



Some Implications of the Te Kotahitanga Model of Teacher Positioning

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ABSTRACT: *The Ministry of Education funded Te Kotahitanga project aims to improve the educational achievement of Māori students in mainstream secondary schools. However, it is contended that certain contradictions inherent in the original research project will limit its overall success. In particular, the implications of Te Kotahitanga's 'teacher positioning model' are discussed. Such a model offers and allocates teachers only a prescribed set of discourse positions. This provides a false choice for teachers between 'agency' and 'deficit theorising'. It is argued that alternative positions must be opened up for debate before Te Kotahitanga's critical potential can be realised.*

INTRODUCTION

The Te Kotahitanga research and professional development project needs little introduction to secondary teachers. The project, led by the Māori Education Research Institute at the School of Education, University of Waikato, aims to improve the educational achievement of Māori students in mainstream education. It is a well-established teacher professional development programme, funded by the Ministry of Education and now implemented in over 20 schools. The ongoing findings of the project are also available to teachers and the general public.

I am currently a teacher participant in the Te Kotahitanga professional development programme, and this has led me to consider the project as a whole. Te Kotahitanga is something of a *fait accompli* in New Zealand secondary education; its critics are regarded as, at best, misguided. However, I still think it is worth re-exploring the conclusions drawn from the original research (Bishop, Berryman, Tiakiwai & Richardson, 2003). In my opinion, although Te Kotahitanga's objectives are clearly intended to benefit Māori student achievement, certain aspects of the project are contradictory and will limit these intended benefits. I want here to outline one aspect of the Te Kotahitanga project which has problematic implications for teachers: its model of teacher positioning.

INITIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE TEACHER POSITIONING MODEL

There is, at a general level, a high degree of fit between the objectives of Te Kotahitanga (to raise the educational achievement of Māori students) and those of teachers. The importance of teacher-student relationships is another point of general agreement. Most teachers would endorse the idea that teacher-student

relationships have a major influence on Māori student achievement. Nonetheless, as a participant in the Te Kotahitanga professional development programme, one quickly becomes aware that this immediately obvious proposition – that teachers are agents of change for Māori student achievement – is used in a very specific way. It is one term of a binary model which defines this ‘agentic’ position by contrasting it with ‘non-agentic’ positions (which collectively take the alternative spot). Both terms have been defined in a strictly relational context, so that according to this model, only one or the other position is actually tenable.

‘Non-agentic’ positions, as defined in the Te Kotahitanga report, are those in which teachers locate the problems of Māori educational achievement with the students themselves, or their families or cultural background. ‘Non-agentic’ positions are also termed ‘deficit theories’, in that they blame the victims and attribute these problems to ‘some deficiency at best, a pathology at worst’ (p.6).

For teachers, even a cursory glance at this seems to necessitate a fairly simple choice in which the only position to take is an ‘agentic’ one. However, there is a significant corollary. Teachers are not only agents of change: they are, to all intents and purposes, the *sole* agents of change. The fact that this position is about as nuanced as a sledgehammer seems to have escaped much notice amidst the flurry to promote it. To explore this further, we need to look at the theory upon which it is based, and the way in which this is used to create both an ideal ‘agentic’ teacher and his or her counterpart: the ‘deficit theoriser’.

THE CONTEXT OF TE KOTAHITANGA THEORY

Certain aspects of Te Kotahitanga theory have been emphasised in the teacher professional development programme. However, the theoretical basis of the Te Kotahitanga project can be seen most fully in the context of the 2003 report. Just what is this theoretical position and how does it inform the project as a whole?

Te Kotahitanga’s theoretical perspective is outlined in the report’s literature review. This begins by noting the disparities between the overall academic achievement of Māori and non-Māori students. It goes on to state that attempts to address these disparities have been precluded by the pattern of power imbalances in which New Zealand educational policy and practices operate. These power imbalances, which have developed historically as a result of colonialism in New Zealand, favour cultural deficit explanations of Māori student achievement. Together with monocultural classroom practices, cultural deficit explanations manifest and perpetuate the ‘ongoing colonising project’ of dominance and subordination (pp.5-6).

So far, this is a fairly clear statement. The authors locate themselves firmly within a critical and post-colonialist theoretical perspective, as indeed one might expect. It should be noted that at this point in the model, the prime mover, as far as academic disparities are concerned, appears to be structural or systemic: the pattern of power imbalances inherent in the education system as a result of its colonialist origins. Although monocultural classroom practices are also mentioned, their explanatory power is harnessed to the patterns of dominance and subordination which the education system reflects.

