A sense of deja vu across the Tasman? What Australians might learn from the New Zealand experience with the Te Kotahitanga professional development programme

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Introduction

Throughout Australasia, indigenous educational issues remain a subject of considerable debate. In New Zealand, Maori underachievement in education has long been a matter of widespread concern. Currently the most highly visible professional development programme now operating in New Zealand mainstream secondary schools, Te Kotahitanga[1] claims to have found the answer. Its designers contend that the major barrier to improving Maori academic performance and behaviour in schools has been teachers positioning themselves in non-agentic positions because of their dogmatic adherence to deficit theorising. Hence, its remedy is equally simple – by changing teachers' attitudes to Maori students and their culture teachers will come to use the power of their own agency to see, 'wonderful changes in Maori students' behaviour, participation, engagement and achievement in their classrooms' (Phase 3 Report, 2007, p.189).

Although research drawing upon a kura kaupapa[2] Maori perspective is not new to New Zealand, the current prominence of Te Kotahitanga owes much to the well-publicised claims of its designers to be able to solve the problem of Maori students' underachievement through focusing exclusively on student-teacher interactions. As early as 2004, its chief designer, Professor Russell Bishop, termed the project a 'win-win' for both groups (*For teachers*, 2004). The release of the final Phase 3 Report in March 2007 was accompanied by considerable media interest stimulated by highly favourable publicity emanating from New Zealand's Ministry of Education. Bishop describes recently released statistics on Maori boys' under-achievement as 'a time bomb', arguing that '... something dramatic has got to be done' (Gerritsen, 2007, p.2). Given the concern surrounding such statements, it is hardly surprising

that there has been an ongoing political commitment to the programme, demonstrated earlier this year by an official announcement that Phase 4, involving 33 schools is now under way (*Education Gazette*, 2007).

The currently high level of political support for Te Kotahitanga has major implications for teachers, students, schools and teacher training in New Zealand. Based on a recent independent review of Te Kotahitanga Phase 3, however, this paper argues that Te Kotahitanga manifests major flaws both as a research project and as a professional development programme:

a) the claims made for the success of the project are by no means conclusively confirmed by the data presented.

b) the project's location within the recent school effectiveness/school improvement paradigm together with its strong and uncritical adherence to a culturalist ideology render many of its assumptions and remedies highly questionable.

c) the data produced by the questionnaire distributed as part of the review process casts considerable doubt on its viability as a professional development programme, without major modifications.

From local research project to national professional development: the expansion of Te Kotahitanga

Before turning to a critical analysis of Te Kotahitanga, Australian readers in particular will need to be aware of the programme's origins and subsequent development. Three Te Kotahitanga reports have now been publicly released: Phase 1 in 2003, and Phases 2 and 3 in 2007. Based on a relatively small-scale research project, the Phase 1 Report claimed sensationally that 'the results of this study show that it is feasible within a relatively short period of time, to improve Maori students' educational achievement', asserting that the way teachers 'theorise their relationships with Maori students and how they interact with them in the classroom can have a major impact upon Maori students' engagement with learning and short-term achievement (p.198). These claims were to be instrumental in the extension of Te Kotahitanga from an initial pilot sample, to 12 schools by the end of 2005. Launched publicly in March 2007, the Phase 3 Report draws on the counter-narrative of kaupapa Maori to develop alternative pedagogies and to locate solutions within Maori cultural ways of knowing (p.19; p.34), with the aim of repositioning teachers 'within

different contexts where students' sense-making processes offer new opportunities for them to engage with learning' (p.15).

Drawing upon the ideology and approaches of the earlier Phase 1 Report, the Phase 3 Report highlights the discourses of students, family-whanau, school principals, and teachers, the writers claiming that these discourses encapsulate both the problem and the solution to Maori educational underachievement. The students' 'authentic' discourses are claimed to centre on the relationships they had with their teachers, particularly the low expectations teachers held of them and their failure to except the legitimacy of Maori ways of knowing as the most influential factors in their ability to achieve in the classroom (pp.18-19). Likewise both *whanau* and principals are cited as correctly identifying the major influence on Maori students' educational achievement as the quality of the student-teacher relationship.

The Report claims that a critical reading of these four narratives of experience identifies three main discourses: the discourse of the child and home; the discourse of structure and systems within the school; and the discourse of relationships and classroom interaction patterns. The main influences on Maori students' educational achievement that respondents identified are held to vary according to where they position themselves within the three discourses (p.23). The Report argues that this positioning reveals two broad groupings: the first comprising those who cite in-class relationships as being most important and the second those who see Maori students' home backgrounds as being a significant factor. Following Shields, Bishop and Mazawi (2005), the Report asserts that:

> What is problematic for education is that it is mainly the teachers who position themselves in significant numbers within this second group. In so doing, a large proportion of the teachers were pathologising Maori students' lived experiences by explaining their lack of educational achievement in deficit terms, either as being within the child or their home, or within the structure of the school (p.23).

The remedy for this is the Effective Teaching Profile (ETP). This depicts effective teachers as those who first, 'positively and vehemently reject deficit theorising as a means of explaining Maori students' educational achievement levels' and second, 'know and understand how to bring about change in Maori students' educational achievement and are professionally committed to doing so'. This can be achieved through Manaakitanga (teachers caring for children); Mana motuhake (the development of group and personal identity); Whakapiringatanga

(including the careful organisation of specific individual roles and responsibilities required to achieve individual and group outcomes); Wananga (the dynamic sharing of knowledge rather than traditional approaches); Ako (including a dialogic relationship which includes teachers learning as well as teaching); and Kotahitanga (involving a collaborative response towards a commonly held vision, goal or outcome). Hence ETP is claimed to address Maori people's concerns about current pedagogic practices as being 'fundamentally monocultural and epistemologically racist', because it 'developed out of the cultural sense-making processes of people previously marginalised by the dominance of colonial and neo-colonial education relations of power' (pp.32-33). Indeed, much of the first chapter of the Phase 3 Report derives much of its theoretical stance from Freire's influential book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972), arguing that educators need to harness power from the sense making and knowledge generating processes of the culture that the dominant system has marginalised, in order to liberate both the oppressor and the oppressed.

