream. Te Tiriti o Waitangi (The Treaty of Waitangi) as New Zealand's underpinning constitutional document, New Zealand legislation and educational policy stipulate that schools must be culturally responsive to the needs of Māori learners 'as Māori'. Research suggests a secure cultural identity is a buffer for negative learning experiences and can positively impact Māori student inclusion in education. Drawing on research with Māori learners excluded from education, a critical theory lens provides a better understanding of how schools as microcosms of society can perpetuate inclusive or exclusive environments for Māori. This paper argues that a teacher is better equipped to be culturally responsive when critically conscious of the social, political, and historical impacts on Māori students. These educators know their positionality, beliefs, and assumptions as they have prepared themselves with a cultural tool kit to influence the student/teacher pedagogical relationship. Highlighting, culturally responsive pedagogies for Māori learners, this paper illustrates how pūrākau (traditional Māori story-telling and stories) can be used as a pedagogical strategy to enhance Māori cultural identities. In finishing, critically conscious, culturally responsive educators are more effective when they can confidently reflect on systemic privilege and address pedagogical practices to create a culturally safe environment where Māori learners can flourish.

Keywords: Critical Pedagogy, Culturally Responsive, Exclusion in Education, Māori as Minority Learners

Introduction

The New Zealand educational context can be fraught with complexities that threaten the meaningful participation of Māori students as minority learners in education. New Zealand has a population of 5.2 million, of which Māori represent only 17. 4% of the population (Stats NZ, 2022; Stats NZ, 2023). Despite the relatively small statistic, Māori learners are more likely to receive disciplinary action leading to exclusion in education than any other ethnic group. Statistics reveal that Māori students in mainstream secondary schools represent 50% of suspensions and exclusions and 49% of expulsions (Education Counts, 2022). Addressing these abominable statistics is fundamental to ensuring equitable access to education for Māori students. Drawing on findings from two empirical studies (a PhD and a Master's study), this paper discusses the need for educators to be critically conscious and culturally responsive to Māori as minority learners to support educational inclusion. Where this paper discusses Māori students in the New Zealand context, the reader is encouraged to consider the principles more broadly for minority students in their own country/cultural - specific context.

The paper first situates exclusion within a brief overview of Māori history regarding the social, political and historical contexts. Next, an introduction of the lens used; kaupapa Māori theory couched within critical theory. Through a critical theory lens, we consider how schools as microcosms of society can perpetuate inclusive or exclusive environments for Māori as minority students. The paper then canvasses the legislative and policy context and how these requirements aim to meet the needs of Māori learners. Following, the paper expands on the empirical research to illustrate key issues impacting Māori student inclusion in education, this is contextualised within the social, political, and historical movements impacting Māori student exclusion in education. The last part of this paper considers how educators can act in culturally responsive ways. We consider keys to pedagogical practice which can create a culturally responsive learning environments to ensure that Māori learners (or minority students in your contexts) can succeed in education. To illustrate, we look at pūrākau (Māori stories and storytelling) as a culturally relevant pedagogical strategy to support Māori learners to develop a positive Māori identity (Cliffe-Tautari, 2020). By including culturally relevant contexts, we improve their overall educational experience, which can contribute to better overall engagement in education.

A Brief Overview of Māori History

Māori as the indigenous peoples of New Zealand navigated from the Pacific approximately 1300 A.D. The British entered the New Zealand landscape in the 1800s, leading to the signing of New Zealand's constitutional document Te Tiriti o Waitangi. There was an English version named The Treaty of Waitangi and there are discrepancies in the English translation. It is worth stating that before the signing of Te Tiriti o Waitangi, Māori people were the majority population. As iwi-based (tribal) people, Māori had their mana (authority) in different regions in Aotearoa (New Zealand). Therefore, there was no one rangatira (chief) over New Zealand. Further, not all rangatira (chiefs) from the different iwi (tribes) signed these treaty documents. Importantly, Māori believe they never ceded sovereignty. Unfortunately, there have been untold breaches to Te Tiriti o Waitangi, leading to the negative impacts on Māori through the colonial process. In this short history, Māori have become culturally displaced through the confiscation of land and the loss of language and culture.

