

E rua taha o te awa: There are two sides to the river... Navigating ‘social justice’ as an indigenous educator in non-indigenous tertiary education

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Abstract

Providing a very different perspective on social justice, this narrative explores and discusses the inherent social justice tensions of being a Māori educator (indigenous to Aotearoa New Zealand) within a mainstream non-indigenous higher education institution in New Zealand. Here the social justice tension is not so much about how to help others but how to correlate widely accepted professional standards and practices with competing personal cultural sensitivities and insights. Specifically, this article describes four of my inner tensions as associated with issues around the Treaty of Waitangi, the principle of cultural diversity, the moral purpose of New Zealand education, and the inherent cultural dilemmas within leadership as a Māori educator. A key outcome of this discussion is the perception of tokenism and resistance in the bicultural preparation of our future New Zealand primary school teachers. Hence, this article seeks to provide my Māori worldview perspective for achieving a more socially just New Zealand society by better preparing our future teachers to meet this challenge.

Keywords: *Māori worldview; cultural diversity; inclusion; teacher preparation; educational leadership; biculturalism*

Introduction

Arguably, descriptions of intentional actions that seek to redress issues of social justice often depict the narrative of a person with not only access to recognizable power and influence but also a commitment to utilising these to benefit others by creating a more socially just environment. Indeed, the international research project upon which this special issue was founded essentially seeks to explore how school leaders within a diverse array of national and cultural contexts enact social justice. That is, how these school leaders, through a commitment to social justice, use their positional power and influences to benefit their students. However, this article provides a very different perspective on social justice. This narrative explores and discusses the inherent social justice tensions of being a Māori educator (indigenous to Aotearoa New Zealand) within a mainstream non-indigenous higher education institution in New Zealand. Here the social justice tension is not so much about how to help others but how to correlate widely accepted professional standards and practices with competing personal cultural sensitivities and insights. Central to this tension is the understanding of ‘self’. Regardless of my diligence towards my professional responsibilities, I am ever cognisant of my own bicultural heritage that is forever inclusive of a deep desire or *wāwata* (aspirations) for improving inclusive and equitable teacher practice and pedagogy in the increasingly diverse cultural setting of Aotearoa New Zealand.

As a responsible academic professional, I am expected to teach and assess particular standardized curricula in a fairly common but at times culturally naïve way. Hence, many inner personal contestations are aroused. Should I remain true to my professional responsibilities and thereby ignore my cultural misgivings or should I significantly amend the curricula so as to suitably address the perceived cultural deficiencies even though this might impact upon my capacity to teach the full scope of the curricula? Should I ignore the cultural implications for the minority of students in my classes who are Māori or should I be providing a more culturally

holistic and inclusive experience for each and every student in my classes? As a tertiary educator, is it my professional responsibility to comprehensively teach the given curricula or is it to educate a more culturally aware and inclusive student? From a social justice perspective, should cultural needs have priority over academic requirements and can I, as Māori, be expected to teach in a culturally neutral way?

This article seeks to describe my personal social justice dilemma as I try to navigate this two-sided professional 'river'. It will be seen that there are a range of conflicting tensions across several aspects of my experience that impact upon my sense of social justice when engaged in teaching for and of cultural diversity as an indigenous, minority educational leader. It is these identified tensions that require navigation, interrogation and a conviction to enact socially just leadership for learning and teaching.

Kei te taha taku awa: *My side of the river... Situating 'self'*

Central to my cultural positioning and professional tensions are my experiences from having been a primary school teacher and now being a facilitator of tertiary learning in an initial teacher education (ITE) programme. I know, first hand, the culturally demanding environment in which my ITE students will soon be immersed. Hence, these tensions are situated specifically in my formal higher education role of facilitating the learning and teaching of and for cultural diversity and bicultural perspectives. This includes the teaching and learning of *te reo* (language) and *tikanga* (customs) of Māori people situated within an indigenous Māori worldview. This is a required part of the ITE curriculum for those students wishing to become a mainstream primary school teacher.