Initial observations

From a general pedagogical point of view, Te Kotahitanga provides a timely reminder to all currently involved in education that the quality of classroom interactions continues to be very important, and that student achievement may be improved by developing flexible learning-teaching relationships. It can hardly be claimed, however that this is a novel finding. The Phase 3 Report seems to imply that Te Kotahitanga has made the significant discovery that Maori students 'wanted their teachers to use a range of teacher interactions, and not just focus on using instruction, monitoring and negative behavioural feedback' (Phase 3 report, 2007, p.64). The implication is that no new pedagogical or curriculum innovations existed in schools prior to the introduction of Te Kotahitanga. Yet as early as 1943, the Thomas Committee critiqued the then over-emphasis in secondary schools on formal, subject-centred teaching methods that so often failed to recognise individual and cultural differences (New Zealand Department of Education, 1943). In 1969, the PPTA Curriculum Review Group under the leadership of Peter Boag produced a series of booklets that radically challenged traditional secondary school practices (NZPPTA, 1969; NZPPTA, 1974). By the 1970s many teachers and Department of Education subject advisors were reading critical education commentaries by Illich, Freire, Postman and Weingarter, and others. In the early 1980s, the

well-publicised report, *Race Against Time* (1982) was calling urgently for the elimination of cultural bias in the education system through a re-examination of educational philosophy and classroom strategies not dissimilar to that now demanded by Te Kotahitanga (recommendations 9-23, pp.57-58).

Many secondary schools appear to have acted upon these recommendations. Moreover, since the mid-1980s, there have been a number of successful attempts to distribute advice on multicultural strategies to teachers (see for instance, Hunkin, 1985), to the extent that more than a decade ago, Hohepa, McNaughton and Jenkins observed that an increasing number of educators 'were then identifying group learning as a preferred mode of learning for Maori (Hohepa *et al*, 1996, p.38). The emphasis in Te Kotahitanga on the importance of culturally appropriate pedagogical practices is, therefore, clearly in agreement with a considerable body of research that relates pedagogy and curricula to cultural aspirations, but in the early twenty-first century this is surely no longer groundbreaking news. The Report is on safer ground in revealing that there have been, are, and will probably continue to be, teachers who exhibit poor cultural understanding, and who largely fail to appreciate cultural differences. But rather than simply finger-pointing and apportioning blame, it would surely have been more constructive to recognise that many changes have already occurred in secondary schools, but then go on and ask why, if these changes have at least to some degree been already implemented within the education sector, have across-the-board improvements in Maori educational achievement still largely failed to appear.

Answering such a complex question comprehensively and honestly would inevitably lead to a serious questioning of any research that claims to have found a single cause and cure for student under-achievement. Unfortunately, all the Te Kotahitanga reports from 2003 on identify the major cause of under-achievement as being poor teacher interactions with Maori students – the direct result of recalcitrant teachers who cling stubbornly to what the writers contemptuously dismiss as 'deficit theorisation' rooted in a history of colonialist oppression. It therefore follows that the magic bullet solution lies in creating effective teachers who, by recognising their errors and changing their pedagogy, will foster dramatic improvements in Maori students' academic performance. Unfortunately, there are a number of problems with such logic.

Although the Te Kotahitanga writers emphasise the central role of the teacher in raising Maori educational achievement, the evidence on teacher effects seems ambiguous to say the least. The international literature is divided, but in the New Zealand context, Nash and Prochnow have observed that research falling within the teacher effects paradigm accepts, often with little question, the problematic assumption that the properties of successful teaching can be 'identified, quantified, and isolated as a causal agent in the generation of learning' (2004, p.184). They go on to illustrate that there is a strong political dimension to the claim that teacher effects are the major influence on student academic progress, evidenced by recent press releases claiming that effective classroom teaching can explain up to half of a child's educational achievements. A recent article *in Education Review* has argued that it not logically possible to 'prove conclusively', especially with limited data, that teacher attitudes are indeed the key to student progress lives (Clark, 2007). Unfortunately, given the current New Zealand political climate the primacy accorded teacher effects unlikely to be seriously challenged. On the contrary, the widespread acceptance of the Te Kotahitanga solution provides a clear indication that research implying that if teachers only raised their expectations of their Maori students then inequality would somehow be reduced, is popular with politicians, and with the educational bureaucracy (Nash 2006).

A good deal of research in New Zealand and elsewhere, however, attests to the significance of what the Te Kotahitanga designers choose to contemptuously dismiss as 'deficit theory', especially the impact of social class on inequality/difference' (Nash, 2003). Nash has identified fundamental flaws in the contention that Maori students underachieve at school simply because they are alienated by mono-cultural mainstream secondary schools (2006). He had major concerns about the highly edited transcripts from focus groups, pointing out that whilst it is relatively easy to get students to talk about their teachers, researchers often experienced considerable difficulty shifting discussion into the private domain of the home (Nash, 2006, p.18). Although Nash was referring to the earlier Phase 1 Report (2003), such concerns are also relevant to the Phase 3 Report as this document presents similar data based on identical conclusions. Moreover, none of the Te Kotahitanga Reports provides any comparison with narratives of experience from non-Maori students. Evidence from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) published by the OECD in 2001, differs significantly from Te Kotahitanga in its conclusion about students' perceptions of their teachers. Based on a sample of 2,390 Pakeha and

641 Maori students, the PISA findings revealed that the only difference between the two groups that tended towards significance was that more Maori than Pakeha students 'strongly agree' that most teachers treated them fairly (Nash, 2006, p.20).

Moreover, Te Kotahitanga has not yet produced a satisfactory or unambiguous way of measuring effects on student achievement. For instance, there do not appear to be any breakdowns of the data showing which of the schools were in any of the current literacy and numeracy programmes, hence it is difficult to accurately assess the extent of gains specifically attributed to Te Kotahitanga. There was no control group as such, therefore the Phase 3 Report's claims to have established a de facto control group are rather weak. There is also a strong implication in the Report (pp.174-176) that the effect size was significant, yet it appears to be 0.24 whereas Fashola & Slavin's threshold which the Report cites, seems to have actually been 0.25. In fact, a basic problem with the data and discussion provided in the results section (Chapter 9), centres around the use of effect sizes.

