
Primary Principals Sabbatical Leave 2009

Applicants Report

Bruce Pagan
July 2009

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The applicant sought leave to:

1. *Investigate and examine the effects/benefits that the pursuit of culturally significant events can have on Maori student achievement with particular reference to those whanau/students that engage regularly in mutton birding and hui i.e. carving.*

2. *In conjunction with the above, to explore the importance of Whakapapa (my own) on self identity relating it to student behaviour (my daughter's) and the implications and importance this may have for other students.*

Background:

Having taught at Bluff School for a number of years 1978-2001, I was able to observe that each year, students along with their whanau, engaged in an annual migration to the titi islands where they took part in the annual harvest of titi – mutton birds.

As teachers, we made many generalisations (based on a white middle class background) about the detrimental effects that time off to pursue this cultural practice may have had.

My interest has been heightened by the inclusion of my own family in this practice. I have been able to observe the positive effect it has had on my own daughter and am keen to see the disadvantages or advantages that may have occurred to others.

I want to participate/observe in the practice of mutton birding and to interview a range of parents and children who have/are involved in the process. I also wish to critically examine the effect that mutton birding has had on my own family and relate these experiences to supporting other students/teachers.

In my current school, requests are made by Maori families for their children to have time off to participate in significant cultural activities, hui, carving. In conjunction with whanau I want to work through a protocol which allows this to happen with the support of the school and families so the self worth and identity of the child is supported and enhanced. I also want to explore how this can be best supported by classroom teachers.

Using personal reflection as a theme I wish to explore my own Whakapapa so that it can stand alongside that of my wife's, in support of our daughter. Our daughter, who has been presented with her Whakapapa is able to trace her ancestry back to the 1350's Maori Migration. On my side she knows me and can relate to a photo of her grandparents. She continually asks and I am unable to give her the information she desires. I want to use some of the sabbatical time to research my family background so that it can stand alongside and support my daughter. I also intend to use the time to engage and discuss with Maori the importance of identify and how this can be used to enhance student learning.

The following report chronicles two case studies which support my contentions that involvement in significant cultural pursuits can improve student achievement and enhance personal self esteem.

A Case in Point

Spencer

Spencer came to our school at the beginning of 2007. Records from his previous school showed that he had an irregular attendance (72% attendance rate) and was at least 12 months behind his chronological reading age. This was also the case for other siblings and members of his extended whanau.

Contact was soon made with parents and within the confines of a positive and supportive relationship, discussions took the line that the children were in danger of experiencing failure in the school setting if attendance rates were not improved.

The family informed the school that one of the reasons for the children's absence was their involvement in a major ongoing carving project at the marae. This project was likely to continue for at least two years.

The family expressed their support for the schools desire that the children should attend school. The school expressed their willingness to support the children taking part in the carving hui.

After discussion with all parties, including the whanau, master carver, tutors, school staff and the children concerned, it was agreed that:

- a. The children would attend school in the mornings for the literacy and numeracy component of the school programme.

- b. They would be able to leave school at 11.30 approximately to take part in the programmes at the marae.
- c. The children would not be penalised for their absence – they would be marked present but noted that they were not on site.

This had the immediate effect of improving the attendance rate to 96% and by the end of 2008, Spencer was reading independently 2 years above his chronological age.

Staff were able to chronicle other progress in Spencer:

- a. A willingness to express ideas – improved oral and written skills.
- b. Greater positive participation in classroom and school programmes and activities.
- c. The emergence of leadership skills – willing to take on extra roles around the school - tuakana teina role.
- d. Willingness to share ideas and explanations with other children.
- e. Clarity in reporting – retention of key ideas and concepts and being able to clearly explain them.
- f. A greater degree of ‘openness’ and willingness to be inclusive and included.
- g. The ability to relate to people of all ages.
- h. His ability to show due diffidence and respect.
- i. Excellent thinking and listening skills - the ability to process information.

Spencer's experiences show clearly:

1. That when due respect is given to all then compromise can be a point of strength.
2. That making connections with cultural traditions can enhance student achievement.
3. That children who know where they come from are more likely to know where they are going.
4. That children who are immersed in tradition and supported in a strong connecting family are more likely to be supported in their learning and subsequently display improved or higher levels of achievement.
5. That schools have a positive contribution to make in supporting cultural activities as an integral part of education outside the classroom.
6. That the pursuit of cultural traditions can be treated as an extension of the school curriculum.
7. That students who make the right connections, with the support of their whanau and school, are able to supplement, support and enhance their learning.
8. That schools have a major role to play in engaging whanau and students in making decisions surrounding children's learning.
9. That schools are able to make specific adaptations of the curriculum to suit individual needs.

Another Case in Point

Mariana

Mariana is my daughter. Through her mothers blood line she has been able to accompany her to the mutton bird islands for the last 10 years. Invariably this has involved regular absence from school for the torching¹ part of the mutton bird season. This usually begins around ANZAC Day and lasts about four weeks, usually necessitating 2 to 3 weeks absence from school².

