

Underachievement of Māori and Pasifika learners and culturally responsive assessment

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Abstract

Māori and Pasifika students have historically made up a large number of those ākongā that underachieve within formal education in New Zealand. The gap in achievement between Māori, Pasifika and other ethnicities identified in Aotearoa is alarming and consideration of current assessment practice is necessary. This article explores the possible reasons for this disparity in achievement, problematising the practice of standardised testing, the measurement of 'success', and what cultural bodies of knowledge are valued in the development of assessment and the classroom environment. Further this article seeks to demonstrate how certain culturally responsive frameworks of teaching and learning, such as more effective use of formative assessment, can be implemented to encourage all ākongā, including Māori and Pasifika, to be actively engaged in their learning and achievement.

Keywords: *assessment, Māori and Pasifika learners, culturally responsive practice*



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Introduction

To be Māori or Pasifika in New Zealand's formal education system qualifies one to identify with the priority learner category, as recognised by the Education Review office (2012). The reason that Māori and Pasifika learners identify with this category is that their participation results are 10-15 percent below that of other tamariki in Aotearoa (Ministry of Education, 2010). Further, the New Zealand National Standards results for 2014 highlight the concern for Māori and Pasifika learners across the three standards of reading, writing and maths. Both of these ethnic groups fall roughly 10% to 20% points behind ākongā that identify ethnically with Asian or European/Pākehā (Ministry of Education, 2010). These statistics have prompted much debate and discussion around what is causing this ethnic disparity in educational results.

Modern research around these educational issues have come to similar conclusions. This research generally suggests the need for an active shift, initiated by kaiako, towards a more culturally inclusive and responsive pedagogy and assessment. The literature in this review has been selected specifically in regard to education in New Zealand. It explores why Māori and Pasifika students are underachieving in schools, and what possible solutions there are to remedy this through the lenses of assessment and pedagogy.

What is the issue?

Aotearoa is home to many cultures that inevitably gives rise to a significant challenge; ensuring that there is an on-going appreciation for the cultural diversity of New Zealand's indigenous and Pasifika people. Garcia (as cited in Slee, 2010) compares 'culture' to an iceberg with most of the differences 'beneath the surface' with the visible signs representing very little of the diversity. Therefore it is important when seeking an equitable and more inclusive approach to assessment in education to recognise that Māori and Pasifika, as separate ethnic collectives, are by no means a homogenous group (Mahuika, Berryman & Bishop, 2011).

Different cultures identify with particular ways of being, knowing, and ways in which they view the world (Mahuika et al., 2011). Ormod (as cited in Slee, 2010) expounds this idea claiming that it is 'one's cultural background that influences the perspectives and values that one acquires [and] the skills that one masters and finds important'. These findings on the notion of culture therefore problematise current educational policy, and assessment practices by asking the question of whether formal education in New Zealand is measuring what is valued, or measuring what is easily measured and thus end up valuing what (can) be measured (Biesta, 2010). For both Māori and Pasifika students being educated in Aotearoa it is identity that is greatly valued and seeks authentic recognition. Schools must avoid the risk of developing, or maintaining deficit theories

around Māori and Pasifika students by acknowledging more than simply cultural difference, but the individual identity of how one wishes to be perceived (Nakhid, 2002).

The process that must take place to achieve this is an 'identifying process'. This is when each student is able to see themselves in the processes and structures of the school, feeling a sense of belonging within the education system (Carrington & MacArthur, 2012; Nakhid, 2002). Nakhid believes that Pasifika [and Māori] people in New Zealand are ascribed an identity by the predominantly Pākehā majority through the narrow lens of their shortcomings; low socio-economic status, under-achievement, and Pasifika ethnicity (2002).

The consequences of this ascribed identity could encourage teachers, consciously or subconsciously, to set below average or low expectations for these students and prepare them for what they, the teacher, believe is their future pathway. This notion of an ascribed identity could contribute to why Māori and Pasifika students have historically made up approximately 61.7% of all students that leave high school with no formal qualifications (Nakhid, 2002). To gain equity in achievement for Māori and Pasifika students kaiako must seek to understand and acknowledge the essence of Te Tiriti o Waitangi (The Treaty of Waitangi), which Macfarlane and Macfarlane (2012) suggest not all kaiako understand or acknowledge.

What is causing the issue?