Two related criticisms can be made of chapter 10, which presents a summary and conclusions (p.185ff). First, it must be emphasised that the claim in the last paragraph on p.185, that 'Te Kotahitanga teachers' understanding of and appreciation for the kaupapa of the project ... and the support they receive within their schools is directly related to improving Maori students' outcomes' is simply not proven, given the problems with the data discussed above. It should be noted that the project's designers do admit on p.183, that other variables may have influenced change over time' but then they then go on to claim that, 'the evidence suggests that Te Kotahitanga contributed to a significant growth in literacy skills for Year 9-10 Maori students of teachers involved in the project' (p.183). Finally, there seems to be a flaw in the weighting that is given to the 'effective implementers of the ETP'. It is unclear from the baseline data provided just what kind of teachers these particular individuals were *before* Te Kotahitanga was implemented. Many of these teachers may well have always used highly discursive pedagogies, had excellent relationships with students, and been culturally aware as well, as indeed many of the teachers who responded to the questionnaire claimed to have been. Claiming credit for their success may be fallacious. The point is that we simply do not know.

Te Kotahitanga as school effectiveness/school improvement

Te Kotahitanga is the product of a powerfully resurgent global school effectiveness/school improvement movement. Whilst school effectiveness/school improvement movements in the past have had considerable impact on public school systems, this latest resurgence arose as a direct response to international research published during the 1960s and 1970s, epitomised in the United Kingdom by the Plowden Report, the Bullock Report and the findings of scholars such as Basil Bernstein; and in the United States by James Coleman's *Equality of Educational Opportunity* (1966), and Christopher Jencks *Inequality: A reassessment of the effect of family and 'schooling in America* (1972), all of which appeared to indicate the relative powerlessness of the school in face of socio-economic factors and home influences. Indeed, the rapid resurgence of school effectiveness/school improvement that followed on from the oft-cited Rutter et al research in the United Kingdom owes much to its direct political links to educational policy initiatives that placed a supposedly scientific emphasis on the centrality of the teacher's role in enhancing student performance in achieving state-mandated outcomes (see for instance, Rutter *et al,* 1979). By the beginning of the twenty-first century the emphasis on school performance and teacher accountability had become global (Thrupp, 2005, Peterson & West, 2003), an extraordinary development that has given projects such as Te Kotahitanga a powerful political legitimacy.

To cite a recent critique, however, school effectiveness/school improvement is 'epistemologically problematic and politically promiscuous and malleable' (Slee & Weiner, 1998, pp.2), Not withstanding attempts to soften the approach, an uncritical acceptance of quantifiable outcomes, flawed attempts to separate contextual from school factors and a largely unquestioning adherence to an input-output model, a preoccupation with performance management, target-setting, and managerial school leadership still predominate (Wrigley, 2004), Thrupp, 2005). Moreover, school effectiveness/school improvement research gains currency through often-distorted reports of public education's shortcomings, which promote a discourse of school failure and encourage a sense of educational crisis. In turn this leads to the eager adoption of school effectiveness/school improvement interventions by politicians and policymakers who have publicly pledged firm action to resolve the crisis rapidly and cheaply (Slee and Weiner, 1998).

Te Kotahitanga exemplifies this former tendency very early on in the Phase 3 Report. Chapter 1 follows Smith (1997) in referring to Maori communities facing 'the twin *crises* of language demise and educational underachievement (p.7). Two pages further on we have no fewer than three references to a crisis in education for Maori: 'the general *crisis* in schooling for Maori as well' (p.9), 'a wider *crisis* in Maori education' (p.9), and a 'Maori educational *crisis* in mainstream settings' (p.9). Readers learn on p.12 that, 'in Maori medium educational settings, whanau intervene in the educational *crisis* in a way quite different from an SES intervention'. Hence, by p.16 of the Phase 3 Report they are already well acquainted with the contention that Te Kotahitanga will seek to 'mediate the ongoing educational *crisis* facing Maori people in mainstream education'. The news from the schools, it seems, is all bad – like the title of a recent critical chapter on historical revisionism in New Zealand – it is always winter, and never Christmas (see Butterworth 2006).

The rhetoric of educational crisis serves a particular function in school effectiveness/school improvement literature. Rea and Weiner have claimed that: 'by substituting 'teacher' for 'child', school effective/school improvement literature is unashamedly redemptionist in tone, with the dual aim of saving the teacher for society and rescuing society through the teacher' (Rea and Weiner 1998, p.23). In New Zealand, the 1986 Report of the Education and Science Select Committee into the quality of teaching (the Scott Report) was an early manifestation of this trend (Education and Science Select Committee 1986). Likewise in Te Kotahitanga, it is constantly emphasised that, 'deficit theorizing by teachers is the major impediment to Maori students' educational success' (p.32). However, redemption is held out as a possibility because, 'teachers are able to shift their discursive positions by positively and vehemently rejecting deficit theorizing as a means of explaining Maori students educational achievement levels' (p.24). Although the Phase 3 Report cites Foucault's (1972) work on dominant discourses, there is no acknowledgement of his contribution to the international literature on the creation of a culture of surveillance and control that might compromise professional autonomy (see for instance, Foucault, 1983). Thus, recent critical studies on the advent of the National Literacy Strategy in England and the increased emphasis on teacher accountability that followed in its wake graphically illustrate how the notion of teachers working 'intuitively' and being sensitive to the needs of their students has been replaced by a notion of 'best practice', through regulation and key performance indicators (Soler and

Openshaw, 2006). Analysis of key documents in the implementation of national literacy and numeracy strategies manifests three factors: a central concern about the behaviour of teachers in the classroom, an assumption that change is both urgent and necessary, and that it is possible to bring about change through the science and technology of teaching rather than through reflection (Coldron and Smith, 1999). The Te Kotahitanga professional development intervention displays similar features, albeit overlaid by a parallel and essentially incompatible discourse about the need to subvert cultural hegemony.