Although it is a laudable intention to ensure that the professional preparation of each and every primary school teacher includes some form of immersion in Māori language and culture, there is more to understanding and appreciating the Māori worldview than simply knowing the language and cultural norms. Indeed, the superficiality of this cultural immersion contrasts markedly with the holistic nature of Māori identity as encapsulated in the whakatauaiki, "Ehara taku toa i te toa takitahi, engari he toa takitini," - My strength is not that of a single warrior but that of many, (as cited in Ministry of Education [MoE], 2010, p. 44) meaning that the combined efforts of the many are needed to complete a project. Indeed, there is far more to being Māori than can be understood through knowledge of the language, cultural practices and artefacts alone. The difficulty for me, as the teacher of Māori language and culture to a largely non-Māori class group, is in knowing the pedagogical limitations of what I am teaching. This causes tension especially when knowing that the students are immersed in a limited selection of Māori language learning and cultural curricular experiences that are then assessed as adequately preparing them to meet their future bicultural professional responsibilities. Moreover, this cultural immersion experience is further limited because it is undertaken as an isolated component of learning rather than being developed further across each of the other professional teaching components within the full ITE programme.

Furthermore, in a more general way, the Treaty of Waitangi principles of *partnership, participation* and *protection* serve as a bicultural power-sharing metaphor that calls upon all educational leaders to encourage culturally reciprocal learning and teaching relationships. However, the challenge that this calling produces is in how the educational leader ensures such explicit links or connections to these principles of the Treaty of Waitangi. From a Māori perspective, I firmly believe that it is insufficient for an educational leader to simply identify and promote the intention of these Treaty principles. Rather, the leader must live and model these principles. This implies that the educational leader must, first, explore the current understandings associated with how these principles are being applied within their educational context and then develop deeper understandings with learners about the social implications of a sincere and absolute commitment to these principles and, thereby, the Treaty of Waitangi.

Finally, and more specifically to the context of social justice learning and teaching, the *New Zealand Curriculum* (NZC)(MoE, 2007) vision statement discusses, "What we want for our young people" (p. 8) and highlights the need to increase the consciousness of learners towards issues of social justice. This requires the

educational leader to consider how best to develop understandings that reflect ‘socially just’ perspectives. One way of being able to do this is evident in the *Key competencies* of the New Zealand curriculum (MoE, 2007) as often these are prominent within classrooms and school planning for learning documentation. This forms part of my experience of facilitating the development of learning with student teachers, which includes an identified focus on examining social justice issues related to their pre-existing perceptions, understandings and experiences of social disadvantage and deprivation. However, New Zealand national statistics clearly highlight that social disadvantage and deprivation is strongly correlated to cultural identity (Wynd, 2013) and, by and large, those most likely to experience disadvantage and deprivation are of Māori or Pasifika heritage. Arguably, many of the students in my classes have a limited appreciation of the traumatic consequences of disadvantage and deprivation and, consequently, possess insufficient social justice convictions. Indeed, I often sense that the norms of the pervasive societal misconceptions are clearly evident in student teacher thinking – the pervading belief is that the New Zealand national economy is robust and so everyone is benefitting when, clearly, this is not the case, particularly for Māori and Pasifika. This implies that an authentic commitment to social justice means, in the main, improving the social circumstances for many Māori and Pasifika. However, the tension for me is in proactively promoting this perception and commitment while not appearing to be promoting advantage for those of my own culture. Such a misconception of my motivation can lead to a tension for both the student and myself.

Kei te waenganui o te awa: *The middle of the river...* Describing some specific tensions

There are four specific tensions associated with my educational role as a Māori person in New Zealand’s higher education system. These tensions are associated with:

1. The dynamic possibilities of the Treaty of Waitangi;
2. The principle of cultural diversity;
3. The moral purpose of New Zealand education; and
4. The inherent cultural dilemmas within leadership.

The dynamic possibilities of the Treaty of Waitangi

In the Aotearoa New Zealand context, the Treaty of Waitangi is affirmed as highly significant in the *New Zealand Curriculum*: “The curriculum acknowledges the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi and the bicultural foundations of Aotearoa New Zealand,” (MoE, 2007, p. 9). Moreover, the Treaty of Waitangi principles of partnership, participation and protection serve as a bicultural power-sharing metaphor seeking to inspire educational leaders to encourage reciprocal learning and teaching relationships within their schools. However these principles can be problematic for many educational leaders and teachers with little experience of the dynamic possibilities of the Treaty of Waitangi.

An example of this is the continued contestation of the importance of the Treaty of Waitangi in Aotearoa New Zealand society as an inclusive document of nationhood. Evidence of this contestation is provided by my experiences of student teachers within the ITE programme. Here, the ever-present negative perceptions and/or lack of understanding of the implications for professional practice of aspects of the Treaty of Waitangi as the basis for socially just practice are a constant source of concern. For example, while some student teacher responses, experiences and understandings of the Treaty of Waitangi are proactively positive, others maintain a position of exclusion that negates any participation or expression of its social and national importance. Largely, such students tend to frame the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi as ‘othered’ whereby they view these as only having relevance to Māori and perhaps the government and, thus, not relevant to their own cultural perspectives or positions.