This part of the report tells her story as seen by me – the PowerPoint is her words as she reflects on what being able to participate in mutton birding means to her – and focuses of those things which have made the mutton birding experience a successful one for her. This has been a combination of whanau support; of positive school encouragement; of compromise to minimise disruption and resulted in huge personal growth on her part.

This current season, 2009, has been called the worst on record and this combined with other family reasons meant that Mariana and her Mum were unable to go mutton birding. The narration is therefore based primarily on their participation in the 2008 season.

Mariana chronicled her participation in the 2008 mutton bird season and her photos form the basis on this report. Her 2008 school year culminated in the presentation of her NCEA Level One art portfolio, for which she gained an excellence, and of which, parts feature on the cover of the 2008 Marlborough Girls High Year Book.

¹ Torching – that part of catching and gathering the mutton birds carried out at night.

² Absence from school in some families can vary. Some children will accompany their families for the full season – 15 March to the end of May.

Being able to participate in a traditional and real time cultural pursuit has enhanced and supported her development. The experiences and opportunities have moulded a mature and confident young woman of whom we are immensely proud.

I was able to begin a Family Tree and completed it through six generations going direct through her parents, grand parents, great grand parents etc. following pathways through my parents and my wife's parents. This had the immediate effect of increasing our known family data from an initial narrow base of around 14 known contacts to documenting over 200. Smiles all round! And a willingness to strengthen the ties through formal/informal contact with at least the cousins. This has aroused my own curiosity and I believe strengthened the somewhat previous tenuous ties with my own family. I keep relating my work back to the reoccurring themes contained in Ka Hikitia, MOE, 2006 surrounding the importance of identity and making positive connections with people [students]. In my case, knowing and putting into effect these two themes, can and does make a positive difference in improving self esteem and personal and professional performance.

In support of school protocols

From informal and anecdotal conversations with schools, staff and parents the following **generalisations** in support of an active participation in cultural traditions and activities are drawn:

1. School leadership and staff acknowledge the relevance and benefits that can be accrued from supporting children and whanau that choose to go mutton birding.
2. Schools are supportive and recognise the learning opportunities and benefits that can accrue. Time spent on the mutton bird islands is recognised as hard work; quality time spent in an often extended family situation and learning through involvement and opportunity.
3. Schools tend to be inclusive in the manner in which they encourage positive feedback from students on their return. The practice of sending down screeds of school work based on units of work based on extensive units from the Correspondence School is no longer supported – rather schools encourage the use of technology to record and journal the experiences. Many families have a ‘store’ of reading materials on the island made up of school journals and the like.
4. Most of the children tend to go down for the torch³ which tends to be from ANZAC Day onwards for the next three to four weeks. This generally involves 2-3 weeks absence from school.

³ Torching – that part of catching and gathering the mutton birds carried out at night.

5. There are some disadvantages to those children who are absent for long periods i.e., the full season from March through to the end of May. For the very young this can often result in developmental delay, especially in reading and numeracy.
6. Schools recognise the importance of mutton birding in developing relationships with families and enhancing strong links with Whakapapa. These are acknowledged in being extremely beneficial in building, developing and enhancing self esteem and personal identity.
7. Schools report positive and active working relationships with their Marae and Rununga where appropriate. Regular contact is maintained and a high degree of cooperation is evident. Contact is often informal and relaxed.
8. Mutton birding is a right and tradition handed down through close family connections. It is a customary right passed from one generation to the other. Many of the traditions and customs associated with it are handed down through oral communication, keen observations and practical involvement. This is a practical application, using different learning styles to support teaching and learning.
9. Whanau and iwi acknowledge that generally schools are supportive of children's participation in mutton birding. This is demonstrated at both the primary and secondary levels. Parents tend to be a bit more cautious when seeking leave to take children mutton birding during the high school years, but most teachers recognise the benefits that can be gained and remain supportive during these years.

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10. There is recognition by schools that in the main children go to the mutton bird islands to actively participate in all aspects of the titi harvest. The days can be long and hard and subsequently don't leave much time for formal lessons.
11. Children work alongside the adults in helping to work the birds. The children tend the fires, keeping the supply of wood up and do chores in the work house.
12. They also get to work on the manuⁱ – catching and plucking the birds. In this environment they become confident in the tasks they are taught by watching and listening to the adults. These are the learning experiences.

Acknowledgements

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- Peter and Astrid, Colleen and Kenny, Pam and John, Colin and Ellison, who hosted me at various times
- Tiny and Maureen, Barbara and Syd, for their encouragement and for allowing me to use their images
- and Elaine, who tolerated my whim

Attached appendices

1. Spencer's Power Point
2. Mariana's Power Point
3. General Power Point on mutton birding on Piko

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ⁱ Manu – traditional area of ground to be worked by a specific whanau from which the titi are harvested