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A STRUGGLE TOWARDS A THEORY OF PROFESSIONALISM

FOR

MĀORI WOMEN EDUCATORS

by

Makao Teresa Bowkett

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	i
Abstract	ii
Summary Statements	iii
A Struggle Towards a Theory of Professionalism for Māori Women Educators	
Introduction	1
Chapter One: Literature Review	
Introduction Part One	
Socialisation Processes	6
American Research on Minorities and Women	7
Traditional Management Literature	14
Women in Educational Leadership	15
Women's Access to Leadership	20
Developing Coping Strategies	24
Mainstream Feminist Critiques of Leadership	25
Mainstream Feminist Critiques of the White Male Views of Professionalism	30
Summary	33
Part Two - Within the Wahine Māori Context	
Wahine Māori State of Invisibility	35
Wahine Māori as 'Other'	39
Mana Wahine Discourse	40
Experiences of a Wahine Māori Academic	42
Summary	45
Chapter Two: Methodology	
Introduction	
Qualitative Approach	49

Grounded Theory Approach	51
Life Stories	52
Discovery - The Aim of Grounded Theory	
Participants	54
Interviewing	55
Kaitiakitanga	56
Chapter Three: Introduction to Participants	58
Chapter Four: The Women's Stories	
Interviewee One	62
Interviewee Two	66
Interviewee Three	74
Interviewee Four	82
Interviewee Five	88
Interviewee Six	93
Interviewee Seven	101
Interviewee Eight	111
Interviewee Nine	113
Interviewee Ten	117
Chapter Five: Themes	
Struggle for Mana Māori	125
Aspirations in Teaching	128
Preparation for Promotion	131
Constraints	135
Pressures	138
Pastoral Care Service	140
Chapter Six: Māori Women's Professionalism	142
Chapter Seven: Conclusions	146
References and Appendices	151

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“Identity at any meaningful level cannot be manufactured or manipulated; it is as much genetic imprint as formative experience. No matter what destructive processes we have gone through and are going through, eventually the taniwha stirs in all of us and we can only be who we are.”

Merata Mita 1992:54

This thesis is a gathering of personal stories contributed by wahine Māori teachers working within the secondary school system, amidst the struggle for a Māori women’s professionalism. Without their support and willingness to open up and share significant aspects of their personal and career experiences - the dreams, hopes and visions - the research on wahine Māori, would remain invisible. The fate of their uniquely and distinctly Māori experience, would otherwise be assimilated without voice into the bulk of research on women from the dominant culture. Ki nga wahine Māori, thank you for caring, for undertaking the responsibility to empower others, for being brave enough to be identified and for trusting. When you put something before the public, it is risky as it is exciting. For Māori who have had their spirituality continuously attacked, sharing the dreams and visions of one another is an experience beyond the self. This represents power.

ABSTRACT

The primary objective of this thesis focused upon the life stories and experiences of wahine Māori in order to identify, define and describe the factors that contribute to the success of wahine Māori in leadership positions at secondary school level, and the ensuing struggle in the evolvement of a Māori women's professionalism. Data was collected through a questionnaire, interviews and literature reviews. This study draws on the contributions of a sample of ten wahine Māori currently working in education, discussing aspects of their early schooling, whānau, teaching careers, coping with pressures in teaching, future aspirations in education and commenting on the status, and issues related to the struggles confronting wahine Māori in secondary schools. Whilst the sample for this study is relatively small, it is nevertheless representative of a diverse range of ages, backgrounds and experience. The research is a starting point which could work to inspire, guide and support other wahine Māori venturing into secondary school teaching careers as newcomers.

SUMMARY STATEMENTS

- (i) The findings presented in this study draw on the contributions of ten Māori women interviewed on their experiences teaching in the secondary sector of education in Aotearoa.
- (ii) The participants are affiliated to a number of iwi and hapu from throughout Aotearoa. The women were aged from thirty years to sixty five years.
- (iii) The positions held by the women ranged from beginning teacher to senior management levels and reflected the years of teaching experience which was from two years to thirty five years.
- (iv) The participants reported a strong sense of whānau and whānau values. From this base, the women established a firm determination to succeed in their educational careers.
- (v) In seeking promotion, the women were motivated by the following factors: the need to gain recognition, promoting change, natural progression and developing education initiatives.
- (vi) The women expressed frustration over the inadequate provision of professional development. They identified barriers to Māori women working in secondary education as: lack of self confidence, negative

perceptions to overcome, no self-promotion, lack of opportunity to prepare and the dominance of an established Pakeha male hierarchy.

- (vii) From the evidence, it appears that in fulfilling the role of a Māori woman professional, the participants assume a responsibility to encourage and support the goals and aspirations of Māori and Māori in education. Incumbent on those holding this position is the assurance that the needs and goals of Māori be defined by Māori, according to Māori values. The role in developing Māori in education therefore extends well beyond the school boundaries. This places extra workload demands above their regular teaching duties. The style of leadership adopted by the women is defined in terms of whānau and iwi, and is based on collectivism, community and caring. Affirmation of the rights of Māori to access education and to participate fully on their terms encapsulates the long term goal of the women interviewed - one of Māori autonomy.

