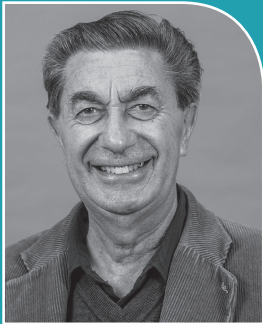


Bridges to success for Māori: An aspirational lens

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Introduction

This paper offers a position on factors contributing to Māori success. It presents findings from a seminal study, *Ka Awatea*¹, which explored aspects of Māori learner success in eight secondary schools in the Rotorua rohe (district). While the findings emerged from a study in the field of education, it is contended that the cultural constructs presented in this position paper are far-reaching and are able to be applied within a range of workplaces and professional disciplines such as psychology, economics, and innovation. The paper commences by offering a snapshot of the discourse on Māori success in education, and outlines the pathway that led to the *Ka Awatea* study. It then proceeds to describe and explain the main findings of the study and proposes some recommendations for potential stakeholders who may hold the key to Māori success.

Māori Learner Success – a snapshot of the discourse

Few New Zealand scholars have focussed their attention on the attributes of successful Māori, both in mainstream (sic) education and beyond. Instead, the focus has remained largely on identifying Māori deficits, and this, combined with a reluctance to incorporate a Māori worldview into areas such as the

¹ The *Ka Awatea* study was supported by a grant from Ngā Pae o te Māramatanga, the Centre of Research Excellence funded by the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC) and hosted by The University of Auckland. The University of Canterbury was commissioned to undertake the research, and procured an alliance with The University of Auckland, Victoria University of Wellington, and Ua-Cox Consulting Ltd. The foremost contributors were the research participants: learners, teachers, principals, whānau, former learners, and community leaders. To access the full manuscript, see <http://www.maramatanga.co.nz/project/ka-awatea-iwi-case-study-m-ori-learners-experiencing-success>

national curriculum framework and institutional policies and practices, and the undervaluing of Te Reo Māori (the Māori language), has contributed to an overall lack of positive outcomes for Māori (Penetito, 2010; G.H. Smith, 1992; Turner, 2013, Webber & Macfarlane, 2018). The body of research on Māori achievement has, for so long, positioned Māori as simply ‘another’ cohort among a homogenous school, professional, or workplace population. This positioning seeks to assimilate Māori within the dominant culture in an invisible fashion, rather than seeing Māori as cultural bearers, distinctively unique and highly dynamic as any Indigenous group of people can be (Bishop, Berryman, Cavanagh & Teddy, 2007; Webber & Macfarlane, 2018).

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Historically, the official government policy was one of assimilation, where the focus was on all Māori acquiring the culture, customs, language and knowledge base of the Pākehā (British settlers and their descendants). The resultant undervaluing of mātauranga Māori (Māori knowledge), including language and customs, has had serious consequences for generations of Māori. Research illustrates that as a result, many Māori learners experience early disengagement from education, which has often led to high levels of unemployment, early patterns of delinquency and criminal involvement, increased risk of mental illness and predictable loss of potential for future success (Sherrif, 2010; Education Review Office, 2006; Macfarlane, Glynn, Cavanagh & Bateman, 2007). Surpassing the low expectations of others has proved

challenging for many Māori, but increasingly more Māori are attaining high levels of academic and workplace success.

Yet despite this increase in outcomes of success, little work has been done to identify what factors have contributed to this success. In addition, there is relatively little knowledge about how the various school, home, community and personal factors are interrelated. Not since Mitchell and Mitchell (1988) profiled Māori learners with high marks in School Certificate English and Mathematics, was the subject of Māori success and its intrinsic link to culture examined again in any depth. The *Ka Awatea* study delved into the literature on successful Māori learners specifically, and explored some of the issues facing Māori learners in mainstream education today with a particular focus on factors that impede their progress. However, it did not dwell there, preferring to place greater emphasis on identifying those factors that support successful outcomes and investigating strategies that could promote a more inclusive framework for Māori both in a school and community environments (Macfarlane, 2010; Webber, 2015). There is growing evidence and acceptance of the importance of making culture count in such a way that illuminates a pathway forward, thereby increasing the potential for Māori learners’ success. In essence, *Ka Awatea* promoted an agenda that is mindful of the unique position a culturally-centred Māori individual should occupy in an educational or workplace environment – where Māori individuals are seen as capable, productive and competent members of their whānau (family), hapū (tribe), iwi (extended tribe), school, and other communities (Ministry of Education, 1998; 2002; 2006; 2013).