As well as having serious implications for professional autonomy, Te Kotahitanga also has significant conceptual problems arising from its location within the school effectiveness/ improvement paradigm. As already noted, Te Kotahitanga falls into the reductionist trap of claiming that a single factor, teacher behaviour, can be isolated through the somewhat formulaic remedy represented by the Effective Teaching Profile. The pedigree of the ETP is thus clear, for contemporary and subsequent critiques of Rutter's *Fifteen Thousand Hours* centred on the tendency of the research team towards reductionism, a process whereby complex phenomena were oversimplified to produce the 'obvious' solution to academic underachievement: better schools and more effective teachers. In turn this led to managerial goals being substituted for a more fundamental debate about curriculum and pedagogy (Wrigley, 2004, op.232).

Despite the existence of much research indicating that teachers and schools are at best only one factor in the complex equation that equals academic failure, Rea and Weiner have pointed out that, in the United Kingdom, the main research conclusions of much school effectiveness/school improvement research, '– principally that schools can act independently of local or socio-economic contexts – are understandably popular with policymakers' (Rea & Weiner, 1998, p.22). This point has already been made in the previous section of this review, but it is worth reiterating at this point that such clear-cut findings are politically attractive precisely because they enable any inadequacies in the school system to be blamed on to poor teachers, bad leadership, and failing schools. Its relevance lies in the fact that it has become increasingly true in New Zealand as well, if recent Ministry of Education statements are anything to go by. But viewing the teacher as a panacea for complex problems that are social and political as well as educational in this way poses a particular danger in New Zealand and Australia given that the contemporary political context in both nations

actively encourages school effectiveness/school improvement strategies promoted by educational bureaucracies and politicians that focus almost exclusively on teacher performance.

Te Kotahitanga as cultural essentialism

Although Te Kotahitanga is firmly situated within a problematic, school effectiveness/school improvement paradigm, the programme claims to be addressing problems of power inequalities through a culturally responsive pedagogy of relations' where the adoption of appropriate Maori cultural metaphors will empower educators to:

> create learning contexts within their classroom; where power is shared between self-determining individuals within non-dominating relations of interdependence; where culture counts; where learning is interactive, dialogic and spirals; where participants are connected to one another through the establishment of a common vision for what constitutes excellence in educational outcomes (Executive Summary, Phase 3 Report 2007, p1).

This emphasis on achieving the goals of both social justice *and* excellence in outcomes not only provides Te Kotahitanga's designers with strong political leverage, it also enables them to respond effectively to the charge that Te Kotahitanga as an intervention strategy merely shares certain less desirable features of current school effectiveness/school improvement strategies. A major problem with the programme, however, is that the both goals are driven by an uncritical adherence to the ideology of culturalism ideology. Te Kotahitanga's continuous assertion that teachers 'pathologise' their students through failing to empathise with Maori culture, leading in turn to the low academic achievement of Maori students, is a fundamental tenet of culturalism. This single-minded 'blame-the-teacher' ideologically-driven determinism ironically rules out genuine power-sharing between teachers and Te Kotahitanga researchers, thus undermining professional self-determination and prohibiting the development of a common vision that might better serve the interests of students in the longer-term.

Culturalism is, literally, the ideology of ethnic politics (Rata & Openshaw, 2006). Its supporters therefore have little room for what Lingard *et al* (1998) described as the 'different, diverse and hybrid identities' that characterize contemporary student bodies. Indeed, the Te Kotahitanga Phase Three Report views cultural, social, economic and political disparities as being between two distinct entities: 'the

descendants of the European colonisers (pakeha) and the indigenous Maori people' (Phase 3 Report 2007, pp 7-9 passim). Culturalist supporters, including the Te Kotahitanga writers, also tend to ignore the growing international critique of culturalist ideology (for instance: Friedman, 1994; Barry, 2001; Kuper, 2002; Nanda, 2003). Instead they treat culturalism and the educational solution that derives from it as essentially unproblematic.

Friedman has argued that culturalism and religious fundamentalism are actually parallel movements in identity politics, sharing common characteristics (Friedman, 1994). In culturalism, ethnic identity becomes a type of sacred identity, blessed by tradition and evocative of a special destiny for those 'of the faith' (Rata & Openshaw, 2006). Practitioners of both culturalism and fundamentalism observe similar rituals and share in the use of evocative, almost mystical language to emphasise the group's transcendence of the present into a timeless continuity between past, present and future (Keesing, 1989). And as Kuper has argued, the irony is that culturalism first took root in nineteenth century romantic nationalistic reactions to the Western European Enlightenment's universalist claims: hence 'culture is always defined in opposition to something else...an authentic, local way of being different that resists its enemy – globalising, material civilization' (2001, pp. 14-15).

In her critical study of current Indian responses to modernity that has much relevance for New Zealand and Te Kotahitanga, Nanda observes that Hindu nationalists see themselves as trying to free Indians from colonialism at a mental and cultural level in order to complete the process of political and economic decolonisation (2003, p.10). She sees many post-World War Two expressions of indigenous nationalism as sharing some of the characteristics of pre-war fascism. Both are particular responses to the forces unleashed by the introduction of modern industrial capitalism in societies with either weak and/or discredited liberal traditions. Both subscribe to a similar brand of mystical, antirational and holistic ideas regarding the cultural unity of their respective societies. Both have broad appeal precisely because, for the disadvantaged masses, they espouse the sacredness of natural and social orders whilst also furnishing a theoretical foundation for critical reflection on the excesses of individualist and acquisitive societies for many indigenous intellectuals (2003, p.10).

The notion of culture central to Te Kotahitanga appears to be derived from a similar ideal. Thus, citing Quest Rapuara (1992), the Phase 3 Report asserts that:

> Culture is what holds a community together, giving a common framework of meaning. It includes how people communicate with each other, how we make decisions, how we structure our families and who we think is important. It expresses our values towards the land and time and our attitudes towards work and play, good and evil, reward and punishment (Phase 3 Report 2007, p.30).

