Barriers to the development of cultural responsive practices in ethnically-diverse schools


Anne Hynds
Victoria University of Wellington College of Education
e-mail: anne.hynds@vuw.ac.nz

Janice Wearmouth
Deanery of Education, Liverpool Hope University
e-mail: janice.wearnouth@tesco.net
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Abstract

Two reports (2001, 2002) on school student achievement patterns in New Zealand highlighted a disparity between Maori and non-Maori students. In response, the New Zealand government launched a pilot action research initiative in a number of schools. This initiative was intended to support the development of more culturally appropriate school pedagogies for Maori students through collaborative work between ethnically diverse staff, students and local families. This paper draws on the results of a PhD study (Hynds, 2007) of perceptions of the maintenance of change in teachers’ practice in one of the pilot schools during the two years following implementation of the initiative and maps these perceptions against the framework of a community of practice (Wenger, 1998) to analyse why it was that the initiative was not sustained.

Wearmouth and Berryman (in press) note how the ‘communities of practice’ framework (Wenger, 1998) offers a clear way of thinking about how groups in schools function, how individual students, teachers, family and caregivers can be participant members of these groups and can be ‘included’ or precluded, from group membership. The framework highlights the kind of understandings, values, skills and relationships and the types of processes and tools that are central to the core enterprise of each group, for practice in the school and for conceptualising the school as integral to its local community. This framework therefore is used to examine how values, attitudes and beliefs within the school community which had been insufficiently explored prior to the action research, emerged during the subsequent two years to privilege some voices over others and constrain the development of a hoped-for-vision of reform.
Introduction and background

In New Zealand it has been very clear over a long period of time that there is a very large disparity in educational outcomes between Maori, the indigenous, and non-Maori students. Two OECD reports (2001, 2002) exemplify recent disparities. The differences in school outcomes have been explained in a number of different ways by various academics working in the field of education. For example, some have taken the view that socio-economic circumstances and/or family background and/or oppression of certain groups in society are the major contributors to such disparities (Nash, 1993; Harker, 1991). Others have viewed in-school practices, including curricular structure and provision as major contributing influences (Alton-Lee, 2003; Bishop, Berryman, Tiakiwai & Richards, 2003).

Particular explanations are bound to lead to different views about what might be done about such disparities and at what level: societal, school or family. Following the 2001 and 2002 reports the Ministry of Education took the view that interventions within schools themselves to change teachers’ practices should be a focus of government funding. Between 2001 and 2003 the Ministry of Education in New Zealand funded the first phase of a practitioner enquiry initiative in a number of schools across the country that aimed to improve teaching practice and outcomes for Maori students based on understandings derived from collaborative partnerships\(^1\) between Maori and non-Maori within the broader school communities. Each school undertook, with the support of an in-school facilitator, to:

- collect base-line data on Maori student achievement and identify students’ learning needs;
- develop appropriate interventions (and professional development programmes for teachers) to address the most significant of these;
- implement the interventions;
- observe and record changes in Maori student outcomes; and
- assess the impact the programme had on Maori student outcomes and family (whānau)-school relationships.

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\(^1\) Partnership work between Maori and non-Maori has particular significance in New Zealand and usually refers to the partnership principle in the Treaty of Waitangi. This treaty was signed in 1840, and formed an agreement between Maori and the British Crown about governance of the country.
The evaluation of the first phase of this practitioner enquiry, conducted in 2003, indicated positive signs of progress towards reframing the mainstream school experience for Maori students within several schools (Tuuta, Bradnam, Hynds, Higgins & Broughton, 2004).

The research (Hynds, 2007) discussed in this article examines the formation of one community of practice (Wenger, 1998; 2002; Wearmouth and Berryman, in press) that had formed within the staff of a mainstream secondary school to support the development of more culturally appropriate pedagogies for Maori students during the practitioner inquiry project and its disintegration in the two years following the initiative. It does so through the eyes of 11 of its members. Evidence from teacher interviews is triangulated with evidence from students and their parents/caregivers.

