

# Building the moral imperative to do better by Māori students

## *A Pākehā teacher's reflection*

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### KEY POINTS

- The moral imperative to do better grows from an acknowledgement of inequity and injustice in New Zealand's education system.
- Education sends students powerful messages about their inherent value. If we do not deeply acknowledge Māori identity and belonging in our schools we continue to primarily value the identities of those who already see themselves everywhere, generally Pākehā.
- Deficit theorising can work to protect Pākehā privilege by framing inequity as outside of Pākehā responsibility.
- By thinking critically about the social construction of my role as a teacher, including the source and effects of my actions, my potential as a Pākehā agent of change has begun to develop.

The goal of the Poutama Pounamu blended learning course is to promote contexts for change where equity, excellence, and belonging for Māori and all learners can be realised. In this article I share some key learnings from my own journey through this course. I reflect on my path towards honouring the Treaty of Waitangi, including the challenges I have experienced in confronting Pākehā privilege and deficit theorising. I share my developing understanding of what it means for Māori to achieve success as Māori, as well as the meaning of ako and unfinishedness. Growing my own critical praxis has been uncomfortable, but the journey I share in this article is ultimately about hope. I believe that we can collaboratively build education to do better by Māori students, to benefit all learners and the nation.

At the beginning of 2018 I embarked on a blended e-learning programme provided by Poutama Pounamu. Poutama Pounamu is a group of academics and professional development facilitators at the University of Waikato. The course they offer is based on over 15 years of iterative research into what works best for Māori students and how change can be effective for all learners. I began the programme blissfully unaware of the challenges I would face and new thinking it would ignite. Poutama Pounamu supported me to see the world differently. It made visible to me the power structures in our society, especially how they move around and through me. I came to realise how power structures perpetuate and construct a reality rooted in inequity and injustice, a reality born of New Zealand's colonial history. This realisation was confronting and deeply uncomfortable, but it ultimately led me to develop my critical praxis and fill me with the hope and the agency to do better. I decided that I would no longer support the status quo.

As the year progressed, I attended two wānanga and worked through a series of modules and related resources. I learned and unlearned alongside a small group of educator colleagues, my fellow ākongā. We were learners and teachers together, contributing to the sense making, engaging in ako. After each meeting together, ākongā would anonymously contribute written reflections. The process led me to a number of key learnings, which I have developed into this article along with some of the recorded reflections from other ākongā.

## Learning 1. The importance of honouring the Treaty

The goal of the Poutama Pounamu<sup>1</sup> blended learning course is to promote contexts for change where equity, excellence and belonging for Māori can be realised. Inherent in this goal is the acknowledgement that change is desperately needed, few Māori learners experience equity, excellence and belonging to their full extent in New Zealand schools (see Office of the Auditor General, 2012; Berryman and Eley, 2018). These children are tangata whenua, Aotearoa's first people, and partners of the Treaty of Waitangi. As teachers our responsibilities to Māori are acknowledged in our professional standards (Teaching Council New Zealand, n.d.), which state that we must "demonstrate commitment to tangata whenuatanga and Tiriti o Waitangi partnership in Aotearoa New Zealand". Our responsibilities are also acknowledged in the vision of *The New Zealand Curriculum* which sets out that young people "will work to create an Aotearoa New Zealand in which Māori and Pākehā recognise each other as full Treaty partners, and in which all cultures are valued for the contributions they bring" (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 8). Unfortunately, statements such as these do not appear to have significantly changed attitudes and practices in many schools. Despite partnership, participation, and protection being principles of the Treaty of Waitangi, on average, "Māori students leave school with lower qualifications and fewer life choices, which not only have implications for their own futures but for the future well-being of New Zealand society" (Berryman et al., 2014, p. 4). We must more deeply honour the Treaty of Waitangi.

## Learning 2. Confronting Pākehā privilege

As a Pākehā teacher in a New Zealand school I find the inequity within our education system and wider society disconcerting. As I engaged with the undeniable evidence presented in the Poutama Pounamu course and connected it to my teaching career, I was confronted by my own Pākehā privilege. As Margaret (2018) explains:

we [Pākehā] benefit daily from systems shaped for our white ways – our language, our cultural norms – and this has been achieved while denying Māori the basic rights to live and express themselves on their lands, in their ways ... Regardless of personal politics or wealth, as Pākehā we all benefit from the dispossession of Māori. There are no exemptions from Pākehā privilege. (para. 12–13)

These understandings initially triggered my own “white fragility” (DiAngelo, 2011), and the cognitive dissonance it provoked felt very uncomfortable. But over time the evidence of inequity became a source of hope. From acknowledging injustices, the moral imperative to do better grows. As SooHoo (2004) states, “to admit one has witnessed an unjust act means one is compelled to respond with some moral action” (p. 202). The process of reflecting on my own struggles gave me some empathy and insight into how my fellow ākongā may respond. Together we built our resilience to have uncomfortable but vital conversations. The reflections from other ākongā suggested that many were finding the strength to grapple with confronting privilege:

as the dominant cultural group in NZ it is only too easy to be unaware of how ingrained racism impacts our thoughts and ideas about others. (Ākongā)

## Learning 3. Confronting deficit theorising

The prevailing response to the confronting statistics that show Pākehā privilege and Māori disadvantage in our schools and indeed in our wider society is to frame Māori as lacking, as in deficit (Bishop 2005). I was dismayed to realise how deficit views pervade popular media, social media, and wider society. For example, the outcry after a “Māori santa” (Stuff, 2018) rode a float in a Christmas parade illustrated beliefs about who fits where as many people justified their discomfort. I am disturbed when I hear deficit commentary now. I am even more disturbed by my prior inability or unwillingness to notice it before.