This revelation of student positioning is confronting for myself as a Māori educator and highlights a lack of sufficient current emphasis on consistent bicultural awareness and development across educational settings,

generally, and learning and teaching approaches more specifically. Hence, this appears to be a systemic failing that requires non-indigenous educators to shift their cultural and pedagogical views on the importance of indigeneity so as to avoid disengagement with or, worse, denial of the fundamental intentions of the Treaty of Waitangi. If our future teachers are to walk the talk of the Treaty of Waitangi, it necessitates that each and every ITE facilitator not only teaches in accordance with the principles of partnership, participation and protection but, moreover, that they role model these very same principles to their student teachers so as to enact the essential transformative development required for pedagogical and philosophical shift.

The principle of cultural diversity

In keeping with the espoused principles of the Treaty of Waitangi and *New Zealand Curriculum*, close attention to *cultural diversity* and *inclusion* are promoted as fundamental foundations of curriculum decision-making (MoE, 2007). The principle of cultural diversity in the NZC recognizes that “the curriculum reflects New Zealand’s cultural diversity and values the histories and traditions of all its peoples,” (MoE, 2007, p. 9). Furthermore, Howard (2007) highlights the importance of this principle by stating that, “rapidly changing demographics demand that we engage in a vigorous process of professional development to prepare all educators in the school to function effectively in a highly diverse environment” (p. 17). Importantly, this desired outcome is positioned alongside the NZC principle of inclusion that highlights “the curriculum is non-sexist, non-racist, and non-discriminatory; it ensures that student’s identities, languages, abilities, and talents are recognized and affirmed and that their needs are addressed,” (MoE, 2007, p. 9).

Regrettably, due to current political and educational priorities, both of these laudable principles remain more as ideals than realities. Both of these NZC principles clearly situate aspects of social justice as imperatives within the national learning and teaching curriculum of Aotearoa New Zealand education. Arguably however, these are often overlooked by reductionist approaches to learning in the name of teacher effectiveness, as evident in the current national educational foci upon standardized student achievement outcomes. Here, any opportunity for refocusing the curriculum is consumed by the national political agenda, which is predominantly aligned with improving the learner’s academic knowledge and skills, particularly in the areas of literacy and mathematics. This focus on standardized student achievement outcomes associated with a learner’s development then determines the perceived effectiveness of the curriculum and, thereby, fails to embrace a holistic understanding of what constitutes student learning. Consequently, teaching for and of socially just learning in keeping with a commitment to cultural diversity and inclusion fails to be a significant feature of many school curriculums.

Moreover, and within my specific educational context, a commitment to cultural diversity and inclusion is further eroded due to the inadequate preparation of teachers towards meeting the required level of understanding and appreciation. Essentially, from a Māori perspective, the necessary curriculum decision-making elements required to prioritize cultural diversity and inclusion are manifest through the teacher’s authentic commitment to bicultural repositioning. The teacher needs to both understand and feel what it is like to be Māori in order to truly promote cultural diversity and inclusion.

From my experience as a primary school teacher and my understanding of the Māori world-view, particularly within my current educational context, I have a deep concern about the capacity of the ITE programme to adequately prepare future teachers to be able to respond to cultural diversity and inclusion, when developing and implementing curriculum. Hence, this view adversely affects my perception of the completeness of the ITE programme and, thus, my professional sufficiency in my own teaching in this programme. It seems to me that, given the comprehensiveness of the ITE programme, there is insufficient time to suitably prepare students to meet this future professional expectation. Hence, I am ever conscious of an impression that these key cultural diversity and inclusion principles of the ITE programme remain underdeveloped due to a lack of

consideration for the bicultural repositioning of the students in the programme's structure, content, assessment practices, and the specific teacher's knowledge, skills and dispositions to effectively facilitate such learning.

Thus, for me there remains an inadequate pedagogical focus within the ITE programme because the emphasis is on developing and teaching the core subject specific content, which fails to acknowledge and emphasize the relevance of culturally diverse ways of doing and ways of knowing. Instead, in order to achieve these desirable socially just outcomes of cultural diversity and inclusion, there needs to be a pedagogical shift to overcome the current tokenistic approach to different ways of knowing and different ways of doing. Only in this way will it be possible for students to gain the necessary knowledge, skills and dispositions required to fully embrace the conviction and intention to deliberately implement learning practices for cultural diversity and inclusion in the curriculum they teach in future.

