Cultural care as an integral component of Māori student success

Lily George, Gail Allan, Mavis Barratt, Sheree Thompson and Leeanne Tatana[1]
Massey University
New Zealand

Abstract

The university environment can be somewhat alien for many Māori students engaged with tertiary study. While Māori today are a very diverse group, programmes based on Māori cultural concepts can prove useful for many students to transition them into successful study by demystifying tertiary landscapes. This article looks at two initiatives that ran on Massey University's Albany campus in 2009. TipuOranga was a marae-based Māori student-led initiative (undergraduate and postgraduate) that sought to acknowledge the multiple components of student wellbeing to help students make better sense of the academic setting. The second initiative was evening workshops for postgraduate students in the Whānau Development programme in a setting that was more culturally Māori. There was an emphasis on the supportive elements of whanaungatanga (collective support) to enable students to successfully integrate into a university setting, and to successfully complete their papers. With both these initiatives, there is potential to create firm foundations from which the students can negotiate the shifting sands of their lives, in ways that better ensure their academic success.

Introduction

Māori have been educationally disadvantaged from near the beginning of our conjoined history. Educational disadvantage has contributed to economic and social disadvantage, with the result that many Māori occupy the lower socioeconomic strata in New Zealand society. In the latter 20th century however, Māori endeavoured to regain equity within the education system through a variety of initiatives, including cultural components with university study. However, for many Māori students embarking on tertiary study, the university environment can be one that is somewhat alien. This can require a period of transition that proves challenging, and for some, impossible. Providing programmes such as TipuOranga and Whanau Development that not only demystify tertiary landscapes but also integrate components of Māori culture, have contributed significantly to the successful transition of Māori students. Notwithstanding the diverse experiences of 'being Māori', creating an environment that correlates more closely with lived realities helps to ensure a better 'fit' for these students. In this way, continued

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commitment to academic study and successful completion are more likely to ensue for Māori students.

Educational disadvantage

From the mid-1800s to the early 1980s, Māori were subjected to educational oppression through a system that sought to maintain the unequal balance of power in favour of Pakeha. Hobson's assertion of 'He iwi tahi tatou' (We are one people) has been echoed through the generations to mean (in this instance) a supposedly egalitarian educational system. However, the reality is that until recently, Māori were disadvantaged educationally, and therefore economically and socially. Through curriculum manipulation and other inherent forms of educational racism, the suppression of Māori culture and language has been the result of the drive for assimilation by education policy makers (Walker, 1991).

The resultant reality in the late 20th and early 21st centuries is that many Māori do not successfully complete college or education standards such as NCEA. Many are unemployed or underemployed; we make up 50% of the prison population, and are over-represented across a wide range of negative social indices. Many do not make it to tertiary study, encountering a range of barriers such as high costs, previous underachievement, negative role models (Jefferies, 1997), and a 'square-peg-round-hole' misfit between student and institution. It is no surprise then that only 0.6% of the Māori population make it to postgraduate level (Lambert, 2007). While gains have been made, and will continue to be made, there is a reality to contend with, and "poor retention rates for Māori in mainstream tertiary institutions...remains an issue of concern" (Gavala & Fleet, 2005, p. 52).

For many Māori students entering a tertiary institution, it is almost literally akin to entering a whole new world, where culture shock engendered by new environments and new behaviours can increase feelings of discomfort, so much so that many choose to leave. Raumati Hook (2007) considered that a major reason for underachievement in education was due to lack of Māori cultural content, resulting in "identity loss and disengagement" (p. 1). Hudson and Hughes (2007) also note "the severe shortfall in indigenous staff in the tertiary sector" (p. 36), adding to the alien nature of the educational environment for Māori. Yet effective education is of "fundamental importance" for Māori regarding development and in securing "an economic future that removes them from the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder" (Raumati Hook, 2007, p. 1).