The New Zealand Education system uses a standardised testing system that makes possible the comparison of students' academic performance individually, in groups, and internationally. An implication of such an assessment system that relies heavily of the measurement of 'success', is the impact that it has on the preparation practices of teachers, specifically in regard to Māori and Pasifika learners. Popham describes how standardised testing has been known to cause teachers to relentlessly drill students on test content, eliminating important curricular content not covered by the test (as cited in Volante, 2006).

Evidence based research gathered by Bishop, Berryman, Wearmouth, Peter and Clapham (2012) challenges the summative pedagogy and assessment approach to teaching that standardised testing can impose, reporting that the way that teachers teach and how they interact with Māori students is what influences them to become engaged in learning. For Māori and Pasifika students to positively engage in their own learning, as a result of the relationship with kaiako, reflects the sociocultural context of these ethnic groups where whānau and relationships are of great value. Mahuika et al., (2011) support this idea stating that 'compatibility between the school and home environments will better facilitate effective learning and assessment'.

What action should be considered?

The first step towards assessment being more culturally responsive is teachers, who are predominantly Pākehā in Aotearoa, becoming aware of the normalisation of their own culture and the way that their values and beliefs are reinforced within the current education system (Mahuika et al., 2011). Once kaiako realise that their cultural beliefs are ubiquitous they can seek to be agents of change in adopting a sociocultural perspective that recognises individuals in terms of their social and cultural context (Macfarlane & Macfarlane 2012).

Frameworks such as Ka Hikitia (Ministry of Education, 2008) have been provided to urge the education system to fit the student rather than requiring the student to fit the education system (Macfarlane & Macfarlane, 2012). A culturally specific framework produced by Macfarlane and Macfarlane (2009), Te Pikinga ki Runga (Raising the Possibilities), has been configured using four specific holistic domains in its educational approach to wholeness and wellbeing. Highlighted within this framework are four central aspects of culturally responsive pedagogy including relational, physical, psychological and self-concept. The framework also specifically focuses on strengthening cultural identity in relation to whānau engagement and assessment, making significant links to the key competencies of the New Zealand Curriculum .

On a more practical level Mahuika et al., (2011) strongly recommend the regular use of formative assessment to combat the culturally exclusive and test focused approach to assessment. A possible implication in moving towards a more formative assessment approach in education could be the loss of accountability, which summative assessment provides. Summative assessment promotes accountability that can have a positive effect in motivating improvement, supporting parent and student decisions in seeking the best education, and ensuring that schools are maintaining successful academic results in comparison to others (Looney, 2011).

Therefore it would seem most beneficial for all learners to have a balance of the two assessment approaches. However, Mahuika et al., (2011) argue that the formative approach should be at the forefront of a teachers pedagogy, as it can aid them in taking learning further with an on-going awareness of what is happening during learning activities and recognise where the learning of ākonga is going. Further, its implementation must be consistent for Māori and Pasifika to derive the same benefits as their non-Māori and Pasifika peers, with teachers being aware of their own assumptions and expectations within the classroom context (Brookfield, 1995; Mahuika et al., 2011). By pathologising the lived experiences of Māori and Pasifika students in relation to assessment and learning teachers deny the opportunity to bring about change in learning outcomes and risk harbouring deficit theories and maintaining the status quo of educational disparities (Mahuika et al., 2011).

Conclusion

The New Zealand Ministry of Education recognise the significant disparity between the achievement of Māori and Pasifika students, in comparison to other ethnic groups within the New Zealand education system. The New Zealand education system's assessment practices currently adopt a more summative approach, under the overarching structure of standardised testing.

However for Māori and Pasifika learners evidence based research, specifically that carried out by Mahuika et al., (2011), reveals that a more formative approach to assessment with kaiako actively building positive learning relationships with ākonga is more effective for engagement and therefore achievement. Assessment must be culturally responsive and therefore active in acknowledging and respecting what ākonga value, integrating worldviews, prior knowledge and cultural epistemologies into pedagogy. Macfarlane's (2008) framework Te Pikinga ki Runga is recommended when considering pedagogy and assessment due to its holistic view of ākonga,

inclusive and responsive approach to assessment, and active efforts not to homogenise Māori and Pasifika.

For teachers to work towards creating a culturally responsive learning environment, especially for priority learners, the start point is to provide ākonga with regular opportunities to engage with a formative assessment style.

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