Communities of practice

As Wenger (2002) comments, ‘communities of practice’:

are groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis. … These people … meet because they find value in their interactions. As they spend time together, they typically share information, insight and advice. … They discuss their situations, their aspirations and their needs. They ponder common issues, explore ideas … However they accumulate knowledge, they become informally bound by the value that they find in learning together. This value … accrues in the personal satisfaction of knowing colleagues who understand each other’s perspectives … Over time, they develop a unique perspective on their topic as well as a body of common knowledge, practices, and approaches. They also develop personal relationships and established ways of interacting.’

(Wenger, 2002, pp 4-5)

A coherent community of practitioners has a common enterprise, which here was supporting improved learning outcomes for Maori students in collaboration with the local Maori community. This enterprise binds the members together and gives a sense of working to a common purpose. Relationships between communities in schools form and develop through mutual engagement in common enterprises. Part of an enterprise becomes the maintenance of connections between community members. The real power of the school is mediated by any community’s pursuit of its own interest. To cut across the dynamics underlying the functioning of communities as a source of making and
sustaining knowledge is to threaten the existence of these communities and their contribution to the institution of school (Wearmouth and Berryman, in press).

Communities are built around knowledge domains. Various sorts of knowledge domains related to different aspects of the formal and informal curriculum, such as what comprises effective pedagogy for Maori can lie at the heart of a community’s enterprise in a school. Knowing means being competent in enterprises that are valued. That is, participating in the effort to achieve the enterprise that is valued and is given priority. The knowledge held within a community of practice is not a ‘thing’, an object, something that can be bought and sold. It is living and developing as an integral part of the interactions of the community. What we might call ‘expert knowledge’ is dynamic, not static.

The domain offers common ground for a community’s practice and legitimizes and gives meaning to this practice. In healthy and effective communities in schools it is the insider’s view of the domain that guides the community’s learning and that ‘shapes the knowledge, values and behaviours to which they hold each other accountable’ (Wenger, 2002, p 31). This is why, the issue of power sharing over decision making is so important.

The domain defines the identity of the community and how much its achievements are worth in the school (Wearmouth and Berryman, in press). Attribution of worth and value adds an important political dimension to the notion of communities of practice. Schools can do a lot to create conditions for communities to thrive by, for example publicly valuing their knowledge production and enabling their voices to be heard in senior management’s decision-making. Or they can undermine such commitment.

Elements of one set of practices may be offensive or inappropriate in the practices of another community. Practice can therefore form a source of boundaries for communities:

- Participants form close relationships and develop idiosyncratic ways of engaging with one another, which outsiders cannot easily enter.
- They have a detailed and complex understanding of their enterprise as they define it, which outsiders may not share.
- They have a developed repertoire for which outsiders miss shared references.

(Wenger, 1998, p 113)
When communities define themselves as in opposition to other groups, boundary crossing is very difficult because membership in one group is marginalisation and non-participation in another. Reconciling conflicting forms of competence in the practices of different communities across boundaries requires work.

Learning can be either enhanced or impaired when individuals cross boundaries.

If you allow yourself to cross boundaries of practice recklessly enough, then any experience or competence can be defined as knowledge or ignorance, understanding or shallowness, consciousness or unconsciousness, or awareness or oblivion; all you have to do is change the regime of competence.

(Wenger, 1998, p 139)

Educators interested in inclusion might well ask about the effect on learning of crossing boundaries between communities in a school (Wearmouth and Berryman, in press). Where the ‘regime of competence’ is defined as ‘knowing’ and/or ‘doing’ at a level way beyond a newcomer’s current level, and no adequate support from those expert in a community’s practice has been organised, then, clearly, that newcomer is likely to be marginalised. In schools, as elsewhere, boundaries are, in effect, the discontinuities between one community and others. Membership of communities and definition of boundaries are a function of engagement in valued community enterprises over time, the need to get things done and the formation of identities. Boundaries between communities can assume a particular significance in schools. Impermeable boundaries can ‘fix’ members in marginalised positions in relation to enterprises that are highly valued in a school, for example. Or they may serve to protect.

Identity is developed through practice as a constant state of becoming.

No matter what is said, taught, prescribed, recommended or tested, newcomers are no fools: once they have actual access to the practice, they soon find out what counts.