Over the intervening decades, Māori have striven to rectify these educational disadvantages, and increase Māori access to education, including tertiary education. By February 2001, the time of the first Hui Taumata Mātauranga, Māori aspirations for education were very clear. One hundred and seven recommendations cited at the Hui resulted in three clear goals for Māori education: 1) "to live as Māori"; 2) "to actively participate as citizens of the world"; and 3) "to enjoy good health and a high standard of living" (M. Durie, 2009, p. 2). November 2001 saw the second

Hui Taumata Mātauranga, which acknowledged the integral involvement of education in all sectors and aspects of Māori development. At this Hui, "five platforms for educational advancement" were pinpointed. These included state educational, economic and social policies; Māori and Crown relationships; and Māori synergies and leadership (M. Durie, 2009).

Ensuring that tertiary education is sufficiently responsive to Māori educational and development goals is part of what A. Durie (1998) considers as taking "back responsibility and control over the provision of education for Māori" (p. 297). Initiatives such as kohanga reo, kura kaupapa and whare wananga (Māori-medium educational institutions) are "flourishing networks" that have "seen Māori emerge with the highest rates of participation in tertiary education of any group aged twenty-five years and over" (M. Durie, 2009, p. 9). TipuOranga and Whanau Development are two programmes within Massey University that endeavour to incorporate Māori cultural content and concepts, in order to ensure that "formal education is conceived of as an empowering rather than a subordinating process" (A. Durie, 1998, p. 297).

TipuOranga

TipuOranga was a Māori student-led initiative that was marae-based and included six to 14 students across disciplines and levels, and their whānau. It arose initially from the desire of a few Māori students and staff to lose weight, and grew from there as an exercise to acknowledge the multiple components of student wellbeing; i.e. the spiritual, physical, family, as well as intellectual components of who they are (Te Whare Tapa Whā model; see M. Durie, 1994). Participants met once a month at Awataha Marae in Northcote – an urban pan tribal marae that also operated as an educational centre - from March to August 2009. Sharing personal and cultural experiences in this kind of setting helped students make better sense of the academic setting. Two Māori staff members (the authors) were there to support the students and contribute to the kaupapa (initiative).

According to participants, of most value was the whanaungatanga (strengthened relationships) and wider support networks that were engendered by participation as a group on the marae. Participants were also able to bring along family members, which included children, siblings, parents and spouses. Several participants were non-Māori. Eating, sleeping, singing and talking together while providing awhi and manaaki (support) to each other, was a benefit that touched on all levels of self and community. The students were supported in their study at university, in a way that is not always provided in a tertiary environment.

By meeting at a marae, students' shared cultural understandings provided unity in their diversity. The participants came from many different tribes, with urban and rural foundations, and a wide variety of experiences and expressions of being Māori. The effects of colonisation of people and land have been multiple, resulting in 'diverse realities' for contemporary Māori, as noted by M. Durie (1995) and

others. For some participants, tribal connections remained strong, and a marae setting was 'normal' and comfortable. Others, raised within an urban setting with little or sporadic connection to Te Ao Māori (the Māori world), were initially daunted, although reassured by the collective and supportive experience. For some of the participants, an overnight stay at a marae was a new experience. In these ways and others, the participants were a microcosmic reflection of wider society.

For those who had little knowledge of Te Ao Māori, Awataha Marae provided a gentle introduction to that world, in an atmosphere of safety and communal support. The noho marae demonstrated very clearly the purpose and function of a marae such as Awataha for urban Māori *and* non-Māori, as a site of cultural and cross-cultural communication and learning. Influential kaumātua and kuia (elders) at Awataha Marae had instilled philosophies of bicultural interaction into the development of the marae. As with the Te Mauri Pakeaka education programmes of the 1970s and 1980s, Awataha Marae provided a 'third space' where different cultural groups could come together for "dialogues, confrontations, accommodations, risk-taking and unplanned discoveries…[which] inescapably…engages with the development of something new" (Greenwood & Wilson, 2006, p. 12). TipuOranga participants took advantage of this 'third space', a space where cultural groups could share their uniqueness while seeking similarities and opportunities for sharing culture.

