

Sabbatical Report

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My sabbatical report covers one of the papers I have been studying as part of my Masters of Education. The papers focus was emergent research methodologies.

I have been looking at leadership change and discovering the change moments which impact on school culture and student outcomes. I have investigated the change points throughout my own time as a principal and the impact of these on the organisation and student outcomes.

Introduction

My research is focused on developing an understanding about what experiences and conditions have influenced me within my leadership roles in New Zealand secondary schools.

The first half of this essay provides narratives of some of my early life experiences. These narratives provide a narrow version on how differing people's participation in New Zealand was classified, and later how I came to redefine my position in response to these experiences. The second half covers my later experiences as a formal educator and learner, and how these experiences modified and shaped my views on social justice.

Following each personal narrative I attempt to define how that version of my experience came about, how it links to present and/or historical perspectives, and how it has defined my present and future interactions.

Methodology

The paradigm of transformative and social justice is used as the framework for this self-reflexive work. This framework will help me in my search to provide meaning and critical analysis of experiences, which lead to reduced inequalities within our education system and ultimately in society.

I use an autoethnographic methodology to investigate my own experiences throughout my life as I develop theories and practices as a principal, which have an impact on Māori students and whanau whom I come into contact within my life and work. The key narratives of experience throughout my life provide the story to stimulate dialogue about the social and cultural issues which have led, and continue to perpetuate inequalities between Māori and Pakeha in NZ schools. I also hope they will provide an insight for myself and others, as to how everyone has the agency to transform the deficit status quo which surrounds us.

I have utilised stimulus questions from Mertens (2009) within a self-reflexive interview process. These included:

What transformative moments in my own life do I recall?

How do these experiences illuminate my experiences in relation to others?

What was I thinking? What was I feeling?

How do I relate these experiences in my role as a principal today?

Privilege

At the end of every holiday we would drive over the Rimutaka Ranges from the Wairarapa to Wellington, where I went to boarding school. It was back in the early eighties when the political landscape was changing as Māori were reasserting their claim to dispossessed land through the Treaty of Waitangi. It was 1985 and the Orakei claim was taken to the Waitangi Tribunal by Ngati Whatua. As we were driving over the ranges my father (a hardworking progressive farmer) made the comment "this is what happens to good productive land when it gets given to Māori", referring to the gorse that was colouring the landscape yellow. This was an example of the dominant deficit

discourse held by the media, politicians and the majority of the pakeha population in New Zealand at the time.

I am a white middle class male who was brought up on a farm in the North Island of New Zealand. These four characteristics can define me as a person of privilege, which belong to the group who have colonised a range of peoples (indigenous, gender) from both a physical and emotional perspective. Just like the story above, there has been very little discourse to challenge the status quo of the white privilege. White privilege is often invisible to those who reap the benefits gained by the result of colonialism, where structures were put in place to advantage the white settlers, whilst at the same time marginalising Māori. These structures form the basis of many of society's formal and informal modus-operandi, and have been normalised. This has resulted in economic, educational and health inequalities becoming the norm. It has also resulted in Māori being treated as 'the other', resulting in a discourse about Māori of being inferior.

In our society privilege also means others are disadvantaged. This forms the basis of the neo-liberalist environment we live in, which is based on competition in a market driven economy. When society is based on competition it results in winners and losers, where the winners feel the need to have losers. This in turn leads to an environment of blame and disadvantage.

It has been important for me to develop an understanding of my own privileged position and to be aware of the hidden dialogue that I have experienced. As this deficit discourse has not gone away and needs to be at the forefront of my consciousness when working in education. I feel an affinity with the words of Robert and Joanna Consedine (2012), "whilst I have a love of and pride in my Irish Catholic Pakeha culture and history, it stands alongside my awareness of the privileges I have inherited as a result of the dispossession of Māori".

By having an in-depth awareness of the impact of colonisation in New Zealand requires school leaders to take action. It requires them to become more than managers of the status quo, rather to become transformative leaders. Where they focus on addressing not only the inequalities within the

education system, but also the inequalities experienced within our wider society. As these inequalities affect the ability of the school to perform and succeed for our Māori students.

Transformative leaders in a transformative and social justice paradigm requires behaviours which actively seek to power share and to empower, rather than to mirror the leadership of the previous status quo. This is a challenging situation for leaders, as often their previous experience of leadership is through behaviours of leadership which represented the oppressor. This provides a dichotomy, as the transformation they are now seeking is a new state rather than a modelling of the status quo or previous state.