(Wenger, 1998, p 156)

Identities provide the context in which all the learning that might be significant actually becomes significant. The value that is attributed to the enterprises of some groups rather than others, or the way that a ‘regime of competence’ is defined in a particular knowledge domain, can be seen as a political issue in many schools (Wearmouth and Berryman, in press). ‘What matters is how a form of participation enables what comes next’ (Wenger, 1998, p 155).
Research methodology for the current study

Appropriate Maori-based protocols, as advocated for example by Bishop and Glynn (1999), formed an essential basis for establishing trusting and respectful relationships between the researcher and participants and for the development of an appropriate research methodology.

Research methods

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with 48 participants (teachers, students, parents/caregivers, principals, specialist teachers), in total, 19 Maori participants and 29 non-Maori, in an urban high school. Throughout the process of interviewing, the researcher kept a detailed journal, as valuable information was often gained before the tape-recorder was turned on. The research journal provided an audit trail for recording hunches and decisions made about interview evidence and the research process. Participants were asked to comment on the validity of emerging results through a process of on-going member checks. Inductive analysis was used to identify themes and patterns which emerged from the collected evidence (Janesick, 2000).

The process of conducting interviews

Two interviews were conducted with each participating teacher (4 Maori and 7 non-Maori) from the school over the course of 12 months, following the first phase of the initiative in order to track their experiences of partnership work and their perception of change. The first interviews were conducted with teachers during the latter half of 2003 and the second towards the end of 2004. For the purposes of triangulation, interviews were later conducted in 2004 with 9 Maori students and their parents/caregivers and 9 non-Maori students and their parents/caregivers.

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2 These participants were just from the secondary school community. The original study (Hynds, 2007) examined the influences and acceptance of teachers’ collaborative partnership work within two school communities that had been involved in the government funded action research initiative.
Findings

As Wenger (1998) notes, practice in a healthy community is produced by community members through the negotiation of meaning. It has the potential for being highly perturbable and continuing rediscovery, or for being highly resilient and reproducing the old in the new. Analysis of the first set of teacher interviews in 2003 indicated that there appeared to be a coalescing of many of the teaching staff in the school into a discernible community of practice, whose central enterprise involved a commitment to open communication with Maori students, their parents/caregivers and family elders and that this was an important component of their commitment to initiating change in the school (Tuuta et al., 2004).

The development of practice in the community where practice included creating psychologically safe spaces for all participants to speak about their experiences and interpretations of mainstream schooling. Collective interactions were resulting in community practices of reciprocal learning that reflected both the ways that relationships between participants were developing, and also the purpose underlying the communal activities. Professional development sessions had been held in the local Maori meeting houses where teachers, community elders, families and students told, and listened to, personal stories about classroom, teaching and school experiences to learn from each other about the barriers to Maori students learning and progress in classrooms, and effective pedagogies. It was not only the telling of stories and the face-to-face honesty that was crucial in the development of community practice. It was also the reception of, and openness to, the stories of others. 11 teachers (4 Maori and 7 non-Maori) talked about the importance of ‘shared experiences’ within the first phase of the project.

Learning as engagement in the negotiation of meaning

Evidence from the interviews indicated that the experiences of Maori teenagers and young children, their parents/caregivers, community elders (kaumatua and kuia), as well as teaching peers, that were shared in a spirit of openness in school and non-school settings, had influenced the thinking of many teachers within the school. These teachers (4 Maori and 7 non-Maori) recalled how everyone was given the chance to negotiate meaning within the group. Individual teachers described how their thinking had been transformed during the first phase of the initiative by listening to the voices of others who, typically, are not heard in discussions of the effectiveness of classroom and school reform:
… it was listening to the stories of kaumatua (elders) and of Maori students at the hui (meeting) and hearing their experiences of being in mainstream classrooms … so those hui were really powerful and I could see how classes were for Maori kids … it made me see my teaching quite differently … .


But having listened to the commentaries, the voices of Maori students and realising now that my whole teaching delivery was uncomfortable, suddenly the problem was there for me…. I couldn’t see the problem before. My eyes have been opened to that … let’s start identifying what the problem is, and the problem doesn’t necessarily sit out there … , it sits here within us as teachers.