Participants usually met from Friday night to Saturday afternoon. They began with a shared dinner, then sang waiata (songs) or engaged in other activities. A kaumātua from Awataha shared some of the history of the marae with those present. This included stories of tribal interactions, as well as history relating to the development of the marae. Another night a friend of one of the students came to give manicures and hand massages. The next day usually began with waiata, and a variety of events such as meditation, massages, and a talk on nutrition followed by preparation of lunch by the nutritionist. In addition, a Māori language teacher took participants through some language instruction. So the activities were varied, but at their core was the building of whanaungatanga (collective support) in order to support the students more effectively in their studies. As one of the students noted:

> …what i [sic] love most about TipuOranga roopu is that it is Māori-flavoured to the core. It has started a great foundation for fluid continuity for when the [university] marae is built. (personal communication, April 3, 2009)

Two of the students designed a logo for TipuOranga. The following is the dialogue taken from an email regarding the meaning of the logo, after group discussion on the philosophies underpinning their practice. While this is a long quote, it is worthwhile reproducing it in full as it articulates some of the philosophies TipuOranga participants were working within:

Essentially, the four leaves on the aka (vine) represent the four dimensions – te taha tinana (physical), te taha hinengaro (intellectual), te taha wairua (spiritual) and te taha whānau (family). The double lines are the blood that flows through our whakapapa, connecting us to our whānau, and ultimately, to each other through our shared humanity. The lobule at the bottom of the aka is the kākano (seed) that represents the core of who we are, and that we are never lost because our origins began in Rangiātea, as per the whakatauki "E kore ahau e ngaro, he kākano i ruia mai i Rangiātea".

The three lines on the top of the handle represent the journey undertaken by our tupuna nui through Te Kore, Te Pō and Te Ao Mārama. This is a journey that we often undertake throughout our lifetimes, when crises and challenges occur in our lives. There are times when we feel like we are in Te Kore – the place of nothingness that is nevertheless the space of great potential. It is the latter understanding – that we have been gifted with the opportunity to reach forward into our potential...which moves us forward into Te Pō; the long night in which we are free to explore the worlds around us in new ways. This exploration brings light into the darkness, thereby moving us forward again into Te Ao Mārama – the world of light, of understanding, and eventually, of wisdom.

Finally, the logo is in the shape of a hoe (paddle), enclosing and encapsulating all of who we are as we paddle along the river of life, and in that process – exploring and then knowing the fullness of our selves – uplifting our wellbeing in all dimensions, and bringing balance to those dimensions; i.e. TipuOranga.

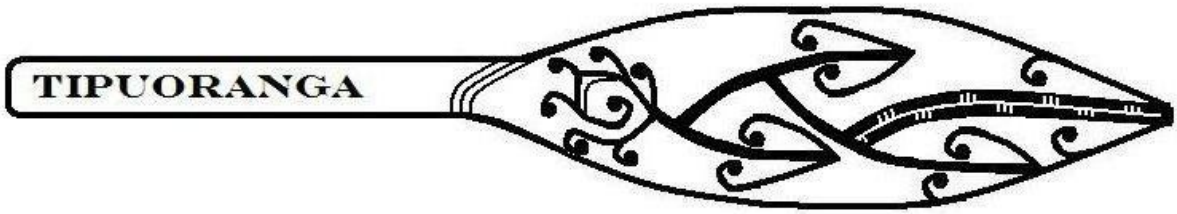

Figure 1: TipuOranga logo

The noho marae were also a space for conversation, of sorting out who the students were in relation to their study and all the other dimensions that make up who they are. Other conversations were around notions of whanaungatanga, raising questions such as What is whanaungatanga? How do we express it in our everyday lives? How do we want to express it within our group? Does it include non-Māori whānau? How do we reconcile and express internal whānaungatanga between all the different parts of who we are? Does it include tolerance and respect for all peoples?

Some of these questions arose as the result of a debate around the inclusion of a non-Māori student, and also the presence of non-Māori whānau in our group. The consensus following debate was that participants wanted to be inclusive, partly as an acknowledgement of the diverse ethnic make-up of all Māori involved. Another issue to emerge was that some students were fluent in te reo Māori (Māori language) and tikanga (Māori cultural customs and practices), while others were just beginning to explore their Māori heritage. So participants came from 'diverse realities' (Cunningham, Stevenson, & Tassell, 2005), and finding ways in which they could share that space included stating these differences, and in doing so exploring further the similarities that drew them together. In this way, a collective balance of equality could emerge.