Developing Awareness

Like many New Zealanders, I undertook an OE which took me to a number of places around the world. After travelling the length of Europe and through Turkey and Syria, I ended up spending time in the spectacular desert between Saudi Arabia and Jordan, in a place called Wahdi Sabah. Unlike many travellers I ended up here as a result of a chance meeting with an Australian Arabic speaking woman who had been living in this area for a number of years and was visiting her Bedouin friends as part of her existence in this part of the world. I was welcomed into their extended family without question as a guest, where I spent three months living their lifestyle. I was treated as an insider, but clearly had very little comprehension of their language or complex culture. The following is a limited extract from my diary at the time:

"Even though I was a stranger to these people I was treated as if this was my home, and we were welcome to come and go as we pleased. They seemed genuinely happy to feed us and let us stay, as their custom stated they should welcome any stranger without asking any questions, and that they should let the stranger tell them their name and so forth when they desired. Although these people had very little compared to our standards they were happy to share everything, and never expected anything in return".

This experience opens up many differing issues in relation to the understanding of myself and how it has challenged my own behaviour and interactions with others. The situation initially placed me in a very uncomfortable place. I was an outsider who knew very little of the customs and practices of the Bedouin people, and knew even less of their Arabic language. I was also in no position to provide anything in return (in a material sense), as due to other circumstances I was penny-less. Yet I was treated in a very non-judgmental way, and was welcomed and provided for by people who from a material point of view had very little.

This was a humbling experience, not only in how I was treated but also from the perspective of being placed in a situation where relationships are formed despite significant cultural and language barriers. It also provides a lesson in how many young people from differing backgrounds may feel when they attend school. Many students come into a schooling environment which is culturally foreign to them, and/or where they do not understand the language. This is not only for new immigrants or refugees, but also for many Māori and Pacific Island students who come into schools in which they have to leave their culture at the door to succeed.

These experiences and reflections have highlighted the need for me to take on transformative leadership practices, to change the status quo for these students. Jorunn Moller (in Carolyn, M. S. 2011) lays down the challenge to principals by asking the following question: How many school principals contribute to making schools more inclusive, socially just, and, at the same time, academically successful?

Enlightenment

My early teaching involvement in thinking about Māori student participation in the formal education system was built on a fairly superficial response to the challenge of Māori participation and achievement. It was based around adapting content to make it more culturally appropriate. This adaption was without any student, whanau or wider community input into deciding what was appropriate and what wasn't. It was also based around content that was written about Māori, by non-Māori and delivered by non-Māori teachers.

When applying for a job as a deputy principal I was challenged about my own knowledge of Te Reo Māori and Tikanga Māori. I came to realise that this was an area of my own understanding which was seriously lacking, especially if I was to be genuinely working with Māori students and whanau in leadership positions in schools. As a result I enrolled into a 'Te Ara Reo Māori' programme at Te Wānanga o Aotearoa. My initial expectation of the course was that I would develop knowledge which would help me in speaking Te Reo Māori and further my career. This self-centred and narrow expectation was soon to be challenged resulting in a new reality being formed.

As a student of Te Reo at Te Wānanga o Aotearoa I became a student in a classroom setting which was very different to my previous experiences. The class was made up of a majority of Māori adult students who for various reasons were reconnecting with their language. The culture of the class room was rich in Māori values of manaakitanga (mutual respect), whanaungatanga (providing a sense of belonging) and ako (reciprocity within the teaching and learning relationship). My own lack of knowledge and understanding was not seen as ignorance, rather in need of support and nurturing. While learning was catered for, using a wide range of strategies which involved dialogue, role modelling and utilisation of experiences.

The experience provided me with privileged (in this case honoured) participation into the Māori world view and experience. It also demonstrated to me that there are two parallel worlds within New Zealand that are hidden to the majority (Pakeha) and traversed daily by Māori. When I refer to hidden, I refer to the way that society through colonisation has actively placed Māori language and Te Ao Māori (customs and world view) as an outsider and one in which doesn't have status in the mainstream. The irony is that like many New Zealanders, I travelled around the world to experience rich and diverse cultures, whereas I did not even see that Māori people, culture and lifestyle is so rich in history, language and culture.