(‘Andrew’, non-Maori teacher, 2003)

These teachers likened their experiences to an uncomfortable awakening from a deep sleep, or from a state of unconsciousness which some described as a kind of blindness. The practice that was developing in the community was unsettling to many of the members. It was ‘perturbable’. It seemed that the sharing of experience of their own classroom practice through other pairs of eyes had been very empowering and had not been something that they would easily forget:

… it was listening at the hui (meeting), and seeing how classes were for many Maori students, and from their grandparents’ perspectives and becoming more aware… of what the cultural differences are … . It was somebody from outside in the local Maori community, a kaumātua (elder) who spoke and some of the Maori staff spoke, it made me aware of what my downfall had been, my lack of cultural knowledge. I picked up so much more, and it made me re-think about why I was at the hui (meeting), it made me realise what does go on in my classes and re-think how I approach teaching … and the way I had been treating students prior to this.

(‘Max’, non-Maori teacher, 2003)

The unsettling effect of the sharing of experiences appears to have focused teachers on identifying and talking through their beliefs about effective teaching. Description, discussion and analysis seemed to enable them to weigh up and examine the contradiction between their beliefs and their practice, and between their practice and students’ needs:
Some of that was really tough data … particularly from their Maori students…., teachers believing one thing about their teaching and then having students giving data that absolutely opposed their beliefs, and teachers having to confront that gap.

(‘Shasha’ Maori In-school facilitator, 2003)

Other participants who were interviewed also noted that the discussions and the presentation of evidence from different perspectives during the sessions in the meeting houses had been an ‘eye-opening’ experience for some teachers:

I have been to a couple of their hui (meetings), down at the wharenui (large meeting house), where … some of the teachers talked … and basically I think it’s been an eye-opener for the teachers from their point of view, learning about the needs of Maori students.

(‘Mr Huia’, parent/caregiver of Maori children, 2004)

Something significant seemed to have happened to these teachers, something that had clearly touched them, unsettled them and stirred a new level of consciousness in them.

Community membership means actively engaging and being competent in enterprises that are valued. Given that a sense of belonging is a fundamental human need, then the way that particular communities in some schools, their practices and the individual members can be differentially valued is of especial concern. The process of collective inquiry and dialogue was not usual practice in the school. Maori teachers who were interviewed explained that it was very unusual practice for them and whānau to have a voice and to be listened to within their school. For some, this was the first time that their own knowledge about students and pedagogy was clearly being viewed as integral to the regime of competence in the community and themselves as expert practitioners:

It is very rare to have the senior management of a school trusting the Maori staff and the Maori whānau to make decisions, which best fit their needs

(‘Heria’, Maori teacher, 2003)
Growing commitment to the core enterprise

During the first interviews, teachers revealed that, in their initial immersion in the discussions, they had become excited about forming a mutual support group to examine data about Maori student achievement in their classes, trial new teaching strategies, experiment with cooperative learning, feedback and feed-forward, voluntarily put themselves into the unknowing position in the classroom and allow students more responsibility for learning and behaviour. Non-Maori teachers frequently talked about learning Maori language, customs and protocols (Te Reo me ona Tikanga Maori), with support from their Maori peers, as well as the need to improve teacher-student relationships. Some teachers also talked about undertaking new roles, responsibilities and partnerships, such as working with other teachers in reciprocal and structured observation with teaching peers, working with specialist support teachers to examine issues of teaching practice, and examining Maori student achievement and data collectively.

Changes over time

By the time of the second interviews with teachers (a year later) there had been an obvious change. 7 / 11 (2 Maori and 5 non-Maori) explained that their own and other teachers’ interest in, commitment to and engagement in the whole enterprise had diminished. Opposition or resistance, which might be active or passive, had arisen from three sources:

- Within the community of practice itself there were some serious disagreements about issues central to the enterprise which were not being resolved. For example, there was no consensus about what constituted improved or culturally-appropriate practice.

- within the wider school staff not everyone was supportive of the enterprise. Teachers explained that they had chosen not to share particular ideas, questions or concerns openly or honestly with colleagues. In addition, some members of the school hierarchy felt that their status and role was threatened by the negotiation of decision-making within the community rather than the more traditional top-down impositional procedure. Particularly significant here was the lack of a safe environment in which to raise critical issues.

