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*A three-way partnership to raise Māori  
student achievement*



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## Dedication

*This study is dedicated to all educators, but especially to minority and indigenous group students, and their whānau, particularly acknowledging Māori as tangata whenua of Aotearoa/New Zealand, and the words of Nelson Mandela:*

*Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.*

## ABSTRACT

The New Zealand education system produces high levels of academic performance (Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development – OECD, in Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, & Fung, 2007). Contradictorily, New Zealand is also one of the few countries that produce a huge divide in performance levels between Māori and other minority culture groups on the one hand, and non-Māori and dominant culture groups on the other (ibid.). However, school policies on Māori student initiatives appear to generate minimal success for Māori students. Therefore, an urgent critique, and transformation of school policies are required to bring about better educational outcomes for Māori students. Hence, this qualitative study is underpinned in critical and socio-constructivist theories, and adopts a Kaupapa Māori orientation that is grounded in the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi. Obstacles to Māori student achievement were firstly identified to determine how partnership relationships among students, whānau, and the school can be strengthened to raise achievement. Teacher questionnaires, parent individual interviews, and student semi-structured interviews were used to gauge perceptions of Māori student achievement, and explore the rationale and nature of partnership relationships. Misperceptions of Māori and education were found to significantly contribute to severed partnership relationships. Therefore, this research study advocates for power-sharing consultative, and collaborative decision-making processes within a culturally inclusive curriculum to *strengthen* partnership relationships among students, whānau, and the school...to raise Māori student achievement.

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## PROLOGUE

In the context of much literature (Macfarlane, 2007a; Bishop & Glynn, 2004) around the negative impacts of the dominant discourse on indigenous and/or minority groups, I have become more aware of my role as researcher in the New Zealand/Aotearoa context. I am an immigrant member of a non-Māori minority group, and have experienced throughout my primary, secondary, and tertiary years the stifling impact of a White, Western, dominant culture that frequently used Christianity as a means of cultural assimilation.

The socio-politico-cultural context of apartheid (separateness) in South Africa meant the races (Whites, Indians, Coloureds, and Africans) were kept separate in their compartmentalised schools and tertiary education institutions, and a tiered education budget saw the education system's power to manipulate the access to knowledge, and how and what resources are distributed among the four races. This perhaps radical overview was brought to light in the late 1970s when freedom of the press and people's rights became much of the business of my peers at the University of Durban-Westville (renamed University of Kwa-Zulu Natal), a university ironically attended by individuals such as me 'under protest' because of its policies based on the oppressive dominant discourse. Thus, while generally White peers were celebrating the transitional tertiary phase, and having the freedom to choose a university and courses of their choice, many non-White peers became comrades against political oppression, and went underground to rally support against practices of apartheid in the South African education system.

My primary school years were somewhat smooth and uneventful in accepting the prescribed curriculum until I became embarrassingly aware of how my cultural background conflicted with that of the dominant culture through the poetry lessons (where every poem was based on the dominant Western ideology). In the dire need to excel academically, and make my parents proud, I was determined to fulfil the expectations of my teachers. Then, at university, the history of the nation (taught at primary school) became more apparent. I can now appreciate Smith's (1999) reference to the *dirty* word *colonialism* since one of the nation's *heroes* and colonists had been found to be actively exploiting the indigenous Africans – an important finding that would have changed the course of South African history taught at

schools! It became very apparent that the education system was a puppet of the government's strategy of *divide and rule*. The four races and their cultures were kept apart, but the knowledge of the dominant culture was taught at all schools. The non-White students were taught to marvel at the superiority of the White culture, and accept they were different and *inferior*, with their communities have no voting rights in the national elections. Education became a significant political tool to control and prevent non-Whites from the power-sharing processes of the country.

I believe I am in a fortunate and unique position to experience the realities of two education systems and their learning and teaching contexts. In the South African context, the lived experiences were in homogenous classes of non-White (Indian) students taught only by minority group (Indian) teachers, and in the New Zealand context, heterogenous classes taught by predominantly dominant discourse teachers. Both contexts create concerns of equity for minority and indigenous group students. As an employee of the Crown in New Zealand, I have become more aware of the access to knowledge by Māori. This has become a matter more concerning than statistics exposing the low academic performance levels of Māori students – that is, it is the *process* rather than the *outcomes* (Jahnke & Taiapa, 1999) of lower academic success among Māori students that appear to be the greater concern.

Thus there was the need to reflect on the above-mentioned process through a critical examination of the New Zealand education system, and particularly the meaning of *tikanga* which underpins the process involved in the teaching and learning relationships. Williams' dictionary gives *tikanga* as a derivative of *tika* - that which is fair, true or just (Durie, July 1998). This has implications for power-sharing partnerships, and equity in education. Therefore, Māori student underachievement in itself becomes a label worth scrutinising, as it can be used as a form of deficit thinking, and may demonstrate the ineffective consultative and collaborative partnership between the school and home.

Bishop (in Taylor, 2007) extends a fresh and apt challenge, open to *all* capable people (Māori and non-Māori) able to make positive contributions toward raising Māori students' achievement. Underlying this challenge is very likely to be the factor of *ownership*. In this research study exploring the three-way partnership, particularly looking at the relationships among Māori students, the school, and family, the tahuhu

(ridgepole) of the thesis would be in the word *strengthen*. The current perception appears to be a sympathetic view to curricular transformation, of educators being sensitive to cultural issues, and schools being advised to include Māori programmes to satisfy one of the New Zealand Ministry of Education's NEGs (National Educational Goals). Guidelines they will be, and without them being mandatory, and legitimated, these guidelines can arguably create room for marginalisation of indigenous group students.

In the context of this dissertation, I acknowledge the impact of my being non-Māori, and not affiliating to an iwi, or hapu, but as an employee of the Crown, saw the obligation to understand the Māori cultural worldview to be able to successfully work with Māori research participants with whom I also co-exist in a learning community. Smith (1999) points out that the identity politics of *by Māori, for Māori* can paralyse development, and advocates that non-Māori can participate in research with Māori if a Kaupapa Māori orientation is adopted. To this end, my supervisors were able to guide me through a reflexive research study with Māori.

I have been inspired by awhinatia (the move towards restorative justice practices) within the case school. A restorative justice initiative aims at providing forums to expand communication channels among students and teachers, and between the school and wider community on matters *that matter* about the student's wellbeing, and the healing or building of relationships (Macfarlane, 2007). Alton-Lee (2003), Bishop and Glynn (1999), and Dimmock (1995) have consistently advocated for educational professionals to provide an education system that is more responsive to beliefs and cultural practices of all their students. Restorative justice practices could thereby enhance consultative and collaborative practices through a three-way power-sharing partnership (students/family/school), to promote equity in education, and a genuinely inclusive curriculum.

*Toia te waka matauranga*

*Ma wai e to? Maku e to, mau e to*

*Ma te whakaranga ake e to*

Haul forth the canoe of education.

Who should haul it? I should, you should.

All within calling distance should haul the canoe (cited in Macfarlane, 2007, p. 161).