The moral purpose of New Zealand education

The *Kiwi Leadership for Principals: Principals as Educational Leaders* (MoE, 2008) discusses the importance of New Zealand's educational leaders leading with moral purpose by stating;

Effective principals have a central belief system that is focused on student learning and well-being. They set clear goals, and pursue them to ensure success for all... They create schools that welcome and include all members of the community. (p. 22)

Implicit in this moral purpose aspiration is the issue of choice. A principal is only capable of living up to this call to "welcome and include all members of the community" if, and only if, each and every member of the community can choose to enrol their child in that particular school. Here, the view posited by Howard (2007) provides a challenge to such an idealistic belief by stating that it is important to "establish that racial, cultural and economic differences are real – and that they make a difference in education outcomes" (p. 18). An inquiry into the concept of privilege, and the ability of different cultural groups to attend particular schools or universities so as to undertake the transformative act to become educated or to become a teacher, sheds light on the concept of choice and how the capacity to choose differs for disaffected cohorts of society. In particular, evidence indicates that Māori and Pasifika families often fail to make such a choice (MoE, 2012). Due to a lack of information or financial circumstances, Māori and Pasifika families are far more likely to have little choice as to where their child can be educated (Thrupp, 2007). Also, quite often Māori and Pasifika families have little appreciation of the benefits to be gained by exercising this option or are culturalized not to judge the actions of others and so do not consider making such a choice.

Of particular interest to me, as an ITE facilitator, were the responses from student teachers where a majority of my students were of the opinion that all New Zealand people had the "choice" to attend university and engage in tertiary learning irrespective of "racial, cultural and economic differences". Indeed, my own position as a tertiary facilitator from an indigenous minority group was viewed as evidence to support the position that there is equal educational opportunity for all irrespective of ethnicity.

This misperception fails to acknowledge the general scarcity of indigenous minorities situated within non-indigenous educational contexts. It seems that too often the perceived success of the few is taken as confirmation of a more general social achievement. Just because I was able to make choices and achieve educational success cannot be taken as evidence that the same opportunity and outcome is available to each and every indigenous learner. However, this seemed to be what many of my students were claiming. In a sense, my personal educational success had the potential to adversely affect other less advantaged learners because it provided a false sense of security around the perception of equal educational choice for all in the minds of many future educational leaders.

Defending my own culturally informed position on choice, as couched in the proclaimed aspiration of moral purpose in New Zealand education, despite my own personal educational achievements, is not a new implication for me but it continues to be a challenge. Indeed, I have come to understand that my educational success provides me with the unique opportunity for contesting majority worldviews from a social justice perspective, which adds further complexity to my professional practice, one that non-indigenous practitioners may not need to consider or necessarily have to defend. This position actually provides further opportunity to contest the positioning and understandings of others so as to promote a different way of knowing and a different way of being positioned from an indigenous perspective.

The inherent cultural dilemmas within leadership

While there is no universally accepted understanding of what constitutes leadership, for the purposes of this article I apply that proffered by Buckingham (2005) who argues that;

The job of a great leader is to rally people towards a better future, and as such, they are not intermediaries. They are instigators. Driven by their compulsion for a better future, the challenge is to do everything in their power to get other people to join together to make this future come true. (p. 132)

In the light of this conceptualization, I can be classified as a leader simply because of my view that there is far more to socio-cultural repositioning than simply knowing about Māori language and culture. If I am to teach my part of the ITE programme properly then my professional practice must involve being agentic in confronting, questioning and challenging the students' dominant social norms and dispositions. Given my somewhat unique experience of not only having personally lived through many of the socio-cultural challenges faced by Māori but also to have succeeded academically, I feel compelled to situate an indigenous contextual way of being, way of knowing, way of doing, and way of positioning within the consciousness of each of my ITE students. Although I might see this as simply doing my professional job, authors such as McNae (2014) align an agentic stance with the practice of ethical educational leadership because it is about "leading in socially just ways [that includes] addressing and eliminating marginalization" (p. 95). Similarly, Bishop (2011) describes effective educational leaders as those who are focused on reform when transforming school cultures and practices that include supporting and fostering "committed, agentic educators" (p. 37).

