

Māori Education

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Abstract

Two ways of dealing with cultures in schools are blind acceptance or critical examination. In this essay blind acceptance means, proselytising aspects of a minority culture into schools, interpreting an understanding of that culture from a dominant viewpoint, or claiming insight into bridging cultural differences. On the other hand, critical examination means examining a wide range of cultures and their values, comparing and contrasting their strengths and weaknesses and using that to reflect more deeply on wider humanity.

In New Zealand, teachers and students reflect on aspects of Pakeha culture critically in school classrooms. It is the dominant means that underpins many of the assumptions on which decisions are based. By contrast Maori culture is reflected on, but not critically examined. While it is important to incorporate aspects of a minority viewpoint, in the most part it is blindly accepted. The result is that many schools have aspects of Maori culture that has been accepted without question. They were included for many reasons, such as reflecting community or meeting bi-nationhood agendas. It was assumed that it would be appropriate to resolve many of the cultural issues that divide these two cultures in schools. Blind acceptance is the main one. In my essay, I resolve these two opposites of relativism, and argue for an authentic place for Maori in schools today.

Identifying a Maori Dimension in schools

Many schools in New Zealand have a dimension that is easily identified as Maori culture. This dimension pervades the institutional culture in many different ways. At the start of the year, an “exchange” of students for values the Marae might take place. Marae welcoming for new teachers and special guests, school prayers in Maori, class prayers in Maori, kapa haka cultural groups, translating words into Maori, and a general preference for things Maori. All these events have a spiritual basis from Maori culture.

Some schools with high Maori rolls give a preference to Maori cultural values. At Mana College, a school I taught at for four years, 60% of students identified as Maori, and this was reflected in the community involvement of Ngati Toa, a local Iwi. Within that school there was a vertical stream of students identified as E Tipu E Rea. Until 2005, this was intended to serve pastoral needs of Maori students, and special assemblies, and celebrations were held outside the main school gatherings. When form classes were abolished in 2006, the main way of meeting pastoral needs was for each year-level cohort staying together throughout the day in the junior college (years 9 & 10) and this strengthened the identity of E Tipu E Rea classes. Their collegiality was emphasised by teacher’s reflecting their communities’ wishes to inculcate them in Maori culture alongside mainstream curricula. Under this new system, Marae based protocol underpinned the classroom structure. The classroom became a Marae, and from this perspective students were reminded to treat it as such.

Blind Acceptance

Johnson Report - Proselytising a bicultural vision in schools.

A Maori dimension in New Zealand schools has been identified by Bowler and Openshaw (2006) as having its origins in the Johnson report (Department of Education, 1977). That report was presented to the Health

and Social Education committee in 1977 in response to a significant lobby for the curriculum to be widened to address a range of social and health issues. Nowhere in the terms of reference was there a suggestion that it deal with bicultural issues. Bowler and Openshaw (2006) note that the influence of its chairperson, Garfield Johnson, should not be over-looked. They directly connect his experience as a school principal from a South Auckland school with his vision to include a Maori spiritual dimension in schools. One of its recommendations was “the fostering of a non-sectarian spiritual dimension in New Zealand state education be accepted.” (2.22.a, pg 37, Department of Education, 1977). Bowler and Openshaw (2006) describe the Johnson report as proselytising a bicultural vision situated in schools. Johnson believed that schools would become a place in which Maori values would nurture the talents of Maori culture, for all students.

Interpreting Maori dimension from dominant viewpoint

The form that a Maori dimension takes in some schools today has been reinterpreted from a dominant viewpoint. Maori students transcend school in some activities, such as giving a speech, because they bring another dimension enhanced from within their community. But no regard is given to the context from which their talents have been nurtured. Rather they are tolerated with all the other speeches made within the school event. This is equivalent to any student coming to school with musical talents nurtured through their family or community. The values they hold towards music are not given a preferred option, instead tolerated along with all others.