Before the 1800s, te reo Māori (the Māori language) was the dominant language, and the Māori language and culture flourished. The colonising experiences of Māori following the signing of the Treaty are evident in educational policy from the 1800s. The 1847 Education Ordinance Act established that English was to be the language of instruction in schools with the underlying intent to 'assimilate' Māori into the English language and culture. Whilst not set in policy, on the ground, Māori children were physically punished for speaking their mother tongue. These abominable acts in the education system have left scars and intergenerational trauma for Māori families and communities and have undoubtedly impacted how the Māori language has been transferred within families and Māori communities.

The 1970s saw steps towards the reclamation and revitalisation of te reo Māori (the Māori language). In 1972, Ngā Tamatoa, Victoria University's Te Reo Māori Society, and the New Zealand Māori Students Association took a petition with 30,000 signatures to parliament to call the government to action to teach Māori language and culture in schools. Other Māori community groups were activating other movements including the 1975 land march to address land confiscation. From these ongoing resistance movements, we have seen the establishment of the Waitangi Tribunal, a government initiative set up under the 1975 Treaty of Waitangi Act to facilitate hearings on the breaches of the Crown in respect to Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

In terms of the revitalisation of the Māori language, grassroots-led initiatives prompted the establishment of Māori immersion schooling initially as kōhanga reo (language nests) which were set to preschool levels then later on kura kaupapa Māori (primary level), kura ā iwi (tribal-based) and wharekura (secondary levels). Māori language is available now in mainstream schools, but learning te reo Māori is still not compulsory in New Zealand and mainstream schools. Providing culturally responsive education in mainstream schools is extremely important given that this is where the majority of Māori learners attend education in New Zealand.

Despite the positive revitalisation movements of te reo Māori (the Māori language), we have not seen major shifts to the extent needed. Volatile socio-political agendas can be driven by populism and racist agendas can hinder policymaking for te reo Māori (the Māori language) regeneration. When political parties do not maintain a long term view of the revitalisation te reo Māori (the Māori language) there are also risks in harming positive race relations and a just education system for Māori learners. It is critically important for educators of Māori students to understand that these issues exist in our society, and to be cognisant of the impact on education for Māori learners. The research discussed in this paper shows that the devaluing of language and culture negatively impacts Māori adolescents (Cliffe, 2013; Cliffe-Tautari, 2021).

New Zealand's Policy Context

Māori learners all have constitutional rights under Te Tiriti o Waitangi. In Article Two of Te Tiriti o Waitangi, Māori are guaranteed protection of their language and culture. Article Three of Te Tiriti o Waitangi guarantees Māori equal rights as other New Zealanders including equitable access to education. Ensuring the principles of Te Tiriti o Waitangi and the rights of Māori are upheld in both legislation and policy is important given that Māori student academic achievement and engagement are lower than non-Māori.

The New Zealand Education Training Act (2020) is the underpinning legislative document for the New Zealand education sector and gives effect to New Zealand's constitutional document Te Tiriti o Waitangi. Section 127 of the Act states that schools and Boards of Trustees (made up of parent representation) must make reasonable steps to give effect through:

i)   working to ensure that its plans, policies, and local curriculum reflect local tikanga Māori [Māori cultural practices], mātauranga Māori [Māori knowledge], and te ao Māori [Māori worldview]; and

ii) taking all reasonable steps to make instruction available in tikanga Māori and te reo Māori [Māori language]; and

iii) achieving equitable outcomes for Māori students.

The Ministry of Education ensures that educational strategy supports this legislation. The Ministry of Education's Māori education strategy Ka Hikitia (2013; 2019) positions that Māori learners are served best when they can succeed 'as Māori'. Research reveals that a secure cultural identity and culturally inclusive environments can positively affect Māori learners' achievement and engagement in education (Cliffe, 2013; Cliffe-Tautari, 2021; Webber, 2011).