However, herein lies a cultural dilemma. From an essentially non-indigenous perspective, as has just been argued, my determined agentic professional actions are considered an act of leadership but, in the Māori world, there are serious concerns associated with me being seen, or striving to act, as a leader. In the Māori world, I do not consider myself a leader and, therefore, I am constantly ensuring that I do not presume to think and act as if I am. This means that in my culturally mixed classroom, I am caught in two worlds. On the one hand, to the non-indigenous students and colleagues I am seen to be a leader – someone who can "rally" the students to commit to creating a far more culturally equitable future for New Zealand as a nation. While on the other hand, to the indigenous students and colleagues I am simply a dedicated and hardworking individual seeking to help improve the lives of others including fellow Māori. This gives rise to strong tensions within me that are balanced with my own bicultural heritage as I strive to navigate through this cultural dilemma around the conceptualization of leadership, especially when teaching key aspects of social justice in my ITE teaching context that includes the themes of *equity*, *cultural diversity* and *inclusion*.

In endeavouring to resolve these inner tensions, I am inspired by the thoughts of the anonymous author (2011) who proposed that teacher preparation programmes must purposefully address social justice issues to balance an over-emphasis on "effectiveness and efficiency dimensions" (p. 26). This perspective is of particular importance in my own professional context where my ITE role calls for the explicit and purposeful teaching of social justice issues related to increased appreciation for diversity and socially just teaching. It is from this positioning of the essential outcome of my educational leadership function that I am enabled to sufficiently

suppress my culturally influenced reservations about doing so. Hence, despite my inner reluctance to take such a publicly dominant role, I purposefully undertake to raise awareness and consciousness for ensuring an inclusive and equitable approach, as promoted by Stevenson (2007). Even so, these are the contestations and tensions that I live with as an indigenous person teaching about indigenous issues in a predominantly non-indigenous tertiary institution. Perhaps a challenge that other indigenous educators need to be aware of and be prepared to address in their own professional practices.

Te taha rerekē o te awa – *The other side of the river...* Re-positioning my waka

My view of social justice involves enacting an indigenous leadership practice that incorporates an increased consciousness, agentic promotion and positioning of Māori worldviews and *wāwata* (aspirations) that is mindful also of the centrality of my own bicultural ethnicity. As a learning and teaching facilitator in higher tertiary education, there are tensions in my current educational context related to my Māori cultural positioning that both guides and constrains my thoughts and actions. On the one hand, my Māori cultural position inspires and guides my professional practice and educational leadership priorities around issues related to equity, cultural diversity and inclusion. This provides me with unique opportunities to affirm and reform educational priorities and policies around fundamental issues associated with New Zealand's distinctive bicultural society. When confronted with disparity, disadvantage and the realities of societal discrimination, my indigenous worldview, and the legacy of agentic action inherited from the struggle of past *tūpuna* (ancestors), provides the platform for me to promote further awareness and consciousness of social justice issues related to the Aotearoa New Zealand educational context from a Māori perspective.

However, on the other hand, this very same bicultural society also has the potential to produce a less than favourable and often reluctant, if not resistant, learning environment. Here, while my Māori heritage provides me with credibility and authority to represent this worldview, it simultaneously affords some with the opportunity to criticize, diminish or ignore my perspective. Some can see my Māori heritage as constituting a bias rather than a justification for my views. The frustration for me is that it is these very same people that I dearly wish to be influencing the most. These can be students in my ITE classes or my professional colleagues. For the students, my wish is that they will be fully able to meet the anticipated professional responsibilities in their future teaching careers. These professional responsibilities will be associated with the bicultural imperatives imbedded in the NZC as informed by the Treaty of Waitangi, as well as the relational requirements of teaching within a culturally diverse society. With respect to my professional colleagues, my frustration is in enabling them to realize and adopt a far more holistic commitment to biculturalism within the ITE programme whereby each and every teacher models the Treaty of Waitangi principles and practices, and strives to imbed these into their specific curriculum area.

As identified from the highlighted tensions I experience, there is a need to improve the consciousness of bicultural development to promote a socially just professional practice of and for future teachers specific to Aotearoa New Zealand. Arguably this requires the re-visioning of ITE programmes and facilitator capacity to authentically enact inclusive and culturally diverse ways of knowing and ways of doing to respond to and address marginality. This is the struggle that I facilitate within my own professional practice when uncovering the unknown, which at times is confronting for both my students and myself, especially when involving explicit and divergent approaches to promoting indigenous equity and equality. It is this navigation of the strong ebb and flow of learning that is my educational context, a context within which much has been accomplished when paddling both with and against the New Zealand educational current. However, knowing there are two sides to the river, highlights that much paddling is still required to navigate this journey toward more socially just educational leadership practices that includes legitimate recognition and enactment of indigenous ways of doing, ways of knowing and ways of being. *Kia ora!* (Be well).

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