Here participants established the social dynamics of a cooperative environment, utilising shared space collectively as Māori as well as non-Māori, and drawing on shared strengths. The programme provided an expression of possibilities and potentials. It showed the students and staff involved that by embracing Te Ao Māori, the world of tertiary learning became demystified further. It showed how it was possible to be all of who they are in the tertiary environment. And it also showed the value and necessity of having a marae located on their campus, rather than having to leave campus in order to have what was such a valuable and necessary experience.

Whānau Development programme

The second initiative was working within the Whānau Development programme. This programme was new to Massey in 2009 and is run from the Albany campus. It consists initially of the Postgraduate Certificate in Whānau Development, followed by a Postgraduate Diploma, and if students wish to continue with postgraduate study – and they are encouraged to do so – then there is provision to enrol in a Masters programme. Authors of this paper include one support staff member and a student.

The focus of the programme is on "positive outcomes for whānau with an emphasis on whānau potential rather than whānau deficits", and it seeks to "create pathways for practitioners to advanced learning" (Te Momo, 2009). The foundation students involved in 2009 were those who were already out in the workforce, working in fields such as mental health and other social services, forensic nursing, and the prison service. The papers themselves were run in a kaupapa Māori way as block courses. For example, they began and ended with karakia, and included waiata and, of course, the sharing of food. And importantly, they provided the students with an environment where they could kōrero (converse) safely and work through issues that arose in the classroom in relation to topics under discussion (Te Momo, 2009).

Students made the following comments:

> I want to give a big ups to Fiona [Te Momo – Programme Coordinator], she is tu meke in the way she models whanaungatanga as

> she teaches us. She gives us freedom to be ourselves, to be the diversity within a kaupapa whānau that we each are.
>
> This paper is what I have waited for. Until whānau development came along nothing appealed to add to my kete of knowledge. I absolutely LOVE this paper, so relevant to who I am as a person who is strongly connected to whānau hapū and iwi, one more word INVALUABLE.

Weekly evening workshops were run by the Māori postgraduate academic advisor where students were brought together on campus, but in a setting that was more culturally Māori. There was an emphasis on the supportive elements of whanaungatanga to enable students to successfully integrate into a university setting, and therefore to successfully complete their papers. The workshops always began with a shared dinner, and from there went on to discuss upcoming assignments, talked about individual projects and gave feedback to others. One student had this to say:

> This paper is extramural, therefore when left to myself it can get extremely isolating. As a Māori I need opportunity to interact, the relational connection is very important.

Another said:

> …what is meaningful is that we participate and connect together as a kaupapa whānau, karakia, waiata and of course to make it all noa - the kai!

The discussions, facilitated by the academic advisor, were often wide-ranging and lively. These were students with a huge range of experiences, and the lecturers and academic support staff were able to learn as much from the students as they may have been teaching (Te Momo, 2009). The age of the students ranged from 44 to 61 years, and their maturity contributed well to the relationship development that was engendered through the group over both semesters.

As part of academic support, students were also offered one-on-one consultations when necessary, and they were free to email assignment drafts for comment and proofing. One student – interestingly the only Pākehā student in the class – had this to say:

> From my perspective, I think it's been the most supported paper I've ever done. I've learnt more and done more reading in this paper due to the group work, and knowing I'd be meeting with [the academic support advisor] regularly. I think it would be amazing if more papers could offer a similar approach. I also think for me this paper was initially very intimidating, so having [her] support and wisdom has encouraged me to carry on, when initially I may not have. I'd consider

> doing another paper similar to this on the basis that this support was on offer, as I think it's invaluable, and difficult to quantify.

Another student said:

> The learning support is extremely vital. Without this person I absolutely know I would not remain on this course. She is our guidance, our tutor, an amazing teacher….

What can be seen is that the student response to a programme that offers all-round support was overwhelmingly positive. While the papers were by no means easy with a high level of analysis and writing expected, having the encouragement from lecturers and academic support staff who worked together for the benefit of the students meant that these students could feel more confident in their study, and therefore perform better than they otherwise would have. As noted by the academic advisor: "Imagine what we could achieve if all papers and programmes were run this way". Nevertheless, of integral importance to the programme's success was the inclusion of cultural components into the learning experience for these students, and for the staff as well. Feedback indicates that most participants – including staff – feel that they emerged from the experience having gained something very valuable from it.

