

An Ontological Perspective on the Development of Home–School Partnership Relationships with Indigenous Communities

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We propose the use of an ontological perspective to shift current thinking about the phenomenon of home/school partnerships, particularly through an examination of school leaders (leadership team) — community relationships that seek to better serve Indigenous students and their communities. We reanalysed focus group interviews of indigenous Māori students and their whānau/families from a wider New Zealand study that investigated the development of culturally responsive leadership in 84 secondary schools. The aim of the leadership intervention was to improve school practices and enable Indigenous Māori students to achieve and enjoy educational success as Māori. Reanalysis of interview material revealed categories related to relational being that highlight both opportunities and impediments to authentic relationships between schools and communities and the development of culturally responsive leadership. This paper attempts to create a framework in regards to relational ontology within a broader struggle for transformative praxis and to provide direction for further theoretical and practical investigation within schools.

■ **Keywords:** school community relationship, Indigenous students, ontology

In this paper, we make the case that building authentic home–school learning relationships between schools and whānau (parents/caregivers) must both be respectful of Māori ways of knowing and being and require a shift from epistemology (knowing about) to ontology (knowing through). Partnership between schools and whānau requires teachers to acknowledge families' cultural capital and build on their funds of knowledge to make learning interactions more relevant and motivating for students (Evans, 2011; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). However, for teachers to become more knowledgeable about families, an ontological perspective would advocate that knowing occurs through the being as well as the understanding. This demands a shift in the dynamics from teachers/schools 'knowing about' to 'knowing through', taking an embodied approach to creating relationships with whānau. Gay (2010) endorses the notion of learning through by defining culturally responsive teaching as connecting 'to and through [students'] personal and cultural strengths, their intellectual capabilities, and their prior accomplishments' (p. 26).

Developing teacher/whānau relationships in New Zealand secondary schools is a complex issue and some-

thing the government in New Zealand has been grappling with for more than a decade. New Zealand's Ministry of Education funded projects such as Te Kauhua (Tuuta, Bradnam, Hynds, Higgin, & Broughton, 2004), Te Kotahitanga (Bishop, Berryman, Tiakiwai, & Richardson, 2003) and He Kākano (University of Waikato & Te Whare Wānanga o Awanuiārangi, 2010) designed to lift Māori students' achievement levels in English medium (mainstream) schools. Both government and the designers and implementers for each of these projects endeavoured to include and engage whānau in school life, but to date there is virtually no evidence that this has occurred.

This paper focusses on the He Kākano data interviews conducted with whānau as part of a larger evaluation research project. These whānau data from the original He Kākano evaluation (Hynds et al., 2013) highlighted broad themes of issues that were important to families. However, the report did not expand on how these themes

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could be used to bring about change in regards to establishing authentic home–school partnerships and improving school and whānau relationships. In this paper, we reanalyse the themes that emerged from the original interview data and highlight ontological perspectives for whānau and school relationships. These perspectives draw from the literature, the whānau interviews, and our own views.

Background

Ka Hikitia Strategy and Māori Self-Determination

The notion of building relationships between whānau and schools is not a new agenda in Aotearoa. Māori self-determination as highlighted in Ka Hikitia, the New Zealand Ministry of Education's (2013) Māori education strategy, is preempted and informed by decades of Māori grass-root struggles seeking relevant and positive models of education for Māori students. Such models are exemplified by a resurgence of Māori knowledge, language and culture in the early 1980s through alternative education movements such as Kohanga Reo (early childhood Māori language nest), Kura Kaupapa Māori (Māori immersion primary schooling), Wharekura (Māori immersion secondary schooling) and Whare Wānanga (Māori immersion university education) (Hindle, 2010).

Although Māori medium schools are well positioned to support Māori students to attain success in their educational endeavours, over 80% of Māori students attend English-medium schools that are failing to support Māori learners to achieve. Part of the agenda to lift Māori student achievement levels is for schools to actively work towards building relationships with the whānau (families) of the Māori students. The national Māori education strategy *Ka Hikitia — Accelerating Success 2013–2017* seeks to manifest the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi, particularly in relating these principles to New Zealand schools pragmatically. For Ka Hikitia to take effect in a manner respectful of the Treaty, Māori (whānau, hapū and iwi) must be considered fairly and involved in developing policies and establishing funding priorities.

The coined statement 'Māori students enjoy and achieve educational success as Māori' is vital to authentic partnerships (Averill et al., 2014, 2015) representing equal power, true collaboration and notions of reciprocity or mutual benefit between schools and whānau. While we agree with the notion of Māori students enjoying and achieving educational success as Māori, we need to consider a critical question: Who decides what success is? At present, success in secondary schools is defined and measured exclusively through achievable learning outcomes that generally have little to do with Māori language, cultural values and pedagogical approaches. In regards to Māori achieving educational success as Māori, we claim that Māori need to be determining what educational success is. When considering the idea of Māori students enjoying and achieving educational success as

Māori, ideas about equal power, true collaboration and reciprocity between schools and whānau need to be taken seriously. We argue that an ontological framework (knowing through) rather than an epistemological framework (knowing about) is crucial if schools are to build partnership relationships with whānau based on equal power, true collaboration and reciprocity.