Culturalism thus has little room for socio-economic differences, class distinctions, differing values, or regional differences *within* a given culture. What is good for one person within a culture, is good for all. One result has been the development of ethnicised public policies justified by appeals to the primacy of culture, and underpinned by the questionable assumption that public policies based upon ethnicity are the most effective way to address the complexities of social disadvantage and to achieve fairer wealth distribution goals (Rata and Openshaw, 2006; Callister, 2007). And as we have seen, the Te Kotahitanga Phase 3 Report expressly ethnicises the message of Freire's *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* in its assertion that the answers to Maori educational achievement rests with a kaupapa Maori analysis that is 'both a means of proactively promoting a Maori world-view as legitimate, authoritative in relationship to other cultures in New Zealand, and also is suggested here as a means of addressing educational disparities in New Zealand' (Phase 3 Report, p.10).

The view that there are indeed distinct, separate and compartmentalised cultures has become embraced by New Zealand policymakers to the extent that the country represents an outstanding example of the global process of ethnic politics at work (Rata and Openshaw, 2006). Elizabeth Rata has examined the process of Maori ethnic elite emergence to the point where its continuing influence on the New Zealand state is accepted uncritically and often unconditionally. Because Te Kotahitanga constitutes such an outstanding contemporary demonstration of the ongoing political strength of Kaupapa Maori, it is able to effectively bypass the complexity of factors involved in academic underachievement highlighted by the last thirty years of sociological and historical research in New Zealand and elsewhere, instead promoting a simplistic causal explanation — that of teacher failure to understand and emphasise with the culture of their Maori students leading in turn to academic underachievement. Thus:

> the usefulness of other explanations is rejected out-of-hand and subjected to the ethnic adversial 'them and us' discourse of kaupapa Maori ideology. Important research is dismissed pejoratively as 'deficit theory ... contribut(ing) to Maori-pakeha inequality (Rata, 2006, p.37).

The Te Kotahitanga Phase 3 Report clearly epitomises this particular train of thought on p.43 when it speaks of current pedagogic practices as being 'fundamentally and epistemologically racist.' It therefore follows that, 'the answers to Maori educational achievement and disparities do not lie in the mainstream, for given the experiences of the last 150 years, mainstream practices and theories have kept Maori in a subordinate position while at the same time creating a discourse that pathologized and marginalized Maori people's lived experiences' (p.34). Counter narratives such as kaupapa Maori then, have the political power to provide alternative pedagogies that are claimed to have developed out of, 'the cultural sense-making processes of people previously marginalized by the dominance of colonial and neo-colonial education relations of power' (p.34). This adherence to kaupapa Maori views, however, creates major problems for the implementation of the project in mainstream schools. On p.15 and again on p.34 of the Phase 3 Report we are presented with a picture of 'an educational setting where students are able to participate on their own terms', but the fact is that this is not actually possible for *any* group of students, Maori or otherwise, especially if this is seen to impinge on the rights of other students.

Moreover, a consequence of the emphatic rejection of other explanations has been the closing down of debate about the causes of educational failure at the policy level. In New Zealand this process can be clearly seen in the way Maori MP Hone Harawira recently reacted to the release of statistics on the underachievement of Maori students. Complaining about a tendency to talk about Maori students from a deficit model in tones which echoed the sentiments of Te Kotahitanga Phase 3 in its emphatic rejection of any cross-cutting factors such as family resources or social class, Harawira warned that 'if anyone had dared to come to my kura and talk like that I would have dropped them, then hauled them out on the road and had the police come to take them away' (NZPA Press Release, 14 March 2007; New Zealand Labour Party Press Release 2007). However, it has been argued that ruling out explanations of Maori educational failure that focus on family resources, socio-economic conditions, or on social class in this way is attractive to the Maori elite and to many politicians precisely because it shifts critical scrutiny away from themselves and on to schools and teachers (Rata and

Openshaw, 2006).

Rigorous policy debate amongst educators certainly has the *potential* to challenge the uncritical adoption of single-cause explanations for Maori educational failure. Unfortunately, however, the degree to which pakeha educational liberals have themselves embraced identity politics, and their adoption of an advocacy role, has ironically facilitated their co-option by the very neo-liberals they claimed to oppose. My own historical research into this phenomenon has revealed that a cumulative process somewhat analogous to Christian evangelism first occurred amongst New Zealand educators in the late 1960s. During the next two decades this was actively facilitated by culturally 'authentic' collective experiences, involving a mixture of individual conscientisation, collective experiences such as organised, compulsory marae visits, together with constant mentoring by already committed culturalists to avoid individual slippage (Openshaw, 2006). An analogous process can be seen at work in a more intensive form in the Te Kotahitanga Phase 3 Report. Here we are told that:

> Changing teachers explanations and practices (theoretical repositioning within discourse) about what impacts on Maori students' learning involves providing teachers with the opportunity to challenge their own deficit theorizing about Maori students (and their communities) through real and vicarious means in non-confrontational ways. It is a fundamental understanding to this project that until teachers consider how the dominant culture maintains control over the various aspects of education, and the part they themselves might play in perpetuating this pattern of domination, albeit unwittingly, they will not understand how dominance manifests itself in the lives of Maori students (and their communities) and how the way they relate to and interact with Maori students may well be affecting learning in their classroom. Therefore, the professional development devised by the researchers includes a means whereby teachers' thinking can be challenged, albeit in a supported way (Phase Three Report 2007, p.37).

In order to challenge teachers' thinking 'albeit in a supported way', there is embodied in the Te Kotahitanga Phase 3 Report's professional development implementation strategy a carefully sequenced Effective Teaching Profile implementation ranging from an Induction Hui, to one-on-one, and sometimes two-on-one, co-construction sessions (see chapters two and five). The direction that teachers must move in response to this strategy is clear from the frequently emotive and over-generalised phrasing of the Phase 3 Report. On p.27, the Phase 3 Report writers claim that 'we were told, time and again... that negative,

deficit thinking on the part of teachers was fundamental to the development of negative relations', and on the same page that students saw, 'negative relations being an assault on their very identity as Maori people'. On the very next page we learn that 'in many ways, it is a sad irony for Maori people living in modern New Zealand that Maori haka is used in international sports clashes to signal defiance and self-determination, whereas when Maori students display their aspirations for self-determination in a defiant manner at school, they are punished rather than understood' (2007, p.28).

