

# Challenging Epistemic Racism: Incorporating Māori Knowledge into the Aotearoa New Zealand Education System

Caitlin Swan

*Te Rāngai Ako me te Hauora - College of Education, Health and Human Development, University of Canterbury, New Zealand*

## Abstract

The Aotearoa New Zealand education system is based largely on Western knowledge, and, consequently, all other epistemologies are silenced, which results in epistemic racism. Epistemic racism disregards certain peoples' capacity to produce or learn knowledge, denying their full humanity. To challenge this dehumanisation, researchers argue that Indigenous Māori epistemologies need to be incorporated into the education system as equally valid to Western knowledge. Although little research has been done in this area, several frameworks and initiatives have been developed to integrate Indigenous and Western knowledge. They identify some possible supporting factors including community involvement and the availability of Indigenous knowledge resources. Several challenges are also identified, including how to remove the marginalisation from one knowledge system without subordinating another. Epistemic racism is a complex problem that will require the transformation of our education system. However, the first step is to challenge one's ideas about what counts as valid knowledge.

**Keywords:** *Epistemic racism, Māori knowledge, Indigenous knowledge, knowledge diversity*



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## Introduction

Diversity is increasingly emphasised in 21st century education (Bolstad, Gilbert, McDowall, Bull, Boyd, & Hipkins, 2012). However, Bolstad et al. (2012) have found that this diversity is often only seen in cultural terms. Diversity of knowledge is almost non-existent in Aotearoa New Zealand schools. Instead, our education system is dominated by Western knowledge that positions all other knowledges, including Indigenous Māori epistemologies, as lesser, resulting in epistemic racism and dehumanisation (Cooper, 2012). However, Māori are guaranteed the protection of their knowledge as a taonga (treasure) under The Treaty of Waitangi (Orange, 2004). It is therefore essential that we challenge epistemic racism by positioning Māori epistemologies as equally valid to Western knowledge in the Aotearoa New Zealand education system (Macfarlane, Macfarlane, & Gillon, 2015). Until this is accomplished many Māori students will experience dehumanisation during schooling. This literature review begins by discussing epistemic racism, and then examines several frameworks and initiatives for integrating Indigenous and Western knowledge. The problem, Cooper (2007) asserts, is to incorporate Māori epistemologies into education in a way that truly challenges their current marginalisation.

## Epistemic Racism

In Aotearoa New Zealand, contemporary education is informed largely by the dominant Western knowledge,

resulting in a Eurocentric education system that has silenced Māori epistemologies (Macfarlane et al., 2015). This epistemic domination began with the colonisation of this country and has resulted in epistemic blindness towards Māori and other non-Western knowledges (Andreotti, Ahenakew, & Cooper, 2011; Harrison, 2005). Santos (as cited in Andreotti et al., 2011) calls this 'abyssal thinking' where social reality is classified as on either 'this side' or 'the other side of the abyssal line' (p. 41). The segregation is to such an extent that "the other side of the line" (Andreotti et al., 2011, p. 41) ceases as reality, becoming non-existent. Thus, Western knowledge is positioned as truth on "this side of the abyssal line" (p. 41) while any epistemologies that do not meet Western criterion are banished to 'the other side' where they are reduced to 'false' knowledge, becoming merely opinions or beliefs (Andreotti et al., 2011). Consequently, a vast range of non-Western epistemologies are neglected and thus destroyed. As knowledge on "the other side of the abyssal line" (p. 41) is reduced to 'false'; not-knowledge, Western epistemologies become the sole source of knowledge, and are thus positioned as universal and culturally neutral (Andreotti et al., 2011).

Maldonado-Torres (2004) argues that positioning non-Western epistemologies as 'false' knowledge results in epistemic racism. "Epistemic racism disregards the epistemic capacity of certain groups of people. It may be based on metaphysics or ontology but its results are nonetheless the same: the evasion of the recognition of others as fully human beings" (Maldonado-Torres, 2004, p. 34). The ability to learn

or create knowledge is characteristic of all humans. Therefore, denying someone's capacity to learn or produce knowledge, denies their full humanity. Thus, Westerners are positioned as normative, possessors of knowledge while everyone else is positioned as inferior possessors of culture (Battiste, 2002; Cooper, 2012). This epistemic racism is perpetuated in the Aotearoa New Zealand education system and many students find themselves positioned as inferior possessors of culture (Cooper, 2012). Gordon (2000) argues that this can result in double consciousness where one sees oneself through the perspective of the colonised and the coloniser. The tension of sustaining these conflicting views causes uncertainty towards one's self-worth (Gordon, 1995). Therefore, it is likely that Māori and other non-Western learners will begin to believe the societal perception that they are deficit learners, who lack epistemic capacity, an image that harms their success (Turner, Rubie-Davies, & Webber, 2015). Battiste (2002) argues that to counter epistemic racism, the challenge is to create an education system that respects the epistemologies and pedagogies of both Indigenous and Western cultures. This challenge calls for substantial rethinking of education.

