



Critical Consciousness, Te Tiriti o Waitangi and Public Health Education

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Aotearoa New Zealand is experiencing a significant shift in political discourse surrounding Te Tiriti o Waitangi. The current government, under the guise of ending 'race-based' policies and reducing bureaucracy, is proposing changes that threaten to erode the rights and protections of tāngata whenua [Indigenous people of the land]. While the coalition government asserts its commitment to improving outcomes for all New Zealanders, the changes represent a direct assault on Māori that will disproportionately and negatively impact Māori communities. In this political climate, the role of education becomes even more critical. As educators in public health, our commitment to uphold the provisions and principles of Te Tiriti o Waitangi and to foster understanding is unwavering and more pressing than ever. We argue that embedding Te Tiriti o Waitangi meaningfully throughout our curriculum is not just beneficial but essential. By doing so, we not only honour our commitment to Te Tiriti o Waitangi but also equip our students – the future public health workforce and policymakers – with the critical awareness and cultural competence necessary to address health inequities, partner with Māori communities and champion and advocate for Māori health aspirations. Our experiences in teaching Te Tiriti o Waitangi within undergraduate and postgraduate public health courses have shown that when students engage deeply with Te Tiriti, it leads to transformative learning experiences. These experiences go beyond the mere acquisition of facts; they foster a fundamental shift in perspective that is crucial for creating a more equitable health system. In the face of policy changes that undermine the status of Te Tiriti o Waitangi, learning and teaching become a powerful tool for preserving and advancing its principles.

In Aotearoa New Zealand, the integration of Te Tiriti o Waitangi into public health education is essential. As educators in public health, we recognise that our role extends beyond imparting knowledge. It involves developing a deep understanding of the cultural, historical and social contexts that shape health outcomes in our country. Our approach to teaching Te Tiriti o Waitangi in our curricula aligns with the recognition that health curricula must be decolonised and Indigenised. We work to embed mātauranga Māori [knowledge], te reo Māori

[language] and tikanga Māori [customs] throughout our programmes, rather than treating them as separate or additional components. This approach reflects our understanding of Te Tiriti o Waitangi as a living document that is central to addressing persistent health inequities and promoting Māori health aspirations.

The relevance of Te Tiriti o Waitangi to health cannot be overstated. The health workforce must be critically aware of the ongoing effects of colonisation and competent in applying Te Tiriti provisions and principles in their work. This includes understanding the social determinants of health through a Te Tiriti o Waitangi lens and being able to partner meaningfully with Māori. Teaching Te Tiriti o Waitangi requires ongoing reflection, relationship-building and a commitment to privileging Māori voices and knowledge. It also demands that we, as educators, continuously develop our own critical Te Tiriti analysis. The goal is not just to impart knowledge but to offer transformative learning experiences for students.

As we reflect on our experiences and journeys with students, a clear pattern emerges: what may begin as a factual learning exercise often culminates in a profound shift in perspectives and understandings. Initially, many students approach the topic of Te Tiriti o Waitangi with limited knowledge. Some express surprise at the depth of what they did not know, despite having learned about Te Tiriti in previous educational settings. This initial gap in knowledge is not uncommon and sets the stage for significant learning and growth. As students dive deeper into the course material, they begin to connect Te Tiriti o Waitangi to broader issues of public health and social inequities. This connection between Te Tiriti o Waitangi and health inequities represents a key moment of insight for many, leading to a newfound appreciation for the relevance of Te Tiriti o Waitangi to contemporary health challenges.

The emotional impact of this learning has also been evident in students' reflections. Terms like 'eye-opening,' 'transformative,' and 'sad' or 'mad' are frequent, indicating that this is not just an intellectual exercise but an emotionally engaging process. This engagement of both hearts and minds often leads to a deeper, more personal connection with Te Tiriti o Waitangi. Importantly, many students report that this learning has fundamentally changed how they view health issues and Aotearoa New Zealand society as a whole. The transformative nature of this learning is particularly evident in how students begin to critically examine their own contexts and biases. Many report broadening their perspectives and developing a more nuanced understanding of the complexities surrounding Te Tiriti o Waitangi and public health. This critical self-reflection is a crucial step in developing culturally responsive public health practitioners.

This shift in perspective is often accompanied by a desire to take action. Students frequently express a renewed motivation to address health inequities and advocate for Māori health. Many see this as the beginning of a longer journey of learning and application that will continue throughout their professional and personal lives. When students are given the opportunity to engage deeply and critically with Te Tiriti o Waitangi, they are inspired and motivated to continue their personal growth and development in the field of public health.

However, it's important to acknowledge that some students and educational institutions may initially approach Te Tiriti o Waitangi with a 'box-ticking' mentality, believing that a single session or course can sufficiently prepare them to be competent in understanding and applying Te Tiriti o Waitangi

to their field of work. We strongly challenge this superficial approach. Understanding Te Tiriti o Waitangi and its implications for public health goes far beyond a cursory engagement. It requires a deep, sustained commitment to learning, reflection, and practice. True competence in this area cannot be achieved by merely 'ticking a box'; it demands ongoing, critical engagement that permeates all aspects of education and practice in public health.

The process of conscientisation in public health education, particularly regarding Te Tiriti o Waitangi, is crucial for preparing graduates to address systemic inequities. This process of conscientisation involves a deep understanding of power dynamics, structural inequities, and the ongoing impacts of colonisation on health outcomes. Our approach to fostering this critical consciousness is multifaceted. First, we encourage students to examine their own contexts and perspectives critically. This self-reflection is often uncomfortable but necessary for growth. We also focus on helping students understand the systemic nature of health inequities. By connecting significant events and understandings – from He Whakaputanga and the texts, provisions and principles of Te Tiriti o Waitangi, to Waitangi Tribunal reports, the social determinants of health, and Māori public health approaches – students begin to see the complex web of factors influencing Māori health. This understanding is crucial for developing the sustained commitment needed to address these issues. We emphasise the importance of ongoing reflection and engagement, as critical consciousness is not achieved through a single lecture, assessment or workshop; it requires a continuous commitment to learning and reflection. This ongoing dedication is a crucial part of developing culturally responsive public health practitioners.

Implementing a Te Tiriti-centred approach to public health education is not without its challenges. Some students may initially resist or feel uncomfortable engaging with content that challenges their existing understandings. Ensuring that all educators are adequately prepared to teach evolving understandings of Te Tiriti o Waitangi requires ongoing professional development, resources and support. However, these challenges also present opportunities. The discomfort that some students experience can be a catalyst for profound learning and growth. The process of continually improving our curricula, pedagogical approaches, and critical Te Tiriti analysis offers vast opportunities. By embracing complexity and developing critical thinking skills, we can prepare students not just for the current public health landscape but for emerging challenges. As we continue to embed Te Tiriti o Waitangi into our public health curricula, we do so with a sense of hope and purpose. Our students' journeys from knowledge to understanding to action embody the promise of a future where the aspirations of Te Tiriti o Waitangi are realised.

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