Ontological Paradigms

Heidegger (1999) described ontology as a doctrine of being and refers to ontological approaches as 'the posing of questions, explication, concepts, and categories which have arisen looking at beings as be-ing . . .' (p. 2). Newman and Holzman (1997) argued that philosophy has been epistemologised and ontology abandoned as 'metaphysical and meaningless' (p. 25). Through a focus on epistemology (or theory of knowing), ontology (or theory of being) is often overlooked (Dall'Alba, 2009). Situated in theory and language, epistemology is based on a need to understand everything in our world(s) — a methodological perspective centred in cognitive processes. In contrast, ontology as being or soul is situated in action and transformation or change (Hindle, 2010; 2014; Hindle, Hynds, Phillips, & Rameka, 2015). Marx (1973) infers that the purpose of philosophy should be to change the world. Heidegger refers to transformation as a process that happens within our essential being that 'lays hold of the soul itself and transforms it in its entirety by first of all leading us to the place of our essential being and acclimatising us to it' (Heidegger, 1998, p. 176).

Māori Perspectives Regarding Ontology

Henry and Pene (2001) offered the idea that operating from Māori paradigms in research has its manifestation in Māori cosmology. This assertion highlights a predicament of considering Māori ways of knowing and being while operating in contemporary contexts. Henry and Pene (2001) quote Dame Mira Szazys, a prominent Māori leader, who urged young Māori to build a vision for the future founded on a new humanism based on ancient values but 'versed in contemporary idiom' (p. 283). Szazys' vision invokes the dilemma of requiring Māori to reconcile the rediscovery or reinvention of traditional knowledge with existing and emerging new knowledge (Hindle, 2014). Mika (2010) asserts that 'the opportunities for us to state emphatically that there is pure, unadulterated traditional (Māori) knowledge are diminished' (p. 2) and advocates for knowledge that is ontologically Māori yet pragmatic.

Mika (2010) further asserts that Māori generally have no problem with the concept of an ontologically prior given, whereas the concept is 'largely ignored in Western education systems' (p. 2). Denzin and Lincoln (2011) acknowledge writings by Indigenous scholars such as Bishop (2005) and Smith (2005) when reflecting on the movement of decolonising Western epistemologies and

opening up the academy to non-Western forms of ‘wisdom, knowing, knowledge and knowledge production’ (p. 456). According to Marsden, a prominent Māori leader, Pre-European Māori ways of knowing connected the physical and spiritual worlds through highly symbolic concepts based on elaborate rituals grounded in mythology, whakapapa (Māori genealogy) and whanaungatanga (relationship) (Royal, 2003). From a Māori ontological perspective, whanaungatanga is viewed as the actions that affect relationships between ourselves, others and our universe (Hindle, 2010). Māori genealogy and ontology situate human beings as being part of, not separate from, the mauri (life force, vigour, impetus and potentiality) that connects everything in the universe (Durie, 2003; Hindle, 2014). In regards to Māori ontological perspectives, Jones and Hoskins (2015) state:

the identity of ‘things’ in the world is not understood as discrete or independent, but emerges through, and as, relations with everything else. It is the relation, or connection, not the thing itself, that is ontologically privileged in indigenous Māori thought. (p. 80)

Concepts regarding Māori ontology seem difficult to reconcile in education systems that are focussed on measurement and only student academic outcomes. Increasingly, education seems to be influenced by neoliberal agenda that represent few, if any, connections with Māori values, knowledge, pedagogy and ways of being (Hindle, et al., 2015). Mika (2010) asserts that this state of affairs ‘is one of the remaining colonial challenges of Māori’ (p. 2). Such challenges are not new for Māori, having been subjected to and dominated by European colonisation since the early 1800s. Schooling and education are intrinsically linked to a dominant colonial force framed by and situating schooling and education in epistemology (understanding about) that privileges western knowledge thus institutionalising a context of unequal power and social relations (Fitzsimons & Smith, 2000).

Ontology in Practice

We see tensions when considering Māori ontological ways to building relationships that are juxtaposed to contemporary societal approaches within educational contexts. These tensions manifest in the space between traditional Māori ways of knowing and being and the barriers and limitations to working in these traditional ways within contemporary society. We offer a metaphor in support of overcoming the challenges as teachers and schools grapple with how Māori ontology might be considered in building relations with whānau. This metaphor situates the mountains as traditional knowledge (Māori ontology), the sea as new knowledge and the shoreline as the (fluctuating or ever-changing) space where new knowledge, over time, is indigenised (Gegeo & Watson-Gegeo, 2002). This metaphor invokes a sense of on-going tension between the mountains, the sea and the shoreline: pressure points,

tectonic plate movements, eruptions, treacherous underwater — visible or less visible (Hynds, 2007) — terrains, and rising sea levels. We assert that it is these spaces of tension/dilemma/interface that provide the opportunity for us to create new knowledge, ways of knowing and ways of being (Hindle, 2014; Hindle, et al., 2015). As a space for the possibility of building authentic relations between schools and families, this metaphor is important as it acknowledges the fact that there is tension in building relationships but emphasises the need for space to work through these tensions constructively. More importantly, the metaphor emphasises that it is through the being (ontology) that this space for transformation is created.