These experiences have helped shape the way I view the world, which includes both the barriers faced by Māori, and the richness within Māori society. They also highlight the need to view my leadership position as a responsibility to challenge the status quo. Transformative leadership requires

the deconstruction and reconstruction of knowledge frameworks which perpetuate inequalities of the status quo (Shields, 2011). It requires careful deconstruction and reconstruction of our own, and teachers' world view. This world view may have deep seated deficit views about Māori and their participation in society. Therefore it requires careful challenging and exposing of these views for what they are. Once this has occurred then reconstruction of a new reality can occur, which views Māori from a more agentic position. To a position which breaks down the deficit discourse surrounding many Māori students and their whanau. It also highlights the need to provide opportunities to both teachers and students to have meaningful engagement with topics such as race and class so that they may understand and challenge the oppressive belief structures.

Later action

The aforementioned experiences have shaped the decisions I have made as a principal at William Colenso College. In 2009 when I first took on this position, I saw a school with a high Māori population who were underachieving in an institution which undervalued Māori student and whanau participation. It was a school in which teachers thought they were doing the best they could for Māori students as they had a focus on positive relationships. But that had not transferred into lower suspension rates or higher achievement. It had merely transferred into a sense of powerlessness for both students and teachers.

The opportunity to be involved in the Te Kotahitanga teacher professional development programme revolutionised the relationships, leadership, pedagogy, and the culture of the school. It provided support to the teachers to develop their praxis. It provided a theoretical understanding of the issues and solutions, and the right amount of challenge and support to change their practice. As a school leader it provided me with the support and challenge to put Māori student achievement and participation at the core of the schools strategy and practice.

Since the end of 2009 I have been fully committed to the principles and practices of Te Kotahitanga. This commitment has seen leadership and teachers transform their beliefs and practices to support Māori student

participation and achievement. It has required me to continuously review my own position and practice. It has also helped strengthen my beliefs about the need for transformative change based on social justice.

As a result of this focus, ownership for this change has spread across the whole school community, and has led to significant shifts in achievement and culture. As Figure 1 shows, Year 12 Māori student achievement has risen from 32.4% in 2009 to 70% in 2014.

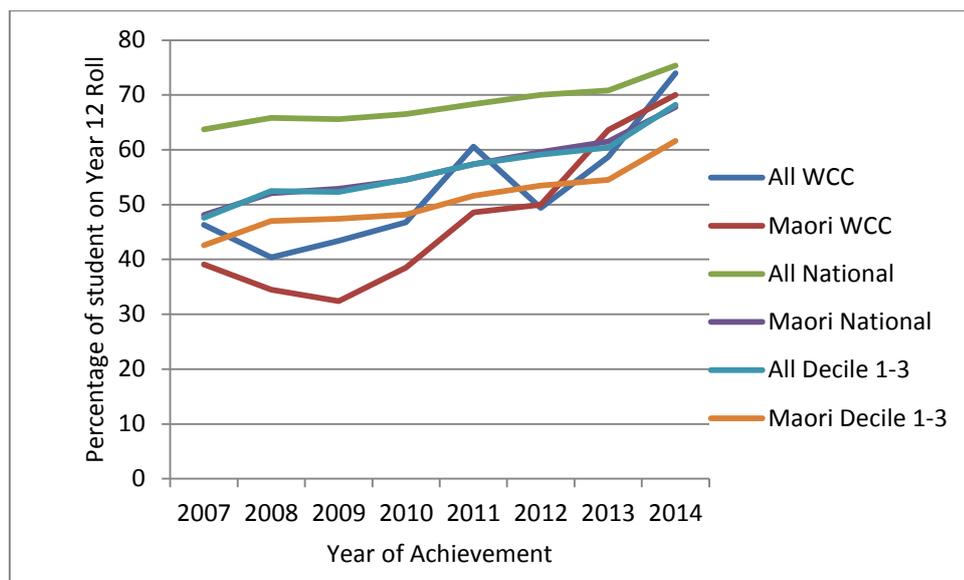


Figure 1. William Colenso College NCEA Level 2 Results (Year 12 Students)

Conclusion

Life's experiences shape you as you shape others. By viewing some of my life's experiences through an autoethnographic approach I have demonstrated how my world view has changed through my experiences. These experiences and later reflection have also led to the emergence of the importance of transformative leadership within my understanding of educational leadership. It requires me (as a leader) to have a clear sense of the values and beliefs that underpin my own identity, be willing to take stands that may require moral courage, to live with tension, and, to some degree, to engage in activism and advocacy (Shields, 2011).

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