- Within the broader groupings of parents and families associated with the school there was resistance to changes that were felt to be inequitable or racist because they were intended to focus on students from one ethnic background. There was a sense among members of the community that the school was privileging the interests of these broader groups over the enterprises of their community.
By their second interviews, only 2 teachers (1 Maori and 1 non-Maori) who were interviewed actually talked about collecting or examining Maori student achievement data within the context of the enterprise.

**Disagreements within the community**

Within the community of practice itself a number of disagreements had arisen that had threatened the cohesion of the group. There was conflict about what was compatible with traditional Maori protocols:

… you know, there are some strategies that are in there that are not quite Maori, to my way of saying … . I didn’t say anything to my colleagues at the time because it was on reflection … I mean, you hear all these things, and you think to yourself, ‘Oh yes, yes’, and then when you go to think about it then that’s when you start to question, maybe I should have brought those questions in before. But you know, I still think about it … the work goes on, but I still have it at the back of my head.

(‘Barbara’, Maori teacher, 2003)

Amongst the disagreements was the issue of involving students in decision-making processes. Some felt that this was not culturally appropriate:

... in my day you had to be white haired, just about bald before you could stand up and speak on a marae. Now they’ve got systems where anybody can go and stand up on the marae and korero (give a point of view) because this is how they’re being taught – ‘You go to the front’ – and yet there’s an old Maori saying that, ‘If it’s all right at the back then it’s right in the front; if there’s no workers at the back then the front will fall down’, and a lot of our Maori people are forgetting to learn how to work before they make their way up, because there is a step and our kids aren’t going through those steps, … you’ve got to go back to values ... .

(‘Barbara’, Maori teacher, 2004)

Others believed that developing relationships where self advocacy among students was encouraged was central to improving pedagogy for Maori:

The mahi (the work) is power sharing in the classroom…. Teachers need to get off their pedestal, you know, and get into the role of their students more …. I mean, for me, it’s about working with them, the students first and stepping into their world and then when you have their trust and some credibility with them, because for a lot of
our young people their experience of adults is that they shit on them and just want to disempower them all the time, so if … we get off our pedestals and work alongside our students and really build that relationship and our understanding of them as people … but that means letting go of the power … and teachers like power … ..

(‘Heria’, Maori teacher, 2003)

There was also conflict in the community about the extent to which students should be expected to comply with rules, or should be involved in the negotiation of them:

Later when we were back to school ... talking about improving practice and …. discipline and…. at one particular staff meeting …we were working in groups where we were given scenarios to discuss – you know, what we would do in a particular situation – and a couple of people said to me, ‘Well, you manage the students’ behaviour really well, what would you do in this scenario?’, and I said, ‘Well, the very first thing I would do is take out any judgement I’ve had about what’s happened’. Say it was an incident of smoking, maybe I catch a kid smoking, and I don’t personally believe in detentions and stand-downs because I don’t believe it achieves anything. I don’t give kids detention if I catch them smoking, I just say to them, ‘Put it out, this is really dumb. Either stop smoking at school or don’t get caught. Sharpen up. You know, if you really can’t go without the nicotine then sharpen up. Don’t be so thick otherwise you’re going to get caught’, because I know what it’s like to have a nicotine addiction, I used to be a smoker, but I don’t smoke now .... . Well, one of the teachers in my group, he got real upset, … banged the table and shouted, ‘But they need to do as they’re told, you know, there are rules here and the rules are to be obeyed and if you let one off then you set a precedent!’ … Okay, I don’t mind … so I stopped talking.

(‘Heria’, Maori teacher, 2004)

**Opposition from within the school staff**

Power-sharing with students was also a point of contention among the wider school staff:

I don’t think all the teachers see it like I do. Actually, in our [department] discussions, I think some people see co-construction completely differently to me, and I know that this is not necessarily out there with everybody else, we’ve got completely different views about co-construction which is interesting, but I’ve never really come
across the term and I just took it to mean that, let’s build this thing together with the kids, let’s not have the whole thing controlled by the teacher from the front of the room.

(‘Andrew’, non-Maori teacher, 2004)

An increased focus on aspects of the curriculum specifically related to Maori was not popular with all staff. One teacher expressed her anger that recent pressure had been placed on one of her colleagues to reduce the amount of Maori language within her classes:

I felt really angry that my colleague was told she was using too much te reo (Maori language) in class, after all that talk ... my feeling is we haven’t really progressed ... . It’s really come down to the nitty-gritty and it’s a question of our values, and those values are inherited. ... I also feel if we took away the Maori words….. there would be more acceptance of what teachers are doing, but I feel that is a cop-out, and really a lack of respect for us as Maori.

(‘Barbara’, Maori teacher, 20053)

In the community of practice all members were expected to contribute to discussion and decision-making about ways to achieve improved outcomes for Maori students. However, the lower status of members of the community of practice in relation to the existing power structure of the school as a whole was seen to threaten the continued prioritisation of the whole enterprise:

More than likely, the teacher who was doing the leading in terms of innovation of instruction and teaching for Maori students probably was one of the assistant teachers, who was probably more the leader in that respect, but that was also potentially very difficult and I think because it’s about trying to alter the existing school structure. We had new leaders emerging, … and this challenged the existing structure in departments and that caused some issues. High schools are quite different in terms of hierarchy and heads of department can hold a lot of power structurally.

(‘Shasha’ Maori In-school Facilitator, 2004)

3 This quote was taken from a member-check with ‘Barbara’ towards the end of 2005.
Fundamental to the issue here is that the safe environment needed to discuss difficult challenges implicit in the initiative was lacking:

I think at times some people have a problem with fronting up and being honest about what they really think … . No one came and saw me or talked through their concerns directly with me … . Another staff member came to me at assembly actually and very quietly said, ‘Watch your back’, and I said, ‘What?’, and she said, ‘Oh, because there are some people gunning for you’, and I said, ‘Oh, what have I done?’ And she said it was just a personal vendetta, so there was that too, but that really, really upset me.

(‘Heria’, Maori teacher, 2004)

The school itself was not thought to be a safe place for the discussion of opposing views of the sort that would enable the construction of new knowledge about pedagogy appropriate for Maori students:

I don’t think it’s always easy for people to say what they think though in an open forum … . I think it’s hard …. to speak up because they are worried about who is listening and what’s going to be held against them if they say the ‘wrong’ thing. I think as a staff it would be a really good idea to have a staff meeting when there is no management present where people can say what is on their minds and not fear that someone is going to say something or it will be marked down in their log book about them because I do think there is a sense of that sometimes.


Resistance from out-of-school groupings

Some parents and caregivers admitted that they had begun to resist the changes once they started to see a greater emphasis on cultural content related to Maori, in the school curriculum. 6/9 parents/caregivers of non-Maori children interviewed from the school, expressed general concerns about changes that included a focus on Maori cultural knowledge and the inclusion of Maori language. In one school a group of parents/caregivers discussed withdrawing their children from the school because of observable changes:

When I had my concerns, it was towards the end of last year when they were talking about increasing the Maori content. There were a few of us parents that spoke up and discussed, you know, other options if we
didn’t like how much was being introduced. Then we would remove our children, and I was one of those … we would remove our children and take them to a school which didn’t do so much….

(‘Mrs Kruger’, parent/caregiver of non-Maori child, 2004)

Families’ concerns often appeared closely related to their own personal identities as culturally situated. For example, one non-Maori parent/caregiver explained that she had not wanted to find out anything about teachers’ collaborative partnership work because she identified as a ‘European’:

I don’t know much about it, that Maori and non-Maori teachers were working together at the school or anything about raising Maori student achievement .... There might have been something in the newsletter about it, but I probably didn't read it because it’s about Maori education and I don’t think it really has anything to do with us, we're European …


Being European, for this participant, meant that she was not interested in anything to do with ‘Maori education’ at her child’s school. There seemed to be a common belief that open discussion about racial differences should be ignored because, it was argued by some people, that everyone in New Zealand society should be treated the same.

… this Pākehā (NZ European) and Maori nonsense has got to stop. We are all New Zealanders … like we're all offered the same opportunities in life and if you want to take those, then take them, and if you don’t, then you suffer the consequences.

(‘Mrs Hall’, parent/caregiver of a non-Maori student, 2004)

One participant became visibly upset and angry during her interview. She appeared to see the initiative as threatening to a collective identity of ‘New Zealanders’; something she appeared to believe we should all hold. Her strong views about the importance of a collective national identity precluded an acknowledgement of cultural diversity:

No, I don’t want any information on how Maori and non-Maori teachers are working together! … like I said to my daughter…. I think it’s time we stopped looking at the colour of people’s skin and started treating everyone like New Zealanders, and… treating people equally … .

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Some parents/caregivers expressed concerns that changes at their children’s school was racist, even though they acknowledged that they did not know much about what teachers were attempting to do. These participants appeared to believe that by addressing the needs of Maori students, teachers would ignore the needs of their children. They also espoused the idea that teachers should ignore racial differences, claiming acknowledgement of these differences to be a type of racism:

It’s like it’s racist … … I don’t get this race difference, like, to me everyone is even and we should be treated the same … like, to me, let’s get over this race thing and try and get all our kids achieving … .

(‘Mr Smith’, parent/caregiver of non-Maori child, 2004)

A number of participants who were interviewed, particularly parents/caregivers of non-Maori children, were quite hostile to what they perceived as educational ‘privilege’ for Maori students; even though they explained they had no real knowledge of the teachers’ action project work. In one interview, one participant was so angry about what he perceived as ‘racist behaviour’ that he spat his words across the table.

Discussion

The 11 members from the community of practice that had developed during the practitioner enquiry project recalled that, in the course of that project, something significant had happened to them, something had touched them, unsettled them and stirred a new level of consciousness in them. They had come together voluntarily and had clearly found value in their interactions with each other and with the Maori students and wider community, sharing ‘insight and advice’, discussing ‘their situations, their aspirations and their needs, and pondering ‘common issues [and]... ideas’ and developing ‘established ways of interacting’ within the group (Wenger, 2002, pp 4-5). In the beginning they clearly found a great deal of satisfaction in coming to understand others’ perspectives and, together, developing ‘a unique perspective on their topic as well as a body of common knowledge, practices, and approaches’ (Wenger, 2002, pp 4-5).

However, over the course of the two years following the project this community that had come together with such high hopes of achieving their aim to continue the collaboration further to improve Maori students educational attainments and outcomes had fallen apart.
Strong healthy communities of practice encourage interactions between participants that are based on mutual respect and thus enable individuals to trust their peers enough to expose lack of knowledge and skills and open themselves up to new learning. Within the community there were conflicting views about major conceptual issues related to the core enterprise: what constituted culturally-appropriate practice, and the degree to which power and decision-making should be shared with students, for example. These disagreements could have provided an impetus for discussion and a dynamic development of practice and knowledge creation in the group. However, the same safe context for open debate of controversial issues that had been established for the initial pilot project was no longer made available. During member checks after the interviews were completed a number of Maori teachers commented that, to resolve these differences of opinion, it would be important to go back to the elders, family members and students in the Maori community. To do this, however, they would have needed support from the senior management team of the school and this was not forthcoming at the time.

To comprehend the attitudes and reactions of some of the senior staff in the school and some of the non-Maori family members it is important to consider aspects of the national context at the time of this study. At the time of the second interviews with participants (2004), a number of debates stormed across New Zealand and continued into the election year (2005). Some of these related to the macro political situation occurring at the time, including the then Leader of the Opposition’s speech where he accused the government of employing ‘racist policies’, particularly those that targeted ethnic groups (such as Maori) in an attempt to ‘close the achievement gap’. Media headlines remained hot about the social divisions exposed through these events, fuelled by a ‘backlash’ against perceived Maori privilege (McCreanor, 2005). Several national incidents exposed the state of race relations between Maori and non-Maori groups within New Zealand. This was captured in January 2005 when a national newspaper featured a front page article based on the findings of a study called ‘2005 Mood of the Nation’:

In its 2005 Mood of the Nation report, …. UMR Research managing director Stephen Mills says the only cloud on the horizon has been public concern over race issues. ‘The last few years have been pretty positive, settled and optimistic. The one thing that disturbs that are the issues on the race relations front’, says Mills … In 2003 the foreshore and seabed issue ignited concern about racial issues. And 2004 started with a bang, with the racial debate that erupted after Don Brash’s famous Orewa Speech … Outrunning every other issue in 2004 was race relations and the Treaty of Waitangi …. By February 40 percent of respondents were saying treaty and race issues were the biggest problem facing the country.

(Laugesen, 2005, January 16)
In situations where parents have a choice of schools for their children, it is unsurprising if the voices of dominant groups are privileged over the minority.

Over time it had become clear that some stakeholder groups in the school clearly resisted the development work that was occurring. The accustomed role and position of significant members of the hierarchy in the school’s management structure implied that senior management alone had control of decision-making about change in the school. The practice of community members, however, was to adopt open, collaborative negotiation about change and development that cut across the conventional decision-making structure of the school. In addition, the majority of the non-Maori parents and caregivers who were interviewed were openly opposed to changes intended to benefit one minority group, because they believed cultural differences should be ignored and/or that changes to teachers’ practice threatened their own child’s achievement. Member checks with various stakeholder groups on the findings of this study, particularly with teachers and principals indicated a lack of leadership and political ‘will’ that precluded public and critical exploration of such issues. Most notable among these was the inability, or unwillingness, to provide a safe environment for the type of critical, collective dialogue that was needed to open up and address the differences in views and values both within the community itself and also outside it that had previously been hidden but that emerged and threatened the future of the community. Foremost amongst the barriers was a lack of preparation and willingness on the part of school leaders to provide a safe space to open up specific challenges put forward from some groups, particularly at a time when race relationships between Maori and non-Maori groups dominated national news headlines (Hynds, 2007). At times, some participants’ emotional reactions indicated that something was stirring far deeper, at a less conscious level. These reactions appeared to indicate conflicting forms of competence in the different communities, related to incompatibilities between the values that were implicit in the new changes, such as the importance of respecting, acknowledging and responding to cultural differences and previously held beliefs that everyone should be treated the same. Some of the non-Maori parents defined their own position as in opposition to other groups. Boundary crossing was therefore very difficult. Membership in one group would have implied marginalisation and non-participation in another. As Wearmouth and Berryman (in press) note, schools as institutions can do a lot to create the kind of context in which communities of practice can thrive: overtly valuing their knowledge-production and learning and enabling their voices to be heard in decision-making at the top level. In the current study, the school principal confessed that he was reluctant to engage in what she described as ‘emotionally charged’ public conversations about cultural identity. The result of the lack of engagement with difficult, contentious issues was that the central enterprise of the community of practitioners trying to bring about change was over-ridden by the unpreparedness of the principal to develop and sustain open communication with hostile groups on issues related to cultural identity, diversity and inclusive practice. Community
membership means actively engaging and being competent in enterprises that are valued. Given that a sense of belonging is a fundamental human need, then the way that particular communities in some schools, their practices and the individual members can be differentially valued is of especial concern.

**Conclusion**

Reconciling conflicting forms of competence in the practices of different communities across boundaries requires work. This current research can be seen as leading to a similar conclusion to that of Kemmis (2006) who, in a different context, calls for ‘open communication’ in action research initiatives so that participants are safe in expressing their views and hear the messages of others.

Data indicated a general reluctance on the part of teachers and principals who were interviewed to engage in open communication and continued inquiry with all stakeholder groups, alongside a palpable hostility from many stakeholder groups to the changes occurring in both schools. This is hardly surprising at a time when parents and families are encouraged to take up their option of a choice of school for their children. At the time of the research there appeared to be little literature to prepare school leaders to develop and sustain dialogue and critical inquiry with diverse stakeholder groups on issues of cultural identity, diversity and inclusion. Relatively few authors writing in the area of teachers’ professional development appear to call for partnership work around issues concerned with race, identity, diversity and social justice (Cochran-Smith, 2004). There needs to be critical collective analysis of hidden interests, power relationships and dominant discourses that influence society, schooling practice and educational outcomes for marginalised students (Smith, 1999; Jones, 1999; Kemmis, 2006; Kincheloe, 2003). Participative critical inquiry process can then develop together with open communication.

**References**


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