A Secure Cultural Identity as a Buffer for Negative Schooling Experiences

Prior research has indicated that a secure cultural identity can buffer negative schooling experiences (Cliffe, 2013; Cliffe-Tautari, 2021; Webber, 2011). Webber (2011) found that resilience and a positive Māori identity enabled Māori students to buffer negative schooling experiences, such as stereotype threat. Steele (1997) has suggested that stereotype threat can affect any group member where a stereotype exists. Stereotype threat could affect how Māori students perform academically, particularly where a stereotype may infer intellectual inferiority. Steele (1997) argued that stereotype threat either acts as a motivational factor for students to 'disprove' such stereotypes, or it can cause the student to 'avoid' performance; consequently, underperforming and affirming the stereotype. Stereotype threat can undermine or support the academic achievement of Māori students, depending on whether their racial-ethnic identity and achievement are promoted as positive or negative. Webber's (2011) investigations into the influences on adolescent identity development for Māori and other ethnic students in urban mainstream secondary schools found that multiple identities, particularly positive ethnic identities, allowed students to cope with pressures at school, such as stereotype threat (Webber, 2011). The students in Webber's study consciously and constantly looked for ways to overcome the pressures associated with negative stereotypes about their ethnicity in academic and social contexts.

Methodology

The research discussed in this paper (Cliffe, 2013, Cliffe-Tautari, 2021) employed kaupapa Māori theory as aligned with critical theory. "Critical theory interrogates the social, economic, and political structures that privilege the achievement and success of some students at the expense of others." Carrington, MacArthur, Kearney, Kimber, Mercer, Morton, Rutherford, 2016, p.10). Graham Smith (2003) used critical theory and theorised kaupapa Māori theory as a transformative praxis that challenges dominant and hegemonic Western structures. The theoretical positioning of kaupapa Māori (as aligned to critical theory) assumes that the hegemonic paradigm, derived from the dominant group, exercises power over other groups, particularly Māori. In the context of both the PhD and Master's

study, kaupapa Māori was used to make space for mātauranga Māori (Māori knowledge) and kaupapa Māori, is a Māori way of thinking, or doing things based on Māori principles and a Māori worldview (Marsden, 2003). Kaupapa Māori as it aligns with critical theory in this paper acknowledges that Māori student exclusion is not necessarily inherent within the individual, but, in the broader societal structures which impact their engagement in education.

As is fitting with kaupapa Māori, sharing my positionality and who I am is essential to positioning myself within the research space and is an act of decolonising research methodologies in action. I first briefly share my pepeha (tribal saying) and then my interest in the research.

Ko Pukepoto te maunga	*Pukepoto is my mountain*
Ko Waingaehe te awa	*Waingaehe is my stream*
Ko Rotokawa te roto	*Rotokawa is my lake*
Ko Te Arawa te iwi	*Te Arawa is my tribe*
Ko te Ure o Uenukukōpako te hapū	*Te Ure o Uenukukōpako is my subtribe*
Ko Pikirangi te marae	*Pikirangi is my gathering place*

Whilst I am a lecturer in Te Puna Wānanga in the School of Māori and Indigenous Studies at the Faculty of Education and Social Work at Waipapa Taumata Rau - the University of Auckland, New Zealand, I have over 20 years of background in working with Māori learners marginalised in education as well as teaching in Māori immersion education. My background includes working in two secure youth residences, one youth justice and one care and protection residence. These experiences were the impetus for the research areas for the Master's and PhD studies.

The Master's study involved 5 Māori learners aged 13-15 who had also been excluded from mainstream secondary school in Rotorua New Zealand. The PhD study involved 29 participants, including 11 Māori youth aged 15-17 who were engaged with the justice system for offending behaviours and had previously been excluded from mainstream education. The PhD study occurred in two regions in New Zealand (Northland and Auckland). Both studies were underpinned by the tenets of kaupapa Māori theory, where semi-structured in-depth interviews were used to capture student voice and thematic analysis was used to generate the overarching themes. Ethical provisions were met according to the University of Auckland Human Participant Ethics Committee, and the study's validity was achieved through member checking, peer debriefing and reflexivity. Based on both of these studies, the idea of the critically conscious, culturally responsive educator is discussed in this paper.