Claiming insight into bridging cultural differences

Some schools aim to resolve cultural tensions by creating a harmonious micro-society, thereby modelling a positive future that students might choose to join. Such an outlook reflects debates in society around biculturalism and multiculturalism, whereby different modes and arrangements within schools can be created to generate a future focused mini-society. Relationships between students of different cultural backgrounds can be worked through within a reflective environment that resolves the cultural tensions in the community. By doing this schools can claim that cultural differences have been ameliorated, and offer insight into achieving this. Following cultural events at Mana College that display a wide range of cultural talent, I recall the deputy principal suggesting such a vision unfolding.

Critical Examination

If we are to accept a Maori dimension into our schools, we should allow students to examine it more fully. They might be compared and contrasted with a wide range of other cultural values. Indeed it might be envisaged that students should be given a framework that equips them to critically examine any cultural values. By not preferencing one set of values over the other, then we are shielding students from being immersed in a particular values set. In this sense, they are liberated to make the choice for themselves.

Evaluative framework

I argue that neither of these extremes is acceptable. The uncritical acceptance of things Maori into schools is a loss of freedom. Taylor (1991) cites Alexis de Tocqueville describing a society in which few will participate in self-government with a central government, which continues to provide the means to private satisfaction. Instead, the decisions for wider society will be based on pre-assumptions that must be maintained. Only political activism, Tocqueville thinks, would be a suitable defence.

Taylor (1991) contrasts this against the atomism of the self-absorbed individual. By critically examining a range of cultural values it does not locate those values for the subject in a real place. It places too much emphasis on a logical solution that comes from only from our head, not from our heart. Taylor (1991) highlights technical individualism and expansion of reason as by-products of social change such as urbanisation. Johnson saw with urbanisation the breakdown of Marae-based life, and was looking for a new means to carry a Maori voice (Bowler & Openshaw, 2006). Taylor notes that the inclusion of a minority culture tends to avoid the inherent power of its own moral ideals.

The descriptions of blind acceptance from the point of view of Maori were intended to be liberating for Maori. For example, Johnson wants to offer liberation to Maori from within the existing education framework by referencing many of cultural values within a school. Interpreting Maori participation in schools is tolerated as a special talent, not deserving of a special privilege in schools. Finally the social millieux that can be interpreted as a micro-society within a school is intended to provide insight into cultural relations.

In the discussion that follows, I argue that dogmatism ends up as liberalism. I evaluate the examples of blind acceptance as dogmatic controls that are already represented in schools as liberal. As such, they fail to meet Taylor's framework for an authentic self-dialogue. I suggest that locating a school within a school referred to here as E Tipu E Rea, might be an opportunity for authentic self-dialogue, but only if it is open to criticism.

Education needs to place a human dimension at the centre. Postman (1995) argues that schools need to transcend the current social concerns to become places where students form a unifying narrative for themselves.

Taylor (1991) describes authenticity as involving creativity, originality, and opposition to the rules of society. He contrasts this with a human dimension for authenticity that requires openness to horizons of significance to give a background to creativity, and self-definition from dialogue. He believes both sides need to be in tension with each other, rather than privileging one over the other as is more often the case.

Discussion

Western moral values predominate in state schools in New Zealand. Johnson (Department of Education, 1977) sets the inclusion of Maori values against a non-sectarian background in schools. He accepts the background of schools as originating from Judaeo-Christian traditions, forming the basis for Western moral values.

By locating a Maori dimension in state schools, it reduces an inherent cultural value for the liberal observer, even more so, when one considers the context from which it came. The Marae is a sacred place on which Maori have founded their values. Much of the protocol or Tikanga arises from the orientation of its believers on a spiritual notion of the world. For a Maori, "Kia Ora", a common greeting in New Zealand, is usually followed by a hongi, or a physical expression of our meeting on a spiritual level (Tate, 1990). At Mana College, formal exchanges to and from the school were always located on the school Marae. Although I participated in hongi, I could not "share my wairua" because I have no origin in Maori culture. In missing its deeper values, I reduce the essence of things Maori.