Giroux (2005) uses the idea of borders and crossing borders to help understand movement across different cultures. The concept of borders ‘allows one to critically engage the struggle over those territories, spaces and contact zones where power operates to either expand or to shrink the distance and connectedness among individuals, groups and places’ (p. 2). Giroux’s idea of border crossing deals with concepts of transitioning and negotiating space. Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López and Tejeda (1999) talk about the third space as a place where dialogue can be created which allows for competing discourses and knowledge to be bought into the open to create new understandings and relational trust. Concepts such as border crossing and third space are helpful as frameworks suited to inform our study. Researchers have used these theoretical frameworks to contextualise their work and as a lens to help explain what happens as people make educational transitions (e.g., Aikenhead, 1996; Aikenhead & Jegede, 1999; Akkerman & Bakker, 2011; Jansen, Herbel-Eisenmann, & Smith, 2012; Luft, 1999).

Ontology in Home–School Relationships

The idea of adopting a ‘knowing through’ approach to school and whānau relationships would place focus on the ‘being’ (ontology) occurring in the forming of relationships as opposed to the ‘knowing’ about relationship development (epistemology). An analysis of the phenomena of being occurring through Māori whakapapa (genealogy), acknowledges three stages of being: Te Korekore is the realm of potential being; Te Pō is the realm of becoming and Te Ao Mārama is the realm of being (Marsden cited in Royal, 2003). When considering Te Korekore, Te Po and Te Ao Mārama concepts as an ontological framework for school and whānau relationships, Te Korekore represents the beginning point, the idea and the inspiration for relationship engagement. Te Korekore is often described as the void or a space of absolute nothingness. In this space, anything is possible. This is an important concept when considering relationship development. Creating a space where anything is possible needs to be free of predetermined agendas from the school, so that Māori are able to engage in co-construction of the new agenda. Te Po represents the actions taken, and Te Ao Mārama

represents the manifestation or the coming into being of the idea. Marsden's concepts regarding Te Korekore, Te Po, Te Ao Mārama philosophically allows for phenomena to 'unfold' or 'come into existence' through making space for whatever arises to manifest. The notion of allowing for relationships to unfold through the being shifts the emphasis from a linear approach based on predetermined expectations, for example, student achievement to a holistic approach centred in the being (ontology) based on the notion of allowing relationship itself to unfold. To operate in such a way requires the teacher/school to let go of controlling the process and therefore opening up the possibility of collaboration based on an authentic sharing of power. Such an approach aligns with Bishop's (2005) belief that a co-constructed approach aims to reach a consensus and arrive at jointly constructed meaning.

How might an ontological approach develop authentic relationships of integrity between schools and whānau? Evans (2011) highlights what he refers to as the emotional geographies of teaching while taking context into consideration. School and family relationships are generally situated in agenda focussed on issues such as academic achievement, attendance, attitudes towards schools and graduation rates (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Evans asserts that tackling such issues requires consideration of the emotional geographies and complexities of family and teacher relationships; failure to do so may undermine the potential for collaboration and be counterproductive to family engagement with schools. He does not, however, elaborate on why emotional geographies are important to family-school partnerships. Our assertion is that emotional geographies are situated in an ontological paradigm that can allow space for transformation to occur. Put another way, ontological approaches aim to transform the being in ways that enhance or produce positive outcomes. Transformation happens in the space of being (ontology) rather than knowing (epistemology). We assert that the importance and purpose of recognising and engaging with ontological approaches for teacher and parent relationships is not only to allow the space for authentic communication but ultimately to effect change. We also argue that ontological analyses and processes must enhance the emotional complexities of relationship by engaging with whānau in ways that go beyond knowing about to knowing through, or the embodiment of cultural knowledge.

Home-School Relationships

Māori educationalists stress the importance of positive relationships between schools and whānau (Bishop & Berryman, 2006; Bishop, Berryman, Cavanaugh, & Teddy, 2009; Durie, 2003). Schools are urged to form relationships based on Te Ao Māori (the Māori world) through iwi (tribal), hapū (sub-tribal) and Māori education providers (Durie, 2003). Projects that focus on raising awareness of Te Ao Māori (e.g., Te Kauhua, Te Kotahitanga and He

Kākano) share a clear focus on whānaungatanga, or building relationships (Hindle, 2010). Nevertheless, the literature is less informative regarding how to achieve such relationships, particularly from a Te Ao Māori perspective. It may be relevant to identify the lens that teachers use when learning about Te Ao Māori knowledge, practices and values. We suggest that teachers be encouraged to replace epistemological (knowing about) with ontological (knowing through) lenses to acknowledge deeper emotional and possibly even spiritual connections to the phenomena. Ideas regarding learning through engaging in Te Ao Māori knowledge, practices and values as opposed to learning about these concepts encourage shared or equal engagement and contribution from all participants — a level playing field that encourages and fosters reciprocal interactions. We argue that an ontological approach allows the space for transformation through the being. What is important when working in an ontological way is firstly to create the space, for example, for a relationship to occur. Therefore, there is no agenda but the possibility of building relationship. In this space, we acknowledge the importance of equal, shared and reciprocal interactions.