As Berryman et al. (2014) state, “this perception of Māori in deficit terms is well embedded in the fabric of New Zealand society. It has its roots in our colonial history and the Western ideology that drives our societal systems and structures” (p. 8). These views can work to

protect Pākehā privilege by framing the issue as outside of Pākehā control and responsibility. I recognise that I too have, at times, denied my own agency and sought comfort in justifying the status quo. Although confronting, I find hope in this learning because I have come to understand racist narratives as socially constructed. As a construct, they only hold their power when left unexamined. Indeed “we are only bound by it if we don’t recognise it for what it is or don’t wish to challenge it when we see it in action” (Berryman et al., 2014, p. 8). As the Poutama Pounamu ākongā progressed we grew our resolve to see what was in front of us, to examine what we had previously not seen. As one ākongā wrote:

[our discussions have] highlighted for me that changing people’s perception of reality is very challenging. What people accept and expect can be hard to change, particularly when they are part of the dominant culture and their perception is fed by media and politics that are not based in fact but based on emotion. (Ākongā)

Another reflected on the inspiration to:

take opportunities personally to express my thoughts and ideas in relation to these issues when they arise through my work and personal life. Also to do my best to educate the young people I work with in a way that supports them to think critically about what they see and hear around them, the dominant cultures pervasive way of indoctrinating the masses. (Ākongā)

## Learning 4. The challenge of Māori achieving success as Māori

As my learning and unlearning progressed, I began to make more sense of my feeling that belonging, identity, and wellbeing are integral to achievement in school. I thought more deeply about these concepts and what they might mean for all students, especially for Māori students, in our schools. I reflected on previous Ka Hikitia professional development sessions and my limited ability to understand key concepts at that time. In this document, the need for change is clearly acknowledged:

there is much room for improvement in how well the education system is performing for particular groups of students and this needs urgent attention and focus for change. Too many Māori students are left behind and disengage from education before gaining the skills, knowledge and qualifications needed to reach their full potential. The negative impact of this on students, their whānau, wider communities and New Zealand is significant. Immediate and sustained change is needed (Ministry of Education, 2013, p. 5–6).

As I worked through the Poutama Pounamu modules the vision of “Māori achieving success as Māori” (Ministry of Education, 2013, p. 13), which I was unable to grasp before, began to make sense. My identity is embedded in

New Zealand's colonial societal systems and structures. As a Pākehā, I can see myself everywhere: in the language that is spoken; in the faces of those I recognise as the powerful; and in the values that uphold familiar institutions. As I came to understand this, I began to question what the reverse of this might mean for Māori students. Berryman and Eley (2018) found that listening to Māori youth gave insight into the effects of such systems and structures:

our students told of terrible school experiences. Non-engaged students told of their ongoing resistance to the structures and processes and even the people, leading to their schooling being a waste of time and, in many cases, the only option being an early exit from the education system. The engaged students told of finding ways to navigate the system that saw them achieve some educational success but resulted in them having to deny (or at least leave at the school gates) their language, culture and identity as Māori (p. 20).

The education system sends students powerful messages about their inherent value: "Education is the opening of identities. For many students, identification with, or marginalisation and alienation from, school, will have longer lasting and deeper effects than failing to master elements of the formal curriculum" (Wearmouth et al., 2009, p.30). If teachers do not acknowledge Māori identity and make space for belonging as Māori in our schools, we will continue to primarily value the identities of those who already see themselves everywhere, namely Pākehā (discussed further below). Ākongā on the Poutama Pounamu programme also made connections to the Ka Hikitia vision of Māori achieving success as Māori, with reflections such as:

you need to understand that everyone has differing perceptions, views and opinions on how culture and language is seen. We must ask, inquire and learn to give a holistic approach on this. (Ākongā)

Another stated:

that identifying with your own culture and taking pride in your culture is far from innate and in fact may have been buried by generations of bowing to the dominant culture. (Ākongā)