If all this is indeed true, then stern measures can be made to seem entirely justified. Such 'stern measures' are exemplified in the Phase 3 Report's description of how a *treatment integrity procedure* was introduced to schools focusing specifically on the feedback provided to teachers following observation and co-construction sessions (chapter 5, p.86; p.88). The Te Kotahitanga writers warn that, 'although teachers might say and write positive feedback themselves in the appropriate space on the observation sheet, they might well be *thinking* (italics mine), quite differently (p.110). This significant discovery obviously leaves room for a further tightening up of existing Te Kotahitanga procedures designed to apply further pressure on reluctant teachers to fall into line with the project's culturalist ideology, especially because, on many of the feedback sessions with teachers, 'deficit theorising about Maori students was still evident on many of the tapes and there is a clear need to take care of how we respond to it' (p.110). In fact resistance from teachers is viewed as simply symptomatic of their being deficient or even racist.

Callister in a recent (2007) publication has been the latest in a growing number of researchers to highlight the serious methodological issues involved in attempting to determine ethnic-based disadvantage in New Zealand. With particular reference to Maori, he points to the difficulty of defining exactly who belongs to a given ethnic group, the complexities involved in the measurement of ethnic-based disparities, the elusive causes of disadvantage, and the problems of determining exactly what goal is to be achieved (pp.15-46). Callister concludes that ethnic-based special measures have the greatest chance of being accepted by the public and ultimately reducing disadvantage if:

1. the justification is well thought out and clearly articulated.

2. there is an adequate level of public acceptance for the justifications provided

3. the target group can be transparently and clearly defined

4. membership of the target group is a very strong predictor of disadvantage

5. evidence exists that the special measures can be implemented effectively

6. the effects of the special measures are monitored carefully; and

7. a means of determining when the special measures are no longer needed exists or specific time limits are put on the measures (2007, p.100).

On nearly all these counts, Te Kotahitanga falls far short of the ideal. Moreover, its claims can never be falsified, for if the predicted results are not achieved by a particular school or by a specific target teacher, then it can always be claimed that, unwittingly or even wilfully, the ideals of Te Kotahitanga were not fully implemented. Culturalist ideology thus drives the project to the extent that it becomes a faith to be followed unquestioningly and completely by teachers, rather than a research-based programme to be critically assessed and modified, where appropriate.

Te Kotahitanga as professional development. The teacher questionnaire responses

Whilst Te Kotahitanga's location both within the teacher effectiveness/school improvement paradigm, and its embracement of culturalist ideology give legitimate cause for concern, the ultimate success of Te Kotahitanga will be determined by its perceived worth as a professional development (PD) programme by teachers themselves. C.E. Beeby, New Zealand's most outstanding post-war educational administrator, argued that 'qualitative changes in classroom practice will occur only when the teachers understand them, feel secure with them, and accept them as their own' (Beeby, 1979).

The 30-question survey carried out by PPTA in April/May 2007 invited teachers to respond to a variety of questions concerning Te Kotahitanga as professional development, the main theories and beliefs underpinning Te Kotahitanga, the programme's processes, and the ways it has directly influenced teachers and students. Approximately 1,000 questionnaires were sent out, and 308 responses were received, of which 225 came from teachers currently participating in Te Kotahitanga. The response rate was relatively high for a survey of this nature, suggesting that teachers strongly desired to express their professional opinion on

the various aspects of such a highly visible PD programme. Whilst not all respondents answered every question, the information received was informative. Nearly all school subjects were represented in the responses, with the largest numbers coming from English (52), mathematics (38), science (32), and technology (23). The overwhelming majority of respondents classified themselves as European New Zealanders (209), with 14 describing themselves as Maori, and 45 as 'other'. In addition some respondents ticked more than one ethnicity, 11 adding 'Maori' and eight describing themselves as 'New Zealander'. The gender breakdown was 182 female and 96 male, 110 of which were classroom teachers, 127 middle managers (HOD, teachers in charge of subjects), 34 deans or guidance counsellors, 22 principals or deputy/assistant principals, and 15 specialist teachers (SCTs, RTLBs or special needs teachers).

The responses received present a worrying picture of Te Kotahitanga's overall impact on schools, teachers and students, of which only a sample can be provided here. Given that it is now an almost universal ethical requirement in New Zealand for researchers to ensure that participants are given both the choice of informed consent and the right to subsequently opt out without prejudice if they wish, the responses to questions about programme participation were especially alarming. A considerable number of teachers, nearly 49 per cent of respondents, reported that they had not felt completely free to make a personal decision about whether or not to participate in Te Kotahitanga. Of these 17% said that they had experienced some degree of bullying, 29% said that it was an expected part of having a job in their school, and 7% said that it was an employment condition or it was 'contractual'. Only 47% of respondents said that they had felt completely free to make a personal decision about participation.

This pressure placed on teachers may have been actively facilitated by the ideological dynamics of the programme itself, or by the internal politics of participating schools, or by a mixture of the two. Whilst some respondents such as R0155 claimed that '*there was no pressure − whole staff opted in*,' and R0177 spoke of '*a wave of enthusiasm from staff*', the pressure to 'opt in' to Te Kotahitanga at participating schools was starkly revealed in many of the questionnaires returned. The majority of respondents complained of being subjected to both formal and informal pressures to join. Some actively resisted this. R0215 complained of pressure on two occasions '*in which the TK staff member's manner and attitude amounted to bullying*'. R0023 revealed feeling '*harassed and almost*

bullied into taking part, which only made my decision not to participate stronger'.

Others, however, felt unable to resist pressures placed upon them either by the principal, or senior management. There were numerous comments similar to that revealed by R0013 who claimed that there was *'continual pressure from principal to participate'*. The penalties for not 'opting in' could be dire. R006 reported *'this year it was forced through coercion and threatening. People lost MMAs* (salary allowances) *when they didn't opt in'*. New teachers were particularly vulnerable to pressure applied before they had signed their contracts. R0052 recalled being *'told at the job interview, so guess I had the option not to take the job'*. Another respondent, R0012, observed that *'when I got the job I was told TK was part of the agreement'*. A new teacher (R0018) related that *'it was part of 1ˢᵗ year teacher requirement. Told I had to do it, and I'm not one to rock the boat'*. R0014 recalled being *'told as a new teacher it was expected, and wasn't given opportunity to give it up since'*. For those already in teaching positions at participating schools, pressure to 'opt in' was continuously applied. R0185 revealed that *'I declined participating for two years but felt pressured into it by senior management during my appraisal'*. R0159 *'felt it was incumbent on me, as member of middle management, to participate'*. At one school *'staff who did not opt in received written letters from principal expressing principals concern'*. R0216 was *'told personally by my principal that there was no reason not to as once a month the whole staff have to do TK PD'*. This respondent also *'felt psychologically manipulated and compelled to comply if I wanted a good referees report when applying for a school'*.