Things take a markedly different turn when the authors introduce their classification of deficit theorising. Three different types of deficit theories (which

produce deficit explanations) are distinguished: genetic deficit theories, cultural deficit theories, and theories which 'refine' cultural deficit explanations (p.6). The first two of these can certainly be considered deficit theories by any standard. Theories which attempt to link academic achievement with innate genetic characteristics, or do the same thing for cultural characteristics, can only account for academic disparity by way of a deficit explanation. However, in the third case, the links to deficit theory are much less clear cut; in fact the forging of these links substantially weakens the explanatory power of Te Kotahitanga's own theoretical model.

The authors give several examples of the use of theories which they suggest refine cultural deficit explanations. In each case, the 'deficit theorising' consists of linking socio-economic factors to disparities in Māori educational achievement. As far as the Te Kotahitanga report is concerned, this is the same thing as 'conflating socio-economic status with culture'; thereby persisting in the notion that limited educational or material resources are the result of a cultural deficiency. In that case, these authors can be lumped in with more obvious deficit theorists: 'These theories collectively can be labelled "deficit theories" in that they ... collectively see the locus of the problem as either lack of inherent ability, lack of cultural appropriateness or limited resources ...' (p.6).

However, there is a major difficulty with this interpretation. This stems from the concept of culture which is utilised here. What does it include and what should it leave out? If it should not be conflated with socio-economic status, exactly what is its domain? As culture features so strongly in the overall project, it would seem worthwhile to explore its value as a heuristic concept for the Te Kotahitanga theoretical model.

A working definition of culture is given in the report:

Culture is what holds a community together, giving a common framework of meaning. It includes how people communicate with each other, how we make decisions, how we structure our families and who we think are important. It expresses our values towards land and time and our attitudes towards work and play, good and evil, reward and punishment. Culture is preserved in language, symbols and customs and celebrated in art, music, drama, literature, religion and social gatherings. It constitutes the collective heritage, which will be handed down to future generations.

(p.33)

In this definition, culture refers to a domain of values, customs, and traditions which are passed down and maintained as the collective identity of a group of people. Although this is unremarkable in so far as it accords with a general use of the term, it also indicates a definite movement away from the critical theoretical model utilised in the early part of the report, and towards an atemporal model of cultural unity. This is by no means a side issue, but has real significance for Te Kotahitanga's argument. Despite having emphasised the historical process of colonialism, the report now states that socio-economic status and culture are separate issues. This allows an ahistorical version of culture – one which is defined without reference to colonialism – to

predominate. 'Culture' now stands in for history – and Te Kotahitanga undercuts its own critical perspective.

This shift has major implications. Te Kotahitanga's theoretical model, from the outset, relates educational outcomes to wider structural factors, which stem from the implementation and hegemony of colonial systems and ideology in New Zealand. The report links structural factors to a historical process of cultural domination and control, which has a specific history and which has power over classroom interactions (p.5). This theoretical perspective implies a critique of culture from the point of view of restoring its social and historical context. But instead, the theory now shifts away from critique and towards a concept of culture which is detached from its social context, to the point where any link to socio-economic status is seen as deficit theorising.

However, models which link culture, class and colonialism are not deficit theorising. Quite the opposite: they utilise a historical view of culture which does not abstract it from daily life and labour. Culture cannot be divorced from material resources, but must be seen in terms of the historical access of people to them. By contrast, the concept of culture utilised by Te Kotahitanga can be separated from employment, income, health and education in real time and space; referring instead only to ideas and values about these things. This allows a superficial notion of cultural identity to be fostered, while at the same time allowing real structures of inequality to remain uncontested.

Nonetheless, this inconsistent position informs every aspect of the report. It thus has the effect of restricting both Te Kotahitanga's explanatory force and its potential for addressing power imbalances. It also has important implications for the analysis of the research data and the subsequent development of the teacher positioning model.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE TEACHER POSITIONING MODEL

The Te Kotahitanga research produced data from a process of 'collaborative storytelling'. Participant interviews (with Māori students, their parents, teachers and principals) were used to produce a narrative of group experience, thus allowing their own representation of their experiences – rather than that of the researchers – to be heard. Analysis of these narratives was then used to identify the main influences on educational achievement according to the different groups (pp.26-35).

One of these narratives – the narrative of Māori students – has been explicitly privileged by the research. The understandings of Māori students thus 'formed the basis of the identification of major influences on Māori students' educational achievement and subsequent intervention strategies ...' (p.35). In terms of the Te Kotahitanga commitment to a Kaupapa Māori research paradigm, in which power imbalances are addressed through Māori aspirations, preferences and perspectives (p.11), this is entirely valid. Nonetheless, these understandings do not present themselves fully formed, but must be seen through the lens of Te Kotahitanga analysis.

The analysis of the narratives is premised on the assumption that there are three 'discourse positions' which participants make use of to identify the influences on Māori students' educational achievement. This positioning model is drawn from the original theory, and so it is unsurprising that the three positions are: discourses of the child and their home, discourses of school

structure and discourses of relationships and classroom interaction patterns (p.41). Accordingly, the first two of these are classified as 'non-agentic'; the third as 'agentic'.