Evans (2011) notes that teachers tend to dominate conversations with discussions of student achievement that leave parents feeling powerless or resentful. Therefore, teachers need to seek opportunities for reciprocal learning and find ways that engage parents as partners in the interaction (Biddulph, Biddulph, & Biddulph, 2003; Bryk, Gomez, Grunow, & LeMahieu 2015; Semke & Sheridan, 2012) and do so in ways that acknowledge and allow the space for Māori ways of knowing and being. Pathologising practices, whereby school professionals view culturally diverse students and their families as deficit and somehow lacking the necessary language skills and cultural capital, underpin culturally inadequate and inappropriate school programmes (Baquedano-Lopez, Alexander, & Hernández, 2013), which in turn reinforce parents' and caregivers' negative perceptions of schools (Mitchell & Bryan, 2007; Shields, Bishop, & Mazawi, 2005). Deficit views of Indigenous communities are deeply 'embedded in curriculum, pedagogy, standards' and school policies (McCarty & Lee, 2014, p. 104). Citing de Carvalho (2001) and Schutz (2007), Evans argues that '... appropriate parental behaviours' are often 'framed using a school-centric model that privileges middle-class norms and deference to professional educators' (2011, p. 244).

Yet, the professional literature emphasises that educators must take responsibility for finding ways to connect with families and communities (Epstein, Sanders, & Clark, 1999; Evans, 2011; Little, 1990). Epstein (2007) advocates stronger school-family relationships so that teachers have the information they need to help students to develop their talents, meet school requirements and plan for the future. To date, however, the work on home-school relationships has not been linked to valuing ethnic and indigenous perspectives but instead focussed on how home-school

relationships can assist nondominant cultural student groups to master dominant culture educational requirements.

Methodology

The data reported in this paper were collected as part of an independent national evaluation of the effectiveness of He Kākano, a professional development programme for school leaders involving 80 secondary schools working across two school years (Hynds et al., 2013). The He Kākano programme was charged with ‘improving culturally responsive leadership and teacher practices to ensure Māori learners enjoy educational success as Māori’ to ‘improve the emotional, social, cultural and academic outcomes of Māori children’ (University of Waikato & Te Whare Wānanga o Awanuiārangi, 2010, p. 4). The larger evaluation project employed a mixed methods research approach utilising both quantitative (student achievement outcomes, student attitude survey results, school leader surveys, classroom observations, school action plans document analyses) and qualitative (interviews, analyses of open-ended survey responses) data. The bicultural research team comprised both Māori and non-Māori researchers towards reflecting criteria. Penetito (2005) describes as defining development in Māori education research including incorporating Māori methods of investigation; envisaging a positive outcome for Māori; adding to Māori capacity to control their own destinies and contributing to the improvement of the education system and the society as a whole.

Across the evaluation data, results were mixed with respect to connections between school leaders and Māori students, whānau, hapū and iwi about educational practices that might better reflect Māori aspirations and intellectual, cultural knowledge. Hence, closer inspection of the interviews conducted with Māori whānau at the nine case study schools was undertaken to interrogate their perspectives on these relationships and how they saw their schools responding to their children’s educational needs.

Participating Schools

Eighty-nine secondary schools across six separate regions across the country participated in the national evaluation, of which nine schools were chosen as case studies that represented the range of schools participating in the project. Case study schools were located across both islands, and included single sex and co-educational schools. Schools enrolled from 80% to 20% Māori students with the remainder of the school population comprising New Zealand European, Pasifika, Asian and students from other countries.

Data Collection

Focus group interviews were conducted with Māori whānau at the case study schools in each of 2 years. In all cases, the semistructured interviews were led by a Māori

researcher who was a speaker of te reo (Māori language) and adhered to Māori cultural protocols.

Interview Transcription, Coding and Analyses

Interviews were transcribed and then coded using NVivo. Members of the team reviewed printed transcripts and met to review possible codes to identify themes in the interview data based on their experiences from carrying out the interviews. To identify codes, five core researchers from the Victoria University-based team reviewed a subsample of complete interview transcriptions to identify possible nodes and words for coding using NVivo. Deductive top-down analyses was used to identify codes and themes related to the evaluation focus questions, particularly impact and implementation of the He Kākano programme. Inductive bottom-up analyses, reporting stakeholder understandings and actions were also used.

Ethical Procedures

All processes for obtaining informed consent and protecting the privacy of participants (including the identities of schools) were reviewed and approved by the university’s human ethics committee. Participation in interviews was voluntary.