## Inclusion of Indigenous Epistemologies in Education

Although it is rare, some schools in Aotearoa New Zealand are working to incorporate Indigenous knowledge into their curriculum. Harrison (2005) discusses the incorporation of Waikato-Tainui epistemologies into Te Wharekura o Rakaumangamanga, focusing on their development of a Year 13 course based solely on Waikato-Tainui knowledge. Rakaumangamanga is a decile one, Māori-language immersion school for students in Year 1 to Year 13. It is located in Huntly and many of its students are descendants of the Waikato-Tainui tribe. Two researchers (Harrison and Papa) have prior relationships with the school, Papa being a history teacher in their secondary unit. Their discussion, in collaboration with the school's Runanga, is based on prior research as well as interviews with staff and some former students. According to Harrison (2005), when Rakaumangamanga was established, the school's focus was on revitalising Māori language. Limited resources meant that their initial emphasis was on translating English resources, resulting in a curriculum that was, primarily, a translation of the mainstream, Western-dominated curriculum. According to Cooper (2007), this translated curriculum is common throughout Māori-language immersion schools, and has led to Māori epistemologies being positioned in the curriculum, books and through what is said and unsaid as 'just stories' compared to the 'truth' of Western knowledge.

According to Harrison (2005), Rakaumangamanga staff, with the support of their community, began incorporating Waikato-Tainui epistemologies into the curriculum once confident in the school's Māori language instruction. They were fortunate that many Tainui tribal histories have been recorded over the years, providing a wide range of resources. Elders also visit the school to share their knowledge and Rakaumangamanga participates in tribal events at the local Waahi Marae (an important site of the King Movement) (Harrison, 2005). Harrison (2005) reports that the introduction of the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) provided an opportunity for the school to align more

tribal epistemologies with the achievement standards and, in 2003, Rakaumangamanga developed a Year 13 NCEA course in Waikato-Tainui knowledge. Harrison (2005) argues that, while the school's incorporation of Waikato-Tainui epistemologies is unique, it is applicable to other schools with Waikato-Tainui students. They maintain, however, that urban schools will need to incorporate knowledge from multiple tribes to support their diverse students. Tribal epistemologies are clearly positioned as valid knowledge in Rakaumangamanga's Year 13 course. However, it is unclear from Harrison's (2005) research whether the marginalisation of Māori epistemologies is fully challenged in the school's other subjects. The Alaska Native Knowledge Network (ANKN) (as cited in Barnhardt, 2008) contends that it is by shifting from teaching Indigenous knowledge as a separate subject to teaching through Indigenous epistemologies that will challenge epistemic racism. However, Rakaumangamanga's efforts represent a first step towards repositioning Māori knowledge as worthwhile.

Two frameworks for integrating Māori and Western epistemologies are presented by Macfarlane et al. (2015). They argue for the need to create "an interdependent and innovative theoretical space where the two streams of knowledge are able to blend and interact" (Macfarlane et al., 2015, p. 52), thus promoting greater sociocultural understanding and improved outcomes for Māori. They use the analogy of a braided river, where the two separate streams of Western and Māori epistemologies converge to create new knowledge. The first framework, *Tō tātou waka* (Our canoe), requires educators to increase their cultural competency by learning about the Māori world (Macfarlane et al., 2015). Indigenous socialisation patterns and values are then investigated which, Macfarlane et al. (2015) argue, signals the importance of investigating Māori knowledge and cultural rationale. Macfarlane, Blampied and Macfarlane (2011) state that this information should be sought from multiple sources including kaumātua (elders) and kaitakawaetanga (professional consultants). The framework also investigates Western sciences and practice (Macfarlane et al., 2015). Thus, the *Tō tātou waka* framework 'blends' various knowledges together, both oral and written, Māori and Western, to guide holistic, evidence-based practice (Macfarlane et al., 2011).