Even if taking it as read that these positions have been identified as the only ones available – there is still the question of how they are linked with the narratives. The analytical procedure for this is stated in the report:

An analytical model that identifies three main discourses that are commonly used to explain Māori students' educational achievement [was identified]. For each of the participating groups, the model was used to identify the frequency of factors that they see affecting Māori students' educational achievement from within each of the three main discourses ... The narratives of each group of participants are then further analysed to identify some common themes which are in turn illustrated by quotes taken from the narratives. Finally, the themes and frequencies are related so as to produce some overall conclusions and generalisations.

(p.35)

In other words, if the analytical model derives from the original theoretical perspective, the coding of the narratives will reflect this. The model comes first, rather than the narratives themselves. Furthermore, narratives were coded in terms of 'what the experience means to the speakers', rather than the researchers (p.35). For example, references to the curriculum were coded as part of the discourse of relationships for the students; for the teachers as part of the discourse of structures. This method of analysis assumes, firstly, that the researchers were fully able to identify the meaning of any experience to the various participants. More significantly, it also assumes that there is an *a priori* relationship between participant group and discourse position. This is implicit in coding all references to, say, the curriculum, in terms of a bloc of discourse positions that go 'all the way down': teachers to one side, Māori students to the other. The result of this analysis will also be, at least in its underlying themes, predetermined.

A quick look at the discourse analysis would appear to bear this out. As one might predict, students identify the major influences on their educational achievement as being the relationship they have with their teachers. The principals identify the main influences as 'mostly' being about teacher-student relationships, as do the parents. The teachers, on the other hand, identify as the major influences on Māori student achievement 'mostly issues associated with the perceived deficits of the Māori child and their home' (pp.42-82). This leads directly to a number of generalisations about teacher positionings, in which teachers are seen to problematise Māori student achievement, locate the source of these problems outside of their own interaction with Māori students, and feel there is little they can do to bring about change, thus 'abrogating responsibility for effecting change because the causes of the problem are outside the area of teacher agency' (p.81). The coding of the data in line with a predetermined analytic admits only a prescribed set of conclusions about teachers.

CONCLUSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHERS

The straw man of deficit theorising has been used to create a scenario in which an 'agentic' position becomes, by default, the only reasonable position available for teachers to take up. This effects a merger of the politically correct with both the radical and the frankly bewildered which leaves no-one out in the cold: it would be tantamount to being a paid up members of Deficit Theorisers Inc. to disagree with the innocuous position that teachers are agents of change for Māori students.

However, there is actually a large gap between 'deficit theorising' and 'agency', which is already populated by a number of alternatives to these two discourse positions. In the Te Kotahitanga model, any chance of debating these alternatives is lost in the provision of a false 'choice' and the conclusions drawn from this:

Unless these positionings by teachers are addressed first, little change can occur. In other words, it is teachers positioning themselves in non-agentic positions through their deficit theorising that is a major influence on Māori children's academic and other achievement. This positioning creates feelings of helplessness among teachers, feelings of inability to bring about effective change, and results in low expectations of Māori students' achievement. Low expectation of Māori students' achievement in turn creates a self-fulfilling prophecy of failure and low achievement levels. However, in no way should this be seen as reversal of 'blaming the students' to 'blaming the teachers'. Given the history of colonialism in this country and the preponderance of deficit theorising among educational researchers and theorists ... such positionings on the part of teachers is understandable. Rather than being an attempt to blame teachers, this analysis is an attempt to locate teacher theorising within the wider historical context of inter-cultural relationship in New Zealand ...'

(p.81)

There are three separate difficulties with this conclusion. The first is in the determination of cause and effect (positionings by teachers are the drivers of change – whether for good or ill). The second is the semantic leap from 'deficit theorising is a major influence on' to 'this position creates' Māori student failure. The third is that such a resounding indictment of teacher positioning is tempered by a weak return to a critical perspective, in which teachers can not be 'blamed' for such positioning, given their locus within the overall history of colonialism in New Zealand, and the sorry state of educational research. The problem with this shift is that teachers are now (at one and the same moment) both the underlying cause of student failure and mere lackeys of the colonialist project. Teachers function as place-holders for a global system but are also agentic (to a quite staggering degree) within this system. This bursts the bounds of both critical theory and Kaupapa Māori research. It is an argument

which requires special pleading to sustain. Yet the entire Te Kotahitanga project rests upon this proposition.

The need for teachers to take a critical approach to the Te Kotahitanga project is a matter of some urgency. A critical stance is not the same thing as deficit theorising. What it calls for is an awareness of the overall context of Māori student achievement – and a theoretical approach which takes into account, rather than rules out, the historical links between culture, ethnicity, class and the education system. In the end, an ‘agentic’ position will have little real effect on achievement if the significance of these links is not understood.

REFERENCES

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