Results

The focus group interview data analysis revealed a range of themes. As the researchers who carried the evaluation of the He Kākano project, we selected the following broad themes as the ontological perspectives, issues and challenges to working in Māori ontological ways that were revealed by parent interviews:

- Communication with Māori whānau
- Community relationship building
- Māori achieving as Māori.

Communication with Māori Whānau

Typically, parents indicated that they were not generally consulted by the schools about their own aspirations or ideas for their children’s education:

Myself, I have not seen our aspirations or our input being injected into the school.

What we looked at overall was looking at what could be put into the curriculum to make it feel like Māori had some input. For me, the curriculum kind of hasn’t changed.

Whānau appeared to struggle with a lack of communication, particularly about issues that they regarded as important to them. They stated that much of the communication from the school was through the traditional approaches such as notes sent home and telephone calls rather than the kind of face-to-face communication preferred by Māori. This perceived lack of communication was further complicated by whānau distrust about the extent to which teachers had knowledge about Māori culture:

I think to be honest, there are a lot of teachers in this school that wouldn't have a clue, they would not have a clue what you're talking . . . they wouldn't have a clue how to deal with that. One of our teachers struggled to communicate with our parents and I don't know whether it's because, I don't want to say it, I think some of our kids are made to feel like it's their problem and sometimes the problems are between both parties, i.e., teacher and student and family and not allowing, how I can put it, not allowing I suppose to be open minded to understand everybody's faults as opposed to just looking at one picture.

In contrast to school complaints that it is difficult to engage whānau in school matters, parent comments suggested otherwise:

I think sometimes the school feels that some parents don't need to be contacted so we struggled quite a lot . . . It's more communication lines with the school that we struggled with.

There have been problems and there still are problems. I'm not sure about anybody else but there is a lack of communication from school to parents. As in literally – kanohi to kanohi. That's just me.

Whānau interpretation of what was important regarding communication from the school included cultural norms such as being welcomed to the school and parents participating in the school. Some whānau did speak positively about relationships between school and home and expressed admiration for teachers who went a bit further than the classroom teaching and time constraints to build relationships with the students:

Well to me, the relationship between me and the school is brilliant. I can ring up and find out where my boys are, or what my son is up to, all that, there's no problem communicating with the teachers, I leave a message on the phone, they get back to me within a day. So I have no problems with the school when it comes to that. And with the Māori teacher, we see her around all the time anyway.

I think it's the accessibility of the teachers to the students, making the students know that they're not just there for the hour-long period, or whatever it is, but they're there for the students, yeah, in that kind of environment, the accessibility that they put themselves out there to the students, that the students feel comfortable to be able to go as students. I find those are the teachers that seem to be able to relate to the children.

Whānau expressed their own schooling as a negative experience and saw the need for the school to be positive in their communications with them and their children:

For some whānau, they haven't enjoyed [school], so coming in the school gates is a major barrier, so for some other schools, what they do is they just try different ways and the whole thing about the first communication being a positive one . . . coming back to your wish list, if you could change something, you talked about communication, you talked about the fact that that positive affirmation, that the very first point of contact is going to be positive, positive feed-

back, you talked about when kids come home and say the feedback's been good from my teacher.

I think my goal is that I'd like to see my children rewarded for their positives, [rather than] being, why aren't you wearing the correct shoes, why don't you, instead, oh my god, look at your uniform, it looks great, congratulations, get a certificate.

Community Relationship Building

Generally, Māori parents felt the need for closer connections with the Māori community and strategies to involve them in key decisions affecting their children:

We had no communication [about] why the Māori unit was disestablished, why the whānau class was, we were told and the thing is we invest in the school so we should have had a say about how we wanted to see . . . we don't realise that if it was going to be disestablished it wasn't going to be offered to Year 9s.

I think possibly more community involvement with the decision making. I know it's a school thing . . . but that decision making should have been out in the community, the Māori people in the community be part of the decision making in that . . . the future of the whānau should have been left not just up to the school itself but the community to make the decision. I know we've got board members but they [don't] represent everyone's views, if there's not a process for us to have our views.

Closer connections with whānau and the Māori community included the need for schools/staff have a deeper understanding of Māori worldviews and practices. This understanding includes the spiritual dimensions of knowing what it is to be Māori and the importance of the spiritual dimension in regards to Māori identity:

I think they need . . . more understanding about Māori. Māori it's not just a matter of a person . . . spiritual aspects of them, they've got their culture, they've got their whānau and that makes them Māori and a lot of our young people today are missing that aspect and they're feeling empty and they're getting lost and that's what they need to realise.

Māori Achieving as Māori

Whānau viewed Māori content as missing from the curriculum and questioned whether teachers see their children as Māori or not. They clearly articulated their understandings about Māori achieving as Māori in terms of what it meant to them as well as Māori identity being affirmed in the school:

What we looked at overall was looking at what could be put into the curriculum to make it feel like Māori had some input. For me the curriculum kind of hasn't changed . . . The only time there was te reo was Māori Language Week, one week, 7 days, that's it. Matiriki did not look like it was anything Māori except for our kapa haka group and that was it. Everything else, for me and my family, because we came just looked like it was something put together, slapped together and we'll put balloons over there and you'll pop them or we'll have some cakes over here.