Framed Identities and Reframing

In the Master's study (Cliffe, 2013), I theorised the notion of framed identities and the need to reframe teacher beliefs and attitudes. In this study, the participants (*n*=5) perceived that teachers impacted their access to the curriculum. "Framing in this study referred to a deficit-based and limited perception that teachers and professionals can hold of a young person, based on past or current behaviours" (Cliffe, 2019, p. 211). Participants spoke about how negative teacher attitudes became a barrier to accessing the curriculum education as the teachers who 'framed' them according to their past and current behaviours also inhibited their access to the curriculum. One participant said:

I really wanted to change and then when I got there (back to school) he (teacher) still put me at the back of the class. One time he was like "you should just leave the school altogether just like last year" and I was like "no". When he sent me to the back I was like "nah I want to sit at the front Sir" and he said "no" and I was like "why?" and he said "because I said so". I was like "oh, but I want to learn" and he was like "not eh you're still the same, you should just get out of my school" and I said "catch you up".

Framing the participants' identities in this way led to deficit theorising, which had far-reaching implications and as illustrated the participant's access to education was inhibited. Teacher beliefs and attitudes have a huge impact on student engagement in education. The students perceptions demonstrate that teachers can frame students through ascribing a label. The problem with ascribing a one-dimensional 'label' as indicated above highlights the negative behaviours but also the positive qualities of a person (Cliffe, 2013; 2019). It further ignores that 'complex needs' or being 'at risk' for some students may be more fluid, circumstantial and sometimes ecologically bound. This kind of teacher belief and attitude is limiting and does not provide scope for fluidity; homogenising a wide spectrum of students and their needs (Cliffe, 2013; 2019).

The critically conscious, culturally responsive teacher can reflect on their pedagogical practices and relationships with Māori learners and consider how their actions may impact on Māori learners. Reframing is a conscious act whereby teachers acknowledge that students are more than the sum of their behaviour (Cliffe, 2013; 2019). A critically conscious culturally responsive educator reframes how they perceive students and does not allow perceptions of behaviour to override the positive qualities that students possess. This act enables positive relational-based connections which are fundamental to educational inclusion for Māori learners.

Whakapapa (Genealogical) Pride to Resist Racism

In the 2021 PhD study, an overarching theme with the Māori youth participants ($n =10$) were experiences of racism, racial profiling, poverty, marginalisation, and exclusion from education. For these participants, experiences of racism impacted their desire to engage in mainstream education. The following participant shared how bullying alongside perceived negative and judgemental attitudes from some teachers because they were Māori impacted them. They said:

It's like sometimes hard. Because like people judge us, like really bad. It's like when I was little, I think around seven or eight or something, I was like always bullied because I was Māori. People are like rich and stuff like that, have everything and I had nothing. But I still like, I didn't really care that I had nothing because like Pākehā people [New Zealand settlers] like stuff like that. I didn't really care but like it still affected me because I'm like Māori and I can't help it.

In this study, participants also spoke about how they were proud to be Māori and how their ability to connect through whakapapa (genealogy) was not only important to their sense of self but also it provided a resilience mechanism to resist racism and negative schooling experiences (Cliffe-Tautari, 2021). The following participant said:

> *Like people would say stuff like oh "you Māori's, are ta ta ta ta da". I don't care, I was like I'm proud to be Māori, think what you like. It's not going to stop me from thinking what I think about my culture.*

When I asked this participant who had bullied them, they said:

> *Mostly kids but sometimes even adults. There was this one teacher that didn't like me. He was a man. He didn't like Māori kids, like Māori people. I didn't know why, but like he just really hated me. I didn't know why, and I was too young to even know why he hated me and stuff, because when I was little, I thought Māori was like a normal thing.*

The above participant spoke about racism and negative attitudes. These findings align with other research about the salience of a positive cultural identity such as Webber's (2011) study. However, Webber (2011) reported that a positive racial-ethnic identity allowed Māori students in her study to overcome negative stereotypes. This positively affected their sense of belonging and connectedness to the collective (Māori). As above, some participants in this study were more likely to reject the stereotypes assigned to them and resist racism. In this instance, cultural pride provided them with resilience and fortitude to buffer such negative attitudes.