A STRUGGLE TOWARDS A THEORY OF PROFESSIONALISM FOR MĀORI WOMEN EDUCATORS

Introduction

Recent findings by John and Hilary Mitchell (1993:71) reveal the huge workload carried by Māori teachers. Anecdotal accounts indicate that wahine Māori teachers are burdened with the responsibility of resolving problem situations that arise for Māori students and their whānau. For the most part their work efforts are “invisible”. The extra duties shouldered by Māori in schools, and wahine Māori in particular, often involve: providing positive role models for Māori students, in particular, Māori girls; dealing with discipline matters related to Māori students; administering guidance and pastoral care often in the form of counselling to Māori students, Māori parents and caregivers, and to other teaching colleagues; liaising with Māori whānau, and wider iwi groups, and organising sporting and cultural activities. The extra responsibilities undertaken by wahine Māori are above and beyond the expectation of their responsibilities as classroom teachers. It reflects the unique commitment of being a Māori woman professional which is more than the role of teaching curriculum or imparting knowledge.

The extent to which the extra load is carried out by wahine Māori teachers, shows in terms of personal health, personal whānau responsibilities, personal relationships, professional relationships with teaching colleagues, personal time and energy for personal professional development and career promotion prospects.

The implications of this compel the researcher to consider the status of wahine Māori teachers in terms of the positions that they hold within schools, and to study the factors influencing their current status.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the position and status of wahine Māori in secondary schools through exploring the experiences and critical issues impacting on a group of Māori women. It focuses on the accounts of ten Māori women who held positions ranging from the basic scale level to Head of Department and Assistant Principal in secondary schools. It was hypothesised that the collated data would provide a broad overview of the women's skills, knowledge, attitudes and values. Thus, from the aggregated data the essence of what it is to be a Māori woman professional would emerge. An aim therefore was to generate the emergence of: A Theory of Māori Women's Professionalism.

A specific focus is factors that contribute to the success of wahine Māori in leadership positions. There is much for others to gain from their experiences and their struggles, especially for those aspiring to follow similar paths.

This thesis explores therefore both the personal and professional lives of wahine Māori, and by doing so aims to provide a glimpse into their insights. It also provides the vehicle for their story to be told, in the hope that other wahine Māori might identify and gain some benefit.

Underpinning this investigation is my strong personal commitment to contribute to the research arena on wahine Māori. The women contributing have also acknowledged the special role that wahine Māori have in both the promotion of Māori in education and Māori society as a whole.

The process of study has been an inspiring and humbling experience instilling a sense of responsibility and privilege. Culturally, wahine Māori are loath to promote themselves in such a public way. It was very difficult to overcome such barriers, and it was after considerable networking that I was able to find a group willing to come forward. Fifty wahine Māori were invited to participate in the study, from which twenty responded, and ten made up the final sample. In doing so, the prime motivation was that they might be able to offer young Māori teachers some form of support and reaffirmation of what it is to be Māori in a predominantly non-Māori environment. To reassure them that they are not alone in the struggle of being Māori and fitting into non-Māori structures.

The wahine Māori recognise the many forms of racism that exist in any institution. The institutional structures can disguise the presence of racist actions and behaviours. Thus the task of exposing racism becomes a difficult and onerous one. Appointments of Māori in various institutions have served the institution better than they serve the Māori (Mita, 1992:50). Like other Māori appointees entering the work place, the Māori women interviewed find themselves subject to intense professional scrutiny from colleagues and senior management. For many, the need to prove one's ability and professional credibility seems greater than for non-Māori. Thus, while outwardly fulfilling their obligations as an equal employment opportunity employer, the culture of the institutions show little response to the needs and goals of Māori.

The basis of the Pakeha institution is legal, and its structure is bureaucratic and inflexible. This immediately leads to confrontation as Māori desire more

flexibility to retain other values with a priority as high as or sometimes higher than Pakeha legality (Mita, 1992:50).

This thesis is both an exercise in completing the academic requirements of a Masterate of Education, thus fulfilling part of my long term vision to achieve Pakeha educational and professional qualifications, and it is part of my contribution in giving back a little of my skills and myself to iwi Māori. This is only possible because of the help and contributions of others.

The thesis is presented in seven chapters; the first is a literature review on minorities and women in educational administration and leadership, drawn primarily from a pool of limited mainstream American sources. This reflects a dearth of research studies specifically on women from ethnic minorities on an international level, and within Aotearoa totally negligible recognition attributed to wahine Māori in leadership positions in secondary schools. The latter part attempts to establish the theoretical constructs that reflect the unique context within which wahine Māori are placed.

The second chapter describes the methodology utilised for the study, including background into the research process involving personal and life issues with further focus on relating and locating these strategies within a Māori cultural context. The chapter offers the rationale to justify the methodology of the study, specifically the grounded theory of a qualitative approach.

The third is an introduction to the participants, which leads directly into the women's stories in chapter four. Chapter five provides an analysis of the women's experiences and the links between these and the literature on

professionalism. This chapter then explores the themes emerging in relation to their struggle towards Māori women's professionalism. In chapter six the Māori women's view of what it is to be a professional is crystallised. The conclusions in the final chapter seven, outline the potential implications of this type of research. Recommendations based on the findings are presented for those presently engaged in secondary teaching and for those contemplating beginning.