It's actually understanding what that means too, isn't it, that Māori achieving as Māori, that's being able to achieve in an environment where you're confident about who you are and what your values are and that's accepted, it's not treated as being any different . . .

The pros are actually giving our kids a voice as where primarily they didn't have that voice and as far as being tangata whenua with this land, it's allowing the kids to have an understanding of who they are. A lot of our Māori kids have lost that . . .

Knowing who they are as Māori/being proud of it/being comfortable with themselves.

Whānau associated Māori achieving as Māori with having a strong sense of identity and this was often connected with activities such as kapa haka, sport and the performing arts. However, there was also a perception that kapa haka and the performing arts were not valued or supported by schools when it came to Māori identity:

I feel so strongly about this, I really do. My daughter's in the kapa haka group . . . and for the last 2 months every weekend just about they've been [in lock down] from Friday afternoon to Sunday night, they've dedicated themselves, Māori students dedicated themselves every weekend, no social life, 2 nights a week during the week and represented this college at the nationals in Whangarei about a week ago we got back and it's like, does anyone get that, these kids have worked their butts off plus tried to keep up with homework because there was no relaxation on any school work. They represented this college the whole . . . area they did, and it's like, from where I'm sitting, no one gives a damn.

Māori students are used for performance and powhiri but no acknowledgement and no help for missing class and no self-esteem given to these performing students. There is a lack of recognition for their skill or input.

Regarding Māori identity, one whānau member viewed Te Reo [Māori language] as critical. Manu Kōrero (the Māori speech competitions) were viewed and valued as a powerful vehicle for Te Reo, and it was deemed important to encourage and enter students into the Te Reo Māori section of the competitions:

Te Reo is, I'm very passionate about Te Reo, tikanga. Kapa haka's ok, but to me the most important part is Te Reo, identity of the kids.

Manu Korero is Te Reo and it started here at [school name] . . . at Manu Korero they were putting in too many English speakers, so now we have said if you don't have a Māori speaker, no speaker can stand at all from your school. So we've made it compulsory that they have to have a Māori speaker . . . it's all Māori and it's Māori kaupapa and it's run by Māori so it's a good experience for that, but going to the Nationals, that's the cream, that's the cream of the crop . . . That's what life's all about, eh?

Māori traditional icons such as the marae and wharenui or whare Tupuna were viewed as important to Māori identity.

These types of places were seen as places where Māori customs are practised and acknowledged as important:

The biggest [movement] happened here was perhaps the construction of the wharenui and of course one of the things is . . . seeing them around the school that . . . Māori place, there's a very, very relaxed feeling of use here and it's used by many, many groups that come in . . . I don't believe any other school in the country has done it, what we had done . . . in 4 different houses they went through in one day and the principal stood out there and likewise the head . . . there was a karanga, mihimihi and every student in the school shook hands with the principal, now you tell me how many schools, a principal stands out there and shakes hands with everybody, one day, 1850 students went through.

First and foremost, finish the whare. That's been standing on stilts for 2 years, how come they can do the science block and they still can't even get the whare done?

Having the marae/whare as a focal point in the school (rather than 'down the back') shifted whānau perspectives in terms of Māori aspirations and culture being valued in the school. Whānau aspirations were about sharing the whare with the whole community. The wharenui was viewed as a place to bring Māori together and to have staff step over into a Māori world and Māori way of doing things:

. . . cause our whare used to be down the other end and we did, we fought to get it, to bring it right in, to me, the whare is the manawa of the kura, so to bring it into the heart, where it can be seen and shared by everyone, not just Māori, by the whole school.

Maybe now our whare is completed and finished it'll give the whānau more incentive, where they got (me ki ra to ratau turanga waewae?), they got somewhere to go, you know, they can go there any time and hopefully in time too we would, taking our Board of Trustees meetings there, to the whare . . .

We have to look at the other dimensions of what success for Māori is about and that is about things like completing our whare, getting our kaupapa in terms of empowering Māori but empowering our staff as well too and having those things in place so that our annual events bring whānau into the kura. So [Powhakamana] was one of them and certainly things like kapa haka and community events.

Māori achieving as Māori encapsulated a wide range of ideas and had to do with teachers' passion as well as supporting teachers to become 'culturally responsive' to Māori needs and aspirations:

. . . how teachers pronounce their names, how they have a voice for certain students and when they look around the school, and you have to prompt them about, you know, bi-lingual signs cause it's not that obvious, but the [tohu, whakairo] or art work and when you ask about when you walk in the gate, you know, no matter how much Māori students had, they talked about the things like at least have a, have something at the gate, you know, when you come in or things around . . . What is Māori achieving as Māori, when

they go into the classroom what they were saying is, there are awesome teachers here . . . and they are the teachers that are certainly passionate about what they teach.