Including indigenous values in a school context reminds us of a dialogue between self and other. Bowler and Openshaw (2006) report that the inclusion of indigenous symbolism is consistent with the liberal theories of education for New Zealand in the first half of the 20th century. They believed that their inclusion would act as a possible panacea to modern social ills, something to esteem outside of the self. Freire (2004) in his popular book *Pedagogy of the oppressed* argues that education is a means of consciously shaping the

person and the society, which he called conscientization. He argues for an authentic relationship to exist between teacher and student. Freire wants to draw attention to the oppression from within the authentic dialogue of teacher and student. He believes it is possible for all students to recognise oppression within society, which leads to engagement with a struggle for liberation. It is just that some students do not experience oppression, or may want to seek a more individual path. Indigenous symbolism in schools therefore acts as a reminder of authenticity still needed to create a dialogue between self and other.

Maori need to give up their cultural values in order to be able to meet the demands of a school environment. As an indigenous culture that is continually shaped by the environment, it reflects values from within that environment, in order to be a culture that is alive and responsive. I have referred to my experience of locating a 'school within a school' called E Tipu E Rea at Mana College. This appears to be an option that allows a minority culture to be isolated, yet supported to flourish without the constraints of western culture, and still fits Johnson's vision of locating a spiritual dimension in a non-sectarian context. I am not arguing that bicultural agendas cannot be played out in schools, as Freire believes, but rather that the culture that lies behind the identity and values of Maori will have to be given up in order to be tolerated by other cultures in a post-modern school environment. There will not be an environment for Maori to remain alive and stimulated in schools, because Maori draw their values from another place.

Conclusion

Here I take each of the blind acceptances in turn and compare with the discussion points to show that even in a liberal education environment, there is no resolution.

I have presented the blind acceptance of things Maori as a form of social domination. I referred to Tocqueville who believed that any panacea to social ills was a form of domination that held pre-conceived assumptions. From a Maori viewpoint, a dimension was introduced to liberate Maori from social oppression, including education. This also has not produced a clear resolution.

Reflecting on participating in Marae-based protocol in my school, I discussed the reduction of my appreciation of things Maori. This was not Johnson's vision for a place where Maori values would nurture the talents of all students and teachers, regardless of ethnicity. The dominant oppressive paradigm presented by Freire seeks to authenticate the oppressed voice. I noted earlier that Maori students present an authentic dimension in their talents nurtured in school. But this is set against many other talents that students bring from their community. Finally, I described the vision of a school that tries to create a harmonious cultural environment that might offer students a perspective for the future. In return though, Maori will need to give up their cultural values to be tolerated amongst other cultures.

I have critiqued some blind acceptances of inclusion of a Maori dimension in schools. I have argued that from a liberal viewpoint, schools do not accept a Maori dimension. Taylor argues that a middle ground should be found, such that all students have an authentic self. I noted earlier that Taylor observes that the two sides of authenticity need to be in tension with each other. Taking each in turn, I suggest that one side is privileged over the other. Participating in Marae-based protocol offers a self-defining dialogue, as do Maori students presenting their talents at school. But they fail to be accepted as original. Reworking cultural tensions in a school setting involves construction as well as discovery, but was not open to horizons of significance.

Taylor (1991) argues for the moral stance of Maori to be asserted in order that students are engaged more authentically. He defines a moral idea as a picture of what we ought to desire for a better mode of life. I cited an example of a Maori dimension separated within a mainstream school, Mana College. While this was an attempt to authenticate a Maori voice within the school, I felt excluded as a teacher. It appeared not to be

open to criticism, or dialogue. I suggest that the moral stance of Maori needs to be asserted more fully within the whole school, while minimising the indigenous symbolism that is currently taken for granted.

References

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