I began my teaching career in 1973 in New Zealand, in a newly developed commuter suburb/city that was mainly populated by working class white people (Pakeha), Indigenous Maori people and recent migrants from the Pacific Islands. People here worked locally in a large car assembly plant or commuted to factories and low-skilled employment in the adjacent city Wellington, New Zealand capital’s city. Their children attended the local public schools.

On arriving at the first of the two secondary schools that I was to work in over the next 14 years, I was surprised to find that despite high parental aspirations, most of the Maori and Pacific Island children consistently scored lower on standardised achievement tests across all age ranges than did the children of the Pakeha people. So it did not appear to be a case of socio-economic status determining student outcomes. for most of the families, (be they Pakeha, Maori of Pacific Islanders), were working class, and living in similar houses provided by the government as part of New Zealand’s welfare state at that time.

I began to hear that the most common explanation for this differentiation among my peers was that Maori, and students of Pacific Island descent, were culturally deprived; there were few books in their homes, they were not read to from an early age, there was limited parental support for their learning, they did not strive in their learning actively involved with their families and with their marae (meeting house), Toa Rangatira. This marae featured a magnificently carved meeting house and dining room, and being near the capital city, was used often for hosting many groups from around New Zealand and overseas. I remember that one day David Bowie was welcomed on to the marae. Prince Charles also visited at some point as did many other dignitaries and Maori peoples from other districts. This marae and its people was a very significant feature on the cultural landscape of the whole region.

I spent lots of time at the marae myself and was surprised that these people could be regarded as being ‘culturally deprived’. David Bowie had been in their midst—how more culturally cool could they be? Yet their children were consistently missing out on the benefits of schooling. I felt professionally limited and frustrated, unprepared by my pre-service teacher education and curious about why these phenomena could occur. I did gain an understanding of what was happening in the schools from the students’ perspective however, for as time went on they told me that most of their classrooms relationships were toxic, their subsequent learning experiences were mostly negative, and this had been the case for their families for generations. In effect, they understood that they were the recipients of their teachers’ ‘cultural deprivation’ theorizing about them and they had not found it to be an enlightening experience.

What followed was a long period of time when I transitioned from being a secondary school classroom teacher to a university-based academic. This involved my undertaking a doctoral study into what constituted effective ways of undertaking research into Maori people’s lives. This study involved an in-depth analysis of my mothers’ Maori family and the reasons for their dispersal throughout New Zealand following the civil war in the 1860s and 70s. I learnt that...
researching into Maori people’s lives involved the researcher establishing an extended family-like relationship prior to and during the data gathering and analysis phases of the research in such a way that these phases were conflated. This way of undertaking research allowed the culturally-generated sense-making processes of the research participants to be engaged at all times in a way that was different from and less impositional than traditional ways of undertaking research.

In 2001 I returned to my concern about the achievement of Maori students. Extrapolating from the understanding about the fundamental importance of relationships I had identified in my doctoral study, I eventually made my way back to New Zealand classrooms. Here I hypothesized that if teachers were able to establish extended family-like relationships within their classrooms, Maori students would then be able to participate successfully within this context for learning and their learning outcomes would improve. As part of this process, during that year, I led a group of researchers in a systematic examination of Maori students’ schooling experiences in order to identify what they understood about the learning contexts that were currently being created in their classrooms and what impact these were having upon their learning and achievement. Suffice it to say that the interviews with Maori students in the early 2000s revealed that, to them, the same theorizing and consequent negative relationships that had been revealed to me in the 1970s and 80s remained dominant in our schools.

As part of this process, we also spoke to a large number of teachers in a range of school settings about their experiences when working with Maori children. As we interviewed these teachers, we heard them recount time and time again exactly the same kind of explanations that I had heard in the 1970s and 80s. They told me of their high aspirations for all of their students, including Maori. Yet on the other hand, they expounded that same ‘cultural deprivation’ theories that I had heard many years earlier. Essentially they told us they felt that their ability to make a difference for Maori students and by extension, Pacific Island students, was being compromised by forces beyond their control, primarily by the culture or the behavior of the children and their parents. Most spoke of their feeling isolated, and professionally bereft of solutions, yet expected by society to provide them; while they often felt that society was creating situations that they could not address. They told us of their frustration at not being able to reach Maori students and make the difference for them that, by and large, they were able to make for their other students.

“They told us of their frustration at not being able to reach Maori students and make the difference for them that, by and large, they were able to make for their other students.”