Opting out proved to be even more problematic for the many teachers who availed themselves of the opportunity to comment on this question, with considerably more respondents (52.8 per cent) claiming that they did not feel completely free to opt out of Te Kotahitanga than those who did (34.9 per cent). This was even though they had originally joined the programme under the impression that they would be able to exercise their own professional judgement in making a choice. Only a minority of respondents seemed happy with this situation. R0072 argued that *'this has become our school wide PD - a very important and right decision'*, adding that whilst teachers were free to opt out *'as a professional it would be a negative reaction'*. Most respondents, however, seem to have experienced varying degrees of pressure to remain involved, regardless of what their personal feelings may have been. For some this pressure was subtle, because of 'school commitments' (cf: R0067:*'are you a team player or not!!!)'*. R006, who subsequently opted out, was *'asked to sign a*

form not to share my learning with non-TK members', surely an odd request given that the Te Kotahitanga writers would like to see the programme expanded further. R0052 recalled:

> ... *teachers in the early stages of their PD made the comment that if you didn't join TK that you were 'anti-Maori' – which was clearly not the case. Although at the time I put this down to a little over-zealousness on their part, in dept meetings where we share and discuss our practices, some who had TK classes made the statement that hey had signed some 'confidentiality' document and were not permitted to discuss their TK classes with 'non-TK teachers', this of course was a little alarming in a department that is inclusive and encourages a democratic dialogue.*

Others, however, faced more direct pressure. R005 revealed that '*it is difficult to opt out (because) Principal/management seem to enforce compulsory participation*', leading to the worry that '*if I opt out, I will be punished*'. R0029 observed that the '*principal has made opting out difficult and suggested measures which are unappealing*'. R0032 claimed to '*have heard that many staff who wanted to opt out were pressured not to do so. The effect on staff who wanted to leave the programme was very stressful and I and other colleagues could only morally support them.*'

Perhaps the intense pressure applied so frequently to those who display reluctance or wish to question any aspect of Te Kotahitanga can only be adequately explained in terms of the quasi-religious zeal of culturalist ideology. As well as being a significant ethical issue related to the research project – PD translation process, there is a also considerable irony in the fact that whilst much is made in the Te Kotahitanga Phase 3 Report about the need for teachers to share their power with others in order to better understand the world of the others and those 'othered' by power differentials (p.25 passim), in reality it is teachers who are being 'othered'.

The responses to questions inviting respondents to examine the major claims of the Te Kotahitanga project reflected the fact that respondents were strongly supportive of the overall goal of Te Kotahitanga to dramatically improve Maori student performance, but resented being singled out as the chief impediment to their success. Some 53% of respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the allegation that teachers identified student's deficiencies as a major impediment to progress. Similarly, the Te Kotahitanga proposition that structural issues in mainstream schools such as timetabling, expulsions/suspensions and other management issues limited Maori achievement in mainstream schools was rejected by 55% of respondents.

The mixed responses to this section of the questionnaire were even more noticeable in the comments provided by respondents. On the issue of whether teachers' discourses tended to focus on student deficiencies, many felt the assertion to be both untrue and unfair. RO106 claimed that *'this view has never been held in this school. I don't know anyone in teaching who holds this view. This school has always had high expectations/hopes for its students'.* RO104 asserted that *'I have not heard staff put down Maori students for language or for economic reasons. Lack of attendance, lack of work, lack of a pen maybe, but it is always specific to a student never a broad sweeping statement'.* RO159 felt that Te Kotahitanga was furnishing a highly distorted picture - *'I've worked in five different …schools and feel that this description would only apply to a very small minority of teachers'.* This respondent believed, *'it has gotten better, and 90 per cent of teachers coming out of NZ teaching schools don't notice race as being of importance'.* Other respondents, however, felt the assertion at least served as a useful counter to an otherwise overly pessimistic view of Maori students, their capabilities, and what committed teachers could actually achieve. RO021 agreed that *'many teachers put low expectations on Maori'.* RO023, however, felt that, *perhaps some Maori students are disadvantaged because of a lack of home support, but that is just one factor'.*

Regarding the contention that the major influence on Maori students' achievement lay in the minds and actions of their teachers, many teachers clearly felt themselves to be the hapless victims of finger-pointing and blame. Two responses here were fairly typical of reactions. RO150 retorted *'I don't subscribe to this theory'.* RO128 simply exclaimed *'What an insulting statement to make of any teacher worth their salt'.* Likewise, the contention that teachers deficit thinking was a key impediment to improving classroom pedagogy provoked the response from, RO029 that it as *'… an offensive, racist and anti-teacher statement'.* RO188 asserted that *'I can never remember thinking 'she can't succeed because she's Maori!!''.* A minority, however, were more conciliatory. RO177 conceded that, *'It is a painful acknowledgement to make as a professional, that there may have been excuse-making (deficit theorising) as I think I didn't. But to move from here and find what can be changed must make a better environment for learning'.* RO167 felt that *'… any PD that focuses on teaching practice will help improve the teaching experience for students and teacher'.*