Pūrākau as a Pedagogical Strategy With Māori Learners

By including pūrākau (Māori stories or story-telling), educators are enacting a culturally responsive approach that positions Māori ways of knowing in the classroom. Lee (2008) argues that pūrākau are meant for pedagogical intent and hold key messages that have the potential to provide guidance that help us to understand human behaviour. Through studying pūrākau, as Māori students seek to understand the behaviour of their tupuna (ancestors) and Māori heroes, they can learn about themselves.

Take the pūrākau about my tupuna Tamatekapua. He was the navigator on the Te Arawa waka (canoe) and was regarded as a "…lad of spirit and in time was regarded as a chief of more than ordinary importance" (Stafford, 1967, p.62). In the migration of Te Arawa to Aotearoa (New Zealand), Tamatekapua kidnapped both Ngātoroirangi (the high priest) and Kearoa and Ruaeo's wife Whakaotirangi. On learning of the seduction of Kearoa, Ngātoroirangi retaliated with incantation called Te Korokoro o te Parata, which almost destroyed everyone on board.

In analysing the behaviours of Tamatekapua, his actions at times lent to not-so 'conventional' deeds. For example, he is remembered for chasing beautiful women and for finding ways to get what he wanted. While Tamatekapua often paid the price for his deeds, this pūrākau illustrates the complex nature of people; their behaviours, and the human psyche - the brave, the mischief and the risky methods employed by people.

Much like the pūrākau of Tamatekapua, the stories about other tūpuna (ancestors) from other iwi (tribes) are also re-told and they are remembered for their multiplicity of attributes, qualities, traits, characteristics and deeds. Yet, when these pūrākau are re-told, tūpuna are not stigmatised for negative behaviours or actions, nor are they labelled as 'criminals' or according to deficit descriptors. In fact, their persona or identity remains intact as a tupuna (ancestor) and these behaviours are understood within the context of the time, and the

different qualities inherent within individuals are the consequences of both negative and positive actions common to the human experience.

Profiling the Critically Conscious, Culturally Responsive Educator

The first point to consider: what is a critically conscious, culturally responsive educator and why it even matters for Māori as minority students. The critically conscious culturally responsive educator considers the socio-political contexts of Māori (minority) students. In settler colonial countries, the historical and ongoing impacts of colonisation are recognised as impacting Māori (and other minority students) engagement in education. In broader educational theory, the well-known philosopher and educator Paulo Freire (first grounded the idea of critical consciousness in his seminal work "Pedagogy of the Oppressed". In this work, he argued that oppressed individuals often internalise and accept this oppression as status quo. He argued that we need to recognise and understand this oppression within the wider social, political and economic contexts in which oppression exists. Freire (1973) contended that educators can have a powerful impact on student's lives through engaging in meaningful dialogue and reflection with learners to analyse their experiences and how society impacts their lives (Freire, 1973). However, rhetoric and dialogue alone are not enough. For impact, educators must be transformative and take action (Freire, 1973).

In building on this idea, educators have a key responsibility in the context of education to understand the socio-political contexts of Māori (minority students in your context), whose experiences can be laced with multiple layers of historical complexities. For Māori learners in New Zealand, colonisation has impacted access to their language, culture and history in mainstream education. Being the first indigenous people to New Zealand the struggle for the reclamation of language, and culture whilst having the poorest statistics regarding justice, health, education and other determinants is a reality that must be addressed. As discussed in this paper, Māori students are more likely to receive disciplinary action, leading to exclusion and disengagement in education. Knowing, and being responsive to these statistics and this reality is foundational for the critically conscious, culturally responsive educator's toolkit.