In order to understand what was happening here I found the work of Jerome Bruner particularly helpful where he identified that teaching occurs, progress is evaluated, and practices modified as “a direct reflection of the beliefs and assumptions the teacher holds about the learner” (p. 47). This means that “…our interactions with others are deeply affected by our everyday intuitive theorizing about how other minds work” (p. 45). In other words, our actions as teachers, parents, or whoever we are at the time, are driven by the mental images or understandings that we have of other people. For example, if we think that certain other people have deficiencies, our actions will tend to follow from this thinking and the relationships we develop will be negative and our subsequent interactions with them will tend to be negative and unproductive. No matter how good our intentions may be, if our students sense that we think they are deficient, they will respond negatively. We were told time and again by many of the students we interviewed in 2001 and again in 2004/5, that negative, deficit thinking on the part of teachers was a fundamental cause of negative student–teacher relations and this had an adverse impact on their (Maori) student attendance, engagement and achievement. The students told us of their aspirations to learn and to take advantage of what the school had to offer, yet they found that negative teacher theorizing about them, and actions, came across as an all-out assault on their identities as Maori and their need to be accepted and acceptable. The end result was that despite teachers’ aspirations to the contrary, students were being precluded from participating in what the school had to offer by the very images that teachers had of these students in their minds.

Such understandings have major implications for teachers hoping to be agentic in their classrooms and for educational reformers. As Elbaz explains, understanding the relationship between teachers’ theories of practice about learners and learning is fundamental to teachers being agentic because the principles they hold dear and the practices they employ are developed from the images they hold of others. According to Foucault, the images that teachers create when describing their experiences are expressed in the metaphors found in the language of educational discourse. What happens is that teachers are able to draw from a variety of discourses to make sense of the experiences they have when relating to and interacting with Maori students. Most importantly for our desire to be agentic, some discourses hold solutions to problems, and others don’t. This was exciting stuff.
because it explained that it was the discourses that teachers drew upon that kept them frustrated and isolated. It was not their attitudes or personalities, nor was it the fault of the children and their parents. It was what Foucault termed their “positioning within discourse”. That is, by drawing on particular discourses to explain and make sense of their experiences, they were positioning themselves within these discourses and acting accordingly in their classrooms. The discourses already existed; they have developed throughout history and were often in conflict with each other. It was just the dominance of the ‘cultural deprivation’ discourse among teachers that was having such negative impact upon Maori student engagement and achievement. Ironically, despite teachers’ own aspirations for their students, they were unwittingly creating negative relationships with their students with consequent negative implications for teaching interactions and learning.

The crucial implication of this analysis is that it is the discursive positions that teachers take that are the key to their being able to make a difference for Maori students and by extension, other marginalized students. For us, this meant that before we began any in-class professional development, it was important to provide teachers with learning opportunities in which they could critically evaluate where they discursively positioned themselves when constructing their own images, principles, and practices in relation to their Maori students. In other words, we ourselves as providers of professional learning opportunities had to establish an extended family-like context for learning with teachers, just as we were suggesting they do with their students. Further, it was important that these learning opportunities provided teachers with an opportunity to undertake what Davies called “discursive repositioning”. This means our providing teachers with opportunities to draw upon explanations and practices from alternative discourses that offer solutions instead of problems and barriers. Hence, at the commencement of the professional learning opportunities for teachers, we offered them a collection of narratives of Maori students’ learning experiences, in this way providing them with vicarious experiences of what it was like to be a Maori student in classrooms dominated by ‘cultural deprivation’ theorizing, the impact such theorizing has upon student participation and what an alternative learning context might look like.

From these early developments grew a large-scale educational reform project that ran for some 12 years in 50 secondary schools in New Zealand. Of course, there is more to educational reform than examining teacher theorizing, providing alternative discursive positionings and developing extended family-like learning contexts in classrooms and schools. Nonetheless, the development of positive relationships through a discursive analysis is of such fundamental importance to any subsequent activity that I have detailed the development of this dimension of the project in this article.

“"The implementation of these effective pedagogies have had consequent implications for improved Maori student engagement with learning and achievement."
Relationships-based Leaders of Learning Profile

For Teachers, Impact Coaches, Instructional and System Leaders (i.e. Leaders of Learning) who wish to impact Indigenous and Marginalised students' educational outcomes.

Relationship-based Leaders of Learning:

Create a family-like context for learning by:

» Rejecting deficit explanations for learners’ learning
» Caring for and nurturing the learner, including their language and culture
» Voicing and demonstrating high expectations
» Ensuring that all learners can learn in a well-managed environment so as to promote learning
» Knowing what learners need to learn

Interact within this family-like context in ways we know promotes learning by;

» Drawing on learners’ prior learning
» Using Formative assessment: Feedback
» Using Formative assessment: Feed-forward
» Using Co-construction processes
» Using Power-sharing strategies

Monitor learners’ progress and the impact of the processes of learning by assessing how well learners are able to:

» Goals: Set goals for their learning
» Pedagogy: Articulate how they prefer to learn
» Institutions: Explain how they prefer to organise/be organised in their learning/learning relationships and interactions
» Leadership: participate in leadership roles and functions
» Spread: Include others in the learning context and interactions
» Evidence: provide evidence of how well they are progressing and what progress they are making
» Ownership: take ownership of their own learning.

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“I was contracted to work with Cognition Education in New Zealand to develop a further iteration of the programme. This enabled me to review the earlier model and develop a more integrated model that not only provides leaders of learning with a means of creating an extended family-like context for learning, but also monitoring the progress learners are making…”

Footnotes:
