



The Impact of Storytelling on Year 5 Boys' Perceptions of New Zealand's Bicultural Identity

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Introduction

It is the expectation of all teachers in New Zealand to include the nation's bicultural heritage within their pedagogy. This expectation is widely acknowledged, but often results in tokenistic practices, such as a minimal inclusion of Māori language in the classroom. Furthermore, a Māori worldview is seldom considered or understood.

Through informal observations, we had perceived in our students a disconnect from Māori culture, both in their knowledge and appreciation. We felt that this was potentially exacerbated by our teaching practice. Therefore, we were interested to research the effect that storytelling could have on our students' acknowledgement of Māori culture as an important part of New Zealand's national identity, as well as how this might affect our teaching practice beyond tokenistic approaches.

The Research Question

How might engaging with indigenous narratives strengthen Year 5 boys' understanding of national identity?

Research Context and Participants

Saint Kentigern Boys' School is an independent, Presbyterian primary school located in Auckland, New Zealand. The approximately 550 boys who attend the school are of varying ethnicities, with the largest ethnic group identified as Anglo Saxon New Zealanders. The participants in this action research were a Year 5 class of 23 boys.

The Research Action

For the purpose of our action research, we introduced a unit on pūrākau, (commonly referred to as Māori myths and legends). As a class, we studied a range of pūrākau, enjoying the stories, but also examining the morals and inherent worldview.

Within this unit, we also incorporated a study of whakatauaikī (Māori proverbs) and pepeha (a traditional Māori form of greeting/introduction). The unit culminated in the boys introducing themselves by way of pepeha and retelling a chosen pūrākau to the class.

Data Collection and Analysis

The methods of data collection were primarily qualitative. However, quantitative data also gave insights into measurable shifts in knowledge, understanding, and attitudes towards biculturalism and national identity. We established prior knowledge and themes through observations and a letter writing task, after which we were able to focus subsequent interviews and observations accordingly. Structured and semi-structured interviews were used throughout the research to explore emerging themes. Surveys provided quantitative data about student attitudes and understanding, and measurable changes in these.

Our data were analysed using a thematic/discursive process. We examined our gathered data and identified broad patterns or themes, both individually and across the class. Any mention of themes relating to biculturalism and national identity were noted and the occurrence of these measured against other content that alluded to different factors that students considered to be worthy of a mention.

Key Findings and Discussion

Three key themes emerged from the data collected:

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| <p>1.
Boys' awareness and appreciation of biculturalism in New Zealand.</p> <p>"I didn't really know much about it [Maori culture] before"</p> | <p>2.
Varying attitudes towards Te Reo Māori and Māori culture in general; more specifically, the 'us and them' perception.</p> <p>"Back in the time when Māori culture existed ..."</p> | <p>3.
The positive impact of using pūrākau as a vehicle for helping boys increase their cultural understanding and knowledge.</p> <p>"It was cool connecting to the world through pūrākau."</p> |
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Conclusions

The storytelling tasks in our action research were engaging and effective. They certainly acted as a catalyst for boys to learn about and reflect on biculturalism. In the future, consideration may just need to be given to explicitly outlining learning intentions of the unit. We did not want to influence the outcomes of our action research by telling the boys that we hoped their understanding of national identity in New Zealand would increase during the course of their study. However, there is a lot to support the use of explicit learning intentions and success criteria in ensuring desired outcomes for students. Regardless of the type of exposure or length of study, one point is clear: Storytelling worked as a vehicle for teaching the boys and the subject matter here was engaging for our students. Without consistent and long-term exposure, however, the effects are arguably fleeting. This is a key area that any future study could focus on: How do we avoid tokenism and teaching topics in isolation and instead ensure consistent, genuine, and meaningful incorporation of biculturalism in our teaching?

Key Readings

Lourie, M. (2016). Biculturalism in education: Haere whakamua, hoki whakamuri/Going forward, thinking back. *New Zealand Journal of Teachers' Work*, 12(2), 131-148. doi:10.24135/teacherswork.v12i2.180

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This poster and further information is available at <http://www.theibsc.org/>

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