There was one teacher who had again come fresh out of college, been brought up in [Ngati Porou] awesome, they are, the ones brought up that way, but incorporated tikanga Māori or aspects of Māori in every, wherever he could in his lessons and a lot our students just flew with science and wanted to go to those kinds of teachers and, yes, he would, Māori achieving as Māori as just having some of that and they're not big steps but they are things that probably if they were pervasive through this school and this community that 10% differentiation with other schools like this community could change. And that's probably with [whakaaro] about Māori achieving as Māori and it's, yeah, I do believe we're doing good but we can do better in culturally responsive approaches, teachers need a lot of (awhi awhi?) and the right environment and timing for that to happen.

The picture of achievement from whānau perspectives was a highly contestable point, particularly with regard to Māori achieving as Māori:

. . . who's in that picture of achievement and it's the whānau and so really celebrating Māori achievement in an academic sense, cause you have your dissenters about what success is, or what achievement is and in a cultural sense, you know, it's hard to get parents to a report night about achievement per se and you'll get the committed few that turn up to those kinds of nights but (Te Reo) and you got your nanny there, you got the mokopuna and you got the students and so the [whakaro ari] are behind that in terms of Māori being Māori is to bring the whānau in. And nothing more than that but it's very difficult to debate that with classroom teachers when you say to them, look for someone to celebrate success whether it be they don't have to be the top 3 in the class, cause that seems to be where the aim is, but find something to celebrate, whether it be, apart from attendance, because that's always one of the not negotiables, but improvement because those are things that bring the whānau into the school and into a very positive, into the gates and the whole thing about school and coming to school for negative or even insurmountable, you know, your student, taura, shouldn't have to be the dux of the school for the family to come in, it's just bringing whānau in, we're on this journey together and so that's a big part and we've experienced [ne whaea] about Māori achievement or what achievement looks like in this community.

Māori achieving as Māori was viewed as a difficult thing to have happen within a Pākehā (New Zealand European) structure/system. These particular comments resonate with the notion that achievement in secondary schools is often defined and measured by achievable learning outcomes that seldom have anything to do with Māori language, cultural values and pedagogical approaches:

It's not achievable though, because it's a Pākehā system, in terms of education, you can't tell someone that they have to come out of it as Māori with Māori achievement when they've learnt in a, you know the structure, the whole structure of education has already been pre-determined and it's not being

pre-determined as a Māori structure, so I don't think, you couldn't, you know what I mean?

Well, you think, if that's the government 10 year strategic plan, the government plan has come from the government, which is not a Māori government, so it's like they're saying that this is what you have to accomplish, but they're the ones that are saying it, so it hasn't been established, like Māori haven't pre-determined that these are the outcomes that we want for our children in terms of education, it's come from the government's thoughts of what that will look like and telling Māori that this is what it will look like for you, so it's just, you know.

Māori have been saying this for yonks, this is a Pākehā education system, that's because it's predominantly Pākehā in everything that it has and does, numerically and everything else, which means that they also set the rules and decide what's important and what isn't. On the other hand, school is compulsory for everybody, so the school can't actually decide it will educate some and not others, nor does the school do that, on the other hand it does do that, it doesn't set out to do that, I mean I've never met a teacher who said, I want the Māori kids to fail, they're not going to say that to me anyway, even if they did, but, on the other hand I do believe that most teachers do want all the kids to succeed, but some find it harder than others and for no reason, necessarily but I still take the view that the school's got the major responsibility, they're the grown-ups if you like.

One parent was adamant that true change will not come about unless there is commitment to partnership:

I think you have to look at that from a governance and also from a management perspective as well, is that you need to have people in those positions that are making those decisions that affect the need to have more of a partnership or more of an equal standing for having Māori representation, not so much representation but having Māori across the school rather than just as teachers.

The statement that partnerships between schools and whānau require 'more of an equal standing' implies that for whānau, partnerships with their schools are of unequal status. Schooling and education are sites for the production and reproduction of dominant western knowledge (Fitzsimons & Smith, 2000). A Te Korekore, Te Po, Te Ao Mārama process allows the space for schools to let go of the idea of having to control the process, thus suspending any possibility for inequality and allowing for an authentic sharing of the power. A collaborative approach is embedded in the notion that all participants (school and whānau) will inform the process and therefore the direction of the process. A co-constructed approach opens up the possibility for highly authentic interactions between the whānau and schools.

Discussion

As Lortie (1975) reminded us, teaching is relational work. It is perhaps obvious that the relationships between teachers and students influence achievement, but the impact of

relationships between home and school on educational outcomes has not been as thoroughly interrogated in the literature. Despite evidence of strong linkages to higher academic achievement, better attendance and increased school completion rates (Henderson & Mapp, 2002), the nature of authentic family engagement and how to attain it have proved elusive (Evans, 2011). There is of course a natural disconnect between parents' focus on children's well-being and teachers' focus on students' educational achievement; there is also a disconnect between the teacher's professional perspective and the family's personal one.