The Toolkit of the Critically Conscious, Culturally Responsive Educator

A critically conscious educator is equipped with a cultural tool kit that enables them to evaluate their own teacher beliefs and pedagogical actions to support the inclusion of Māori learners. Using an acronym 'keys', this paper outlines four areas of the critically conscious and culturally responsive educator: 1) **K**eeps Mindful; 2) **E**ducates themselves; 3) **Y**earns to Understand and 4) **S**eeks Opportunities.

Keeps Mindful

The critically conscious culturally responsive educator recognises the inequities in mainstream education for Māori as minority learners. A critically conscious educator will acknowledge the historical, social, and political impacts on Māori as minority learners in the mainstream education system. They recognise the importance of acknowledging that access to education can be filled with complexities for some Māori learners as historically systemic practices have been a tool of colonisation and a pathway to inequity. Critically conscious, culturally responsive teachers, therefore are mindful of these inequities and are responsive to reducing them in tangible ways to improve access for Māori learners. They can move beyond

stereotypical views of Māori and investigate and seek to understand the factors that lead to the exclusion of Māori learners in their schools.

Educates Themselves

Critically conscious, culturally responsive educators investigate what the research details and statistics reveal, which is the uneven playing field for Māori compared to non-Māori learners regarding educational achievement, inclusion and engagement. Critically conscious culturally responsive educators ask the hard questions that lead to inequities in the education system. They critically assess access, practices, policies and pedagogy. They check in regularly to see their responses in classrooms, collective responses in departments and overall school-wide practices. They look beyond the surface of behaviour to try and understand what led to a suspension, exclusion or expulsion. They collaborate with others in the school to address such issues which can lead to exclusion for Māori learners.

Yearns to Understand

A role of the critically conscious and culturally responsive educator is to be self-aware about their own identity, worldview, identity, attitudes, beliefs, assumptions, and biases and how this impacts on their own pedagogical practice. By being aware of their own positionality, they can consider their own teacher beliefs and attitudes and whether they can impact positively or negatively on Māori as minority learners in their classrooms. In understanding themselves, they are better equipped to understand their Māori learners.

Seeks Opportunities

Critically conscious, culturally responsive educators provide culturally relevant learning and cultural contexts for Māori as minority learners. They challenge deep-seated notions about who decides what normal is and how do we determine whose knowledge counts. They recognise the value of mātauranga Māori (Māori knowledge), te reo Māori (the Māori language) and tikanga (cultural practices) to develop a secure cultural identity and so, they seek opportunities to include all of these aspects into their classroom and pedagogical practice. They move beyond Māori 'iconography' and upskill themselves to do their best to pronounce Māori words/names correctly and to create a culturally safe and responsive space where Māori learners see themselves reflected in the learning and the classroom (Webber & O'Connor, 2019, Cliffe-Tautari, 2020).

Conclusion

As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, Māori compared to non-Māori students, are overrepresented in the suspension, exclusion, and expulsion statistics. To create inclusive environments for Māori as minority learners, we need to ask ourselves how we know if what we do as teachers matters for Māori learners in our classroom. Although Māori students represent a small cohort in our mainstream schools, many remain silenced and on the fringes of the mainstream education system. The issues may be systemic and permeate the education system at all levels such as the policy, school, and classroom levels, however, accepting the statistics despite the complexities is not an option. Educators have the power to make a difference to these students and their trajectories through supporting the development of a positive cultural identity. Pūrākau as a pedagogical strategy is one way that Māori learners can connect with their culture. Supporting the development of a secure cultural identity must

therefore be a goal of educators. Critically conscious culturally responsive educators must therefore have the skills, knowledge and disposition to both access and draw on mātauranga Māori (Māori knowledge), te reo Māori (Māori language), culture and practices in their pedagogical practice to support the development of a positive Māori identity to acknowledge Māori ways of knowing as being just as important in education.

Acknowledgement

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