My understanding of my role and my agency in supporting "Māori achieving success as Māori" (Ministry of Education, 2013, p. 13) became clearer to me with the support of discussion and reading material. Alton-Lee (2003) identifies "some of the many ways in which teaching can inadvertently 'other' Māori learners in "mainstream" schooling and the impacts that such othering can have. For example, curriculum bias, a failure to recognise the crucial role of culture in education, and traditional teaching approaches can all trigger peer racism, bullying, negative classroom interactions, and student failure, even in the classrooms of well-intentioned,

dedicated teachers" (pp. 13–14). By thinking critically about the social construction of my role as a teacher, including the source and effects of my acts, my potential as an agent of change began to develop. As Berryman and Eley (2018) state, "If we as educators continue to promote conditions where students feel they must fit in rather than truly belong, we will continue to undermine their wellbeing within education and we will risk failing to address the ensuing negative statistics" (p. 1). My fellow ākongā too began to see their own agency. One resolved to identify my own lenses through which I perceive things and become aware of this ensuring I make a conscious effort to see from others' points of view. (Ākongā)

Another showed the building of capacity to respond to challenges faced by teachers:

to be truly culturally responsive is to teach from the knowledge and strengths the child brings from their own whānau, and we have to find a way to see and receive that knowledge even if it challenges our own ideas about teaching and learning. (Ākongā)

## Learning 5. Ako and unfinishedness

As time went on, I began to think critically about the effectiveness of traditional teaching approaches (Alton-Lee, 2003) which prevail in many New Zealand schools. As Wearmouth et al. (2009) state, "schools as institutions are based to a large extent on an assumption that learning is individual, the result of teaching and has a beginning and end point" (p. 16). My current learning journey gave me an experience of ako. As stated by Poutama Pounamu, "we stress the magic of learning alongside and with each other in a non-judgmental space, which leads to greater benefits for all involved" (n.d.) These words resonated with my understandings of humans as social beings who are born to learn *together* (see Ministry of Education, 2014, p. 15). I know this magic and it is powerful. Other ākongā reflections indicated their experience of ako:

[It] was good to have a big group discussion about the topics. I felt that by discussing and working collaboratively we were able to get a better understanding of the topics and come up with better potential solutions/answers. (Ākongā)

... the discussions are very much the sense making that you want to achieve in the classroom; everyone brings their own experiences and viewpoints and listening to them adds another layer to my understanding. (Ākongā)

One reiterated my own thoughts, stating that:

these meetings give me an opportunity to have professional discussions with my peers that impacts my role as a teacher and leader. They motivate and inspire me to reflect on my practice and are a positive way to discuss ideas and challenges. (Ākongā)

My understanding of ako was further developed by Soo Hoo's (2015) citation of Freire (1998): "there is no teaching without learning, so when teachers recognize the reciprocity in the teaching and learning process, they realise that it is unfinishedness that allows us to mutually educate each other. Unfinishedness dethrones authority because there are no sole authorities within this concept" (p. 253). I saw this concept of unfinishedness as a pathway towards power sharing and lifelong learning. I am learning and I will never be finished. Indeed I believe that all humans are learning and we learn best together. In this way everybody is connected and this idea fills me with hope:

by surrendering 'knowing' for humility of not knowing, the full potentiality of the human race comes into focus. Unfinishedness is the watermark for open-mindedness, respect and humility. Our consciousness of our unfinishedness and our vulnerability as human beings move us towards one another, breeding co-learning and co-creation. (Soo Hoo, 2015, p.253)

I find this to be an immensely exciting prospect.

## Learning 6. Developing a critical praxis

Developing a critical praxis<sup>2</sup> in order to be an agent of change in my school and, hopefully, the wider education system is uncomfortable, challenging work. I have struggled at times and I have seen my colleagues and ākonga struggle too. The Poutama Pounamu blended learning process has supported me to build my capability. Berryman et al. (2015) state that:

the driver for reform rests with leaders who embrace the moral imperative to be the agents of change and who underpin their leadership with a refusal to tolerate a status quo that includes disparity for Māori students within their school. This ensures that the work is led with a real sense of urgency and with courage to persist with the kaupapa by reframing the situation so that new emancipatory possibilities can be revealed. (p.66)

I have gained the strength and understanding to work with others to do this and I have reason to be hopeful that other ākonga did too:

it inspires me to make a difference and encourages me to think about things from a new perspective but also to consider my existing position as a learner. (Ākonga)

Another resolved to:

make changes to the way I work in the classroom with all students but in particular the Māori students I teach. This will lead to: Improved teacher practice and relationships with students, believing in the students potential and feeling a greater responsibility for the children's success. (Ākonga)

My learning journey has supported me to connect with my own critical praxis. I cannot "unsee" that patterns of achievement are steeped in inequity and injustice and

I believe educators must stop blaming those who are underserved for these inequities. We must acknowledge this as a tragic waste of potential and opportunity for all the peoples of Aotearoa. Pākehā teachers can do much more to recognise the importance and value of identity and belonging and excellence as Māori in schools. We must see clearly our history, including how systems and structures have been built to disregard and depreciate the identities of Māori learners and whānau. We must decolonise. We must grasp the moral imperative to work hard, be uncomfortable, be brave, and look deeply. Then we can see our systems for what they are, something that we have constructed and something we can together deconstruct. Through this journey I have found the hope that we can collaboratively build education to do better by Māori students, to benefit all learners and the nation.

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## Notes

1. <https://poutamapounamu.org.nz/>
2. Paulo Freire defines praxis in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* as «reflection and action directed at the structures to be transformed».

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