In today's world, fewer and fewer nations are monocultural so that there are likely to be cultural complexities for the home-school relationship wherever a dominant school culture is challenged by increasingly diverse student, family and community populations. The New Zealand educational system is also challenged by an increasingly diverse student population, but most compelling is the overarching expectation that there be authentic engagement with the Indigenous Māori school community. There is continuing evidence that Māori are among those least likely to benefit from the existing educational system, so the need for urgency seems clear. It would appear that Treaty requirements for partnership with Māori as well as the embodiment of Māori culture in state institutions and structures are not being met.

Authentic relationships between schools and their Māori communities go beyond the kinds of technical symbols of parent-teacher relationships such as conferencing, open-houses and invitations to school events and award ceremonies. Meaningful home-school relationships with Māori would require schools to engage powerfully, authentically and creatively in a process of partnership with whānau. Such authentic partnerships with parents would not be about surface goals such as increasing attendance at parent-teacher conferences or school events (Evans, 2011). Traditional and superficial approaches to engaging families are neither effective nor appropriate for Māori in principle. There is evidence that such approaches are not effective for most families, in fact, but even if they were effective they cannot represent the bicultural partnership required with the Indigenous people of New Zealand. A sincere, bicultural commitment would be deeper, requiring attention to the layered complexities of engaging in Māori culture from an ontological perspective. Such a perspective must be based on Māori values, knowledge, pedagogy and ways of being.

The whānau interview data reveals that schools were not coming from perspectives based on Māori values, knowledge, pedagogy and ways of being and that there are equity issues in terms of school and whānau relationships. Parents articulated their desire to have authentic relationships with schools and clearly communicated the barriers to achieving this. The desire to have deeper relationships between whānau and schools include the need for schools

to be willing to engage in concepts about what it means to 'be Māori'. The data revealed that the idea of being Māori is intrinsically linked to being allied to the spiritual dimensions of being Māori. This view of being allied to the spiritual dimensions promotes an ontological, embodied approach to creating relationships. However, the data reveals that deeper relations between schools and whānau would be difficult to achieve unless there was a shift in power status from one that favours the dominant Pākehā system to one of equal status.

The idea of Māori having equal status with Pākehā was seen from whānau viewpoints as being a highly contestable issue. This point was emphasised in discussions from the data about who gets to determine measures of success for Māori students achieving educational success as Māori. From an ontological viewpoint, Māori whānau considered success for Māori learners from a wider perspective that includes, but goes beyond, academic achievement. Whānau viewpoints expressed ideas of success for Māori students as building a stronger sense of self-identity, for example. This idea of success was articulated by whānau as Māori students not only having access to Māori language, cultural values and pedagogy but also being able to make connections to spiritual dimensions of Te Ao Māori.

Whānau commented that authentic communication between staff and schools requires staff to be willing to step over into a Māori world and Māori way of operating. The data reveal that Māori whānau saw the possibility of equal power-sharing relationships happening in Māori domains such as the marae (sacred space) and in ways that acknowledge the tikanga or procedure associated with marae. The concept of wharehūi (meeting house) and marae (sacred space) being important to Māori ways of being was articulated in the view that the wharehūi needs to be purpose-built and strategically placed at the centre of the school, therefore representing the heart of the school. Instead, far too often a prefab building had been converted into a wharehūi and situated at the back of the school. Further, use of the wharehūi was not determined by the Māori community but was instead scheduled like any other room on campus by the school administration — without Māori input.

We suggest that the purpose of working in an ontological way when considering school and whānau partnerships is based on the need to allow the space for authentic communication to occur. We argue that ontological processes enhance the emotional complexities of relationship primarily by engaging with whānau in ways that go beyond knowing about, for example, cultural knowledge to a knowing through engaging in cultural paradigms thus working in a way where the knowledge becomes embodied. The notion of adopting a 'knowing through' approach to school and whānau relationships would place focus on the 'being' (ontology) as opposed to the 'knowing' (epistemology). This approach philosophically allows for phenomena to 'unfold' or 'come into existence' through

making space for whatever arises to manifest and allowing for relationships to unfold. This approach shifts the emphasis from one that is linear based on predetermined expectations to an approach that is holistic and centred in the notion of allowing relationship itself to unfold. Teachers and schools must let go of controlling the process to allow for the possibility of collaboration based on an authentic sharing of power.

Evans' (2011) research regarding 'emotional geographies' or examining the emotional side of teaching highlights a need for an ontological lens on building relationships between schools and families. We assert that the importance and purpose of recognising and engaging in emotional geographies and ontological approaches to teacher and parent relationships is not only to allow the space for authentic communication but ultimately to effect change. In this paper, we have discussed the tensions, challenges and dilemmas associated between indigenous knowledge systems and indigenous student outcomes that are based on neoliberal school reform. The ideas presented in this paper, and in particular, the notion of viewing relationship building through an ontological lens are preliminary and need further discussion, debate and research.

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