Macfarlane et al.'s (2015) second framework, *He awa whiria* (braided river), "attempts to interrogate and integrate Western science and Indigenous Māori models of programme development and evaluation" (p. 64). In this framework, the two knowledge streams are seen as distinct (Ministry of Social Development, 2011). However, knowledge and evaluation methodologies from one stream can be applied to the other. The assumption is that when evidence from both streams is accepted into the developed programme, its efficacy will also be accepted. Macfarlane et al. (2015) argue that what is required for the success of either framework is a shift in mindset, where educators are willing to challenge their worldview. They assert that, while Western knowledge would not be lessened by these frameworks, Māori knowledge would also become positioned at the centre, free from epistemic racism. Both frameworks aim to support educators to integrate Māori epistemologies into their practice. They do not necessarily provide a model for an epistemically diverse

education system; however, they may be beneficial in developing that model.

Barnhardt (2008) describes an education restoration initiative in Alaska that also uses a converging streams metaphor to incorporate Indigenous knowledge into education. The Alaska Rural Systemic Initiative (AKRSI) was established in 1995, and while the context does differ to Aotearoa New Zealand, the initiative still offers valuable insights. The AKRSI believes that “[b]y shifting the focus in the curriculum from teaching/learning about cultural heritage as another subject to teaching/learning through the local culture as a foundation for all education, it is intended that all forms of knowledge, ways of knowing and worldviews be recognized as equally valid, adaptable and complementary to one another in mutually beneficial ways.” (ANKN as cited in Barnhardt, 2008, p. 132). To achieve this goal, the AKRSI has developed many diverse initiatives such as ‘Elders and Cultural Camps’ and the ANKN. ‘Elders and Cultural Camps’ involve students immersing themselves in a traditional camp environment with the instruction and guidance of elders (Barnhardt, 2008). Barnhardt (2008) argues that, when these camps are positioned as a central aspect of the school curriculum rather than an add-on as is commonly done, they become unique experiences with no textbook equivalent. Students are “able to immerse themselves in a new cultural milieu in a nonthreatening and guided fashion that allows them to set aside their own predispositions long enough to begin to see the world through other peoples’ eyes” (Barnhardt, 2008, p. 116).

Incorporating Indigenous knowledge into the curriculum, Barnhardt (2008) argues, calls for substantial rethinking, not only about curriculum content, but also how, when, where and who delivers it. With this in mind, the ANKN was established to catalogue the Native knowledge system to increase its availability to schools as well as to relax the structure of Western epistemologies to create space for local knowledge. The ANKN has done so by developing curriculum and pedagogical resources which are shared via a website and various publications (Barnhardt, 2008). Barnhardt (2008) argues that these readily available resources have given teachers the impetus to integrate Indigenous knowledge into their curriculum, and nearly 40,000 different people access the website each month. The goal of these AKRSI initiatives is to demonstrate that, by understanding the interactions of Western and Indigenous knowledges, the learning opportunities increase in depth and breadth for all students. According to Barnhardt (2008), while there is still a long way to go to achieve these goals, in the past decade, the academic performance of students in participating schools has increased, showing the efficacy of an education system grounded in local Indigenous knowledge. While these initiatives are based in Alaska, their success at integrating Indigenous epistemologies into the education system suggests they could provide a valuable model for similar initiatives in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Macfarlane et al. (2015) and Barnhardt (2008) both present frameworks that focus on blending Western and Indigenous epistemologies with the aim of challenging existing epistemic racism. However, the language they use to discuss these knowledges is inconsistent, occasionally positioning Indigenous knowledges as ‘cultural’ or ‘traditional’,

perpetuating abyssal thinking. As discussed above, since colonisation, Westerners have been positioned as normative possessors of knowledge and civilization who are inherently superior to those ‘others’ who possess culture and beliefs (Battiste, 2002). This binary of ‘true’ scientific knowledge and ‘lesser’ cultural knowledge is reflected in some of Macfarlane et al.’s (2015) language, particularly in relation to the *Tō tātou waka* framework which is defined as “a blending of clinical and cultural streams” (p. 62). Battiste (2002) argues that, if seen as knowledge, Indigenous epistemologies are often defined as ‘traditional knowledge’ which implies an old body of data that is relatively unchanged from generation to generation or as ‘local knowledge’ which positions Indigenous epistemologies merely as reliable data that modern (Western) science can use. Barnhardt (2008) utilises both the terms “traditional knowledge” (p. 131) and “local knowledge” (p. 117) in his work, referencing these ideas. Through this conflicting use of language, Barnhardt (2008) and Macfarlane et al. (2015) both inadvertently perpetuate the unequal positioning of knowledge which results in epistemic racism, despite their dual aims to remove prejudice against Indigenous knowledges.