Responses to questions regarding the quality and relevance of the student data collected for Te Kotahitanga strongly indicate that many teachers remain sceptical of the project's claims to have provided robust

evidence of major shifts in student achievement as a result of the programme. Only 21% of respondents believed that the data collection was always transparent and rigorous, and 26% were of the view that it was not. Many comments echoed this concern. R0216 observed that '... *suitable control groups have not been set up. This could have been done by half the school (both teachers and students) not doing Te Kotahitanga and then comparing each group's results'*. R0221 felt that the data was not rigorously collected and believed that it may have been '... *filtered' to ensure more funding. Statistically the data shown to our staff did not stand up. Did not feel it was rigorous or transparent'*. R0218, who made an initial decision not to participate in Te Kotahitanga, went further, claiming that the programme's methodology *'would have been laughed out of court if it was put up to serious scrutiny'*. For instance *'numeracy results* (were) *disguised by the use of unit standards and Asstle measured only the number strand of maths and was hugely targeted at the expense of other areas'*. Perhaps the enthusiasm of the Te Kotahitanga team to represent the project in a favourable light may also have played an unwitting role in this process. R0206 recalled being told indirectly that one of the Te Kotahitanga team had admitted that *'we will take any data that backs the project'*. R0190 believed that *'much of the information I am asked to provide is so open to interpretation that it is difficult to take any of the statistics seriously'*. R0082 felt that *'the statistics are manipulated to meet the desired outcomes of the programme'*. R0034 alleged that *'there have been specific attempts (bribes) to TK students to improve figures such as attendance when other groups in the school have not received such incentives'*. A number of teacher comments were similar to those of R0019, who warned that *'TK is swift to interpret any success as proof of its own interventionist value when that is not the case: e.g. there have been some very good and successful interventions carried out at this school that have been the work of people not in TK*.

In addition to answering specific questions, teachers were also invited to make general comments on the programme overall. These were often very full, perhaps reflecting the fact that respondents tended to use this section for recording both general and specific observations about Te Kotahitanga, either to add to comments made in preceding sections, or to reinforce earlier remarks. Thus, regarding professional relationships with colleagues at one participating school, R0207 commented that the actions of facilitators had brought about *'a division in our staff between those who are involved and those who are not involved'*. Opinion was more favourable in seeing Te Kotahitanga as a useful corrective to overly traditional teaching styles. R0119 held that *'I think TK's best strength is*

that it introduces strong non-confrontational teaching styles/techniques to teachers who depended on an authoritarian approach too much'.

A number of respondents tended to be critical of the tendency of Te Kotahitanga to emphasise teacher effects to the exclusion of other possible explanations. RO212 argued that:

> *There are a range of factors that help account for poor achievement levels of Maori students, and other low socio-economic groups. The teaching profession does not have to accept responsibility for all these issues because to do so allows others eg. parents to abrogate their responsibilities.*

On the credit taken by Te Kotahitanga for dramatic improvements in Maori student performance, a number of teachers echoed RO128's concern that *'any gains in our school are attributed to TK - no credit given to many other programmes going on in school'*. RO133 believed that:

> *The TK programme is predicated on the notion that teachers are racist. It is patronising and disempowering for teachers who have excellent relationships with students and do a good job. It saps morale and is counter-productive.*

Many teachers shared this sense of professional outrage about Te Kotahitanga and its underlying assumptions. Thus RO294 found *'many aspects of TK quite disturbing. It has overtones of a religion the basic tenets of which are extremely disparaging of teachers.* This does not mean, however, that respondents had no sympathy with Te Kotahitanga's ideals. RO110, for instance, felt that the programme was *'disappointing and deeply flawed at a school level'*, but added that *'this is sad as the ideas and ideals are wonderful'*. Arguably this furnishes an appropriate verdict on Te Kotahitanga as a whole – a project that espouses high ideals, but also contains flaws that seriously compromise its value both as a research project and as a PD programme.

Conclusion

This paper contends that whilst Te Kotahitanga provides a timely reminder to those currently involved in education that student achievement may be improved by developing sound and flexible learning-teaching relationships, it ignores the fact that such strategies have been a feature of many New Zealand secondary schools for some decades. Likewise, its claim that secondary schools have historically failed to listen to Maori aspirations is difficult to sustain. More significantly perhaps, Te Kotahitanga is based on the proposition that a) teacher effects are central to Maori educational underachievement, and

that b) teachers substantially contribute to Maori student failure. These are over-simplistic conclusions that disregard considerable evidence to the contrary. The data provided by the Phase 3 Report does not adequately support Te Kotahitanga's claim to dramatically improve the academic performances of Maori students due in part to the failure to provide for adequate control groups, especially given the operation of several other programmes in secondary schools.

These flaws however, are but symptoms of deeper problems. The programme is situated within a global school effectiveness/school improvement research paradigm, whose drawbacks it largely shares. It exemplifies a process of blame and redemption; surveillance and control. By substituting 'teacher' for 'child', it aims to save the teacher for society and to rescue society through the teacher. Accordingly, it contributes to the displacement of collaborative professionalism by imposing externally imposed notions of 'best practice'. The Te Kotahitanga writers also adhere uncritically to the ideology of culturalism. This fuels the highly contestable dogma that teachers pathologise their students through failing to empathise with Maori culture.

Many of these problems were amplified in the teacher responses to the PPTA survey. These reveal that, whilst teachers strongly sympathised with the broad aims of Te Kotahitanga, they also identified a number of serious flaws with the project as a professional development programme. These included an intense and unjustifiable pressure placed upon them both to opt into Te Kotahitanga, and to stay in, resulting in alienation and sometimes victimisation that detracted from staff collegiality and ultimately led to de-professionalisation. There are obvious ironies here for both teachers and students. Recent calls for an activist teacher professionalism emphasise the value of recognising expertise, creating an environment of mutual trust and respect, and experiencing pleasure and having fun (Thrupp, 2005, p.115). For too many Te Kotahitanga teachers these things are not happening. The real losers though, may well be those very students the programme seeks to assist.

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NOTES

1.   Kotahitanga is defined by the project designers in the Phase Two report (p.166) as a 'collaborative response towards a commonly held vision, goal or other such purpose or outcome'.

2.   *Kaupapa* is defined in the Phase 3 report (p.7) as 'a discourse of proactive theory and practice that emerged from within the wider revitalization of Maori communities that developed in New Zealand following the rapid Maori urbanization in the 1950s and 1960s'.

3.   *Whanau* literally refers to a family or more commonly an extended family. However, in the Phase 3 Report (p.12) the Te Kotahitanga designers note that it is increasingly used in a metaphoric sense when it is seen to embrace other concepts such as relationships, the process of establishing relationships and the means/mechanisms of establishing relationships.