Educational transformations

M. Durie (2009) writes that New Zealand's education sector has been transformed "to the point where a palpable indigenous dimension can be felt both within and beyond the sector" (p. 2). The Māori cultural renaissance has resulted in significant increases in Māori participation in and contribution to education on all levels (Lambert, 2007). There are now exponentially increasing numbers of Māori in tertiary education, both as students and as teachers. Māori seem poised to achieve a critical mass to seriously contribute to the positive and ongoing development of Māori society in all arenas. As noted by Jefferies (1997), "the importance for the success of an individual in modern society is often linked to the level of education attained" (p. 6). For Māori, individual success usually equates to that of whānau, hapū and iwi as well.

Gavala and Fleet (2005) conducted a study of 122 Māori psychology students at Massey University. One finding they reported was that students were more likely to achieve psychological well-being that supported ongoing enjoyment and motivation, if the academic environment was one that was "culturally-congruent", and further, that cultural identity could be used as an "empowering resource" (p. 52). A kaupapa Māori tutorial group studied by Gavala and Fleet (2005) showed the effectiveness of a "whānau atmosphere, where everyone works, eats and struggles together" (p. 57). Their study added to the fundamental recognition that incorporating aspects of Māori culture into programmes and papers was effective in increasing the success rates of Māori students.

Lambert (2007) cites the scaffolding of students by Māori academic mentors with proven ability as one of the "key features of successful strategies" for Māori student success at tertiary institutions (p. 73). Extended interaction time with these mentors was also important, as was the input and support of communities around the students (Lambert, 2007, p. 73). M. Durie (2009) also considers then, that one of the tasks of Māori support staff is that of "being able to...mediate between Māori worldviews and the conventions associated with higher education" (p. 7) in order to lessen the discomfort and increase the well-being of these students. Linking to the Tertiary Education Commission's Tertiary Education Strategy 2007-2012, Massey University has also adopted the KIA MAIA (Key Initiatives for A Māori Academic Investment Agenda) Strategy, which seeks quality outcomes for Māori students by providing increased support while "building Māori professional capabilities, increasing Māori research capability and engaging with Māori communities and tribal organizations" (M. Durie, 2009, p. 14). TipuOranga and the Whānau Development programme can be seen as KIA MAIA in practice.

The TipuOranga programme ran for six months in 2009 until funding was no longer readily available. A limitation of the programme was the intensive support needed from the support staff to arrange and manage the noho marae. If the programme was to run for a longer period, it is likely that staff could ease back on involvement, and let students take more responsibility in arranging and running the programme. All participants would agree that this was a very worthwhile initiative. The Whānau Development programme continues in 2010 and of interest will be seeing how the learning support deals with students from years 1 and 2 of the programme. It is envisaged that support scaffolding can continue with 2009 students providing tuakana (elder 'sibling') support for those beginning in 2010. As with many learning programmes however, time provides lessons on improving current programmes, or signals new directions to take.

Conclusion

Quite simply, culture is important to many Māori students. And more importantly, having culturally relevant programmes and initiatives can contribute positively to student retention and success. As noted by Gadd (1975), Māori culture is rich:

> …with the sort of experiences that educate deeply and lastingly. The tangihanga, hui, …arts and crafts, genealogies, traditional lore and history…all are interdependent, interrelated, inseparable aspects….Each draws powerfully together social, emotional, intellectual and sensory experience. Each is both functional and symbolic of Māori identity. Each establishes and maintains links with the past, and at the same time declares a promise to the future. (p. 18)

It could be argued that the inclusion of Māori cultural components also 'declares a promise to the future' for **all** peoples of this land. Success for Māori ultimately

equates to success for the whole of Aotearoa New Zealand society. With initiatives such as TipuOranga and the Whānau Development programme, there is the potential to create firm foundations from which the students can negotiate the shifting sands of their lives, in ways that ensure their academic and life success.

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