A different approach to incorporating Indigenous epistemologies in education, is proposed by Andreotti et al. (2011). They discuss the inclusion of diverse knowledges in higher education, presenting a model of ‘epistemological pluralism’ which is informed by Santos’ (as cited by Andreotti et al., 2011) concept of an ‘ecology of knowledges’. This ‘ecology of knowledges’ is based on recognising the existence of multiple, diverse knowledges that are both autonomous and interconnected. Santos (as cited in Andreotti et al., 2011) argues that “[s]ince no single type of knowledge can account for all possible interventions in the world, all of them are incomplete in different ways [hence] each knowledge is both insufficient and inter-dependent on other knowledges” (p. 43). Thus, the ‘ecology of knowledges’ results in continual questioning and partial answers, providing a broader idea of what we know and do not know, but also an awareness that what is unknown by us may be known by others (Andreotti et al., 2011). Epistemological pluralism is necessary in an ‘ecology of knowledges’ and emphasises that each knowledge system is dynamic, interdependent and incomplete (Andreotti et al., 2011). Therefore, within this model, all knowledges are positioned as equally valid within their respective contexts (Cooper, 2007).

Andreotti et al. (2011) discuss several different models informed by Indigenous knowledges that support epistemological pluralism. One – informed by Māori epistemologies – is based on the metaphor of weaving a fishing net. Here, “ontologies are fishing grounds, epistemologies are fishing nets and the fish is the appropriate knowledge that will serve as nourishment for one’s community” (Andreotti et al., 2011, p. 47). To weave a functional fishing net, one needs relevant knowledge in various areas, including the diverse fishing grounds, necessary equipment and weather. One must also know what types of fish will fulfil the needs of one’s community. In other words, one must understand each knowledge as a system, their respective contexts, how they interact and how they are relevant and appropriate for one’s community. This metaphor describes epistemological pluralism in terms of the cross-fertilisation and combination of diverse fishing grounds (Andreotti et al., 2011). While this

framework challenges abyssal thinking and the epistemic racism it engenders, there remain many challenges in enacting it. Andreotti et al. (2011) identify several challenges including: translating Indigenous epistemologies into another language without changing their nature; identifying whose knowledge should be favoured in which context; incorporating Indigenous knowledge into an education system designed for a different knowledge system without institutionalising it; and finally, challenging epistemic racism without creating new abyssal divides in our society.

## Conclusion

Little research has been conducted on epistemic racism or how to challenge it. However, the frameworks and initiatives reviewed here do identify several factors that support the inclusion of Indigenous epistemologies as valid knowledge in education. Understanding Indigenous knowledge was naturally identified as essential by all researchers. Andreotti et al. (2011) take this further, and argue that not just the content of Indigenous knowledge should be understood, but that the knowledge should be understood as a system as well. To be able to appropriately convey this knowledge, Andreotti et al. (2011), Barnhardt (2008) and Battiste (2002) argue that knowledge of Indigenous pedagogies is also required. Harrison (2005) in Aotearoa New Zealand and Barnhardt (2008) in Alaska found that resources on Indigenous knowledges were readily available in their respective contexts, and both attribute this as supportive to the success of the initiatives they studied. The Indigenous community, particularly elders, were also seen as an important source of knowledge and pedagogy by Harrison (2005), Barnhardt (2008) and Macfarlane et al. (2015). While these studies identified these factors as supportive, their lack conversely becomes detrimental to the successful positioning of Indigenous epistemologies as equally valid to Western knowledge.

Epistemic racism has become embedded in the Aotearoa New Zealand education system and in our thinking. It is essential that we work to challenge this dehumanisation by repositioning Māori epistemologies as worthwhile knowledge. However, the difficulty of doing so can be seen in the common positioning of Māori knowledge as just 'stories' in Māori immersion schools and in the terms Macfarlane et al. (2015) and Barnhardt (2008) occasionally use to discuss Indigenous epistemologies, terms that situate the knowledge as lesser, outdated or merely data to be analysed by Western science. Several questions will also need to be resolved, including: How can Māori knowledge, with its particular language, pedagogies and institutions be translated and incorporated into an institution designed for a different language, pedagogy and knowledge system? And, how can the marginalisation of Māori knowledge be challenged without causing other knowledges to be subordinated? The consensus is that challenging epistemic racism will require a transformation of our education system, but what form will that transformation take? Further research will need to be done to address these

issues and create an epistemically diverse curriculum as well as on the respective knowledge systems themselves, as is being done in Alaska by the ANKN. Challenging epistemic racism will be a complex and gradual process, but a first step that all educators can take is to challenge one's assumptions about what counts as valid knowledge.

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