Having recognised the shortage of

writings published within New Zealand which concentrate exclusively on Māori success, *Ka Awatea* sought to redirect attention from deficit theorising towards the nuances of success. A number of observations were made in the study, including: a need for strategic change at every level; the continued tension between holistic Indigenous knowledge and Western models; and the importance of cultural identity and the significance of place. Essentially, what emerged in the findings of the study was that those Māori learners who were succeeding at school possessed a skill suite which was underpinned by psycho-social tenets such as a strong cultural identity, an intrinsic motivation to learn, and a willingness to engage in learning within a range of contexts.

Four constructs and an overarching lever

It is generally accepted that success is built upon a range of key ingredients. Analyses of the data from *Ka Awatea* revealed that positive Māori identity and cultural efficacy are shown to be closely linked to resilience, with knowledge of one's whakapapa (genealogy) and mana tangata (a sense of belonging) also emerging as key influences. Cultural knowledge and engagement also tend to support connections in the wider community and an individual's access to social support and positive role models.

Similarly, whānau, hapū and iwi help individuals to develop fundamental psycho-social imperatives such as a sense of their collective belonging, cultural connectedness, and responsibilities to others. According to all of the participants in the study, their Māori identity lay at the heart of all things important to them and their achievement was considered complementary to this. These data sets emerged as four broad themes, these being: a strong sense of identity and belonging; a sense of resilience; a sense of connection to place, and a sense of being at ease in two worlds - and one overarching lever: whānau dynamics.

Mana Motuhake: A positive sense of identity

Mana motuhake, or a positive sense of identity as Māori, is critical to success as Māori, and is experienced via developing a sense of cultural efficacy. This includes the ability and knowledge that individuals can engage meaningfully with Māori culture and an ability to put this into practice, and where their psycho-social behaviour is informed by Māori values such as manaakitanga (care) and māhaki (humility). Māori experiencing success are more likely to feel a sense of belonging and connectedness to others in their whānau, school, workplace and community. Whānau play the most important role in terms of socialising their members into the Māori world and helping them to develop cultural efficacy. The findings that

emerged from *Ka Awatea* indicate that there is a significant opportunity for schools and workplaces to play an important role in enabling Māori identity to be developed, and to purposefully engage with Māori in activities that foster a strong sense of identity.

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Mana Tū: A sense of courage and resilience

Successful Māori individuals develop psychological attributes that include positive self-efficacy, positive self-concept, resilience, and an internal locus of control. These attributes contribute to a sense of courage and resilience that allows them to thrive in the school context and beyond. Successful Māori individuals tend to be aspirational, have high expectations and enjoy overall physical, emotional and spiritual wellbeing. A healthy home environment that supports an holistic sense of wellbeing is a key factor in fostering courage and resilience, where whānau members model practical resilience strategies, such as a firm work ethic, perseverance, determination and discipline. Complementing this are people who act as mentors and as confidantes. These mentors look for the good in the individual, articulate their potential, and have realistic expectations. Māori experiencing success see themselves as engaged and contributing community members. They want the community to provide opportunities for them to meaningfully participate in the broader success of their whānau, hapū and iwi.

Mana Ūkaipo: A sense of place

A strong connection between learning and the physical and socio-historical environment in which the learning occurs is pivotal to Māori success. Essentially, successful Māori seek a synergy between their school or place of work and the unique context in which the school or place of work is located. They want to see local role models of success made visible and prominent in schools and workplaces. There is a better chance that they will thrive when local customs and culture have some resonance with their educational and community activities, and they expect these phenomena, which they view as a viable platform for ongoing aspirations and achievement, to occupy a position of importance in areas such as the school curriculum and workplace environment.

Mana Tangatarua: A sense of inclusivity

Every participant had a culturally inclusive aptitude, a sense for navigating success in two paradigms – Te Ao Māori (a Māori world) and Auraki (a Western world), but held to a contention that educational and workplace success should not come at the expense of Māori identity. They saw both their Māori and Auraki experiences as vital to overall success, noting they need the appropriate navigational skills and role models, and a strong sense of psychological and spiritual wellbeing to navigate a bicultural Aotearoa New Zealand, successfully. Supportive and galvanic relationships are essential to success whereby whānau are primarily responsible for Māori success as Māori and should model what this looks like. Schools and workplaces are well-positioned to contribute largely to Māori success because they offer numerous opportunities to be innovative and creative, to try new things and to take risks, and in doing so, provide the kind of terrain that encourages both distinctiveness and diversity to flourish.

There is a clear correlation between the recognition of and support for an individual's cultural identity and their subsequent ability to translate that into the attainment of knowledge and skills.

Mana Whānau: The overarching lever

The findings from *Ka Awatea* revealed that successful Māori individuals occupy a valued position within their whānau. They are nurtured into succeeding in both worlds by their whānau, are socio-psychologically capable and have a developing sense of belonging across a number of contexts.

Māori experiencing success appreciate that their whānau appreciates education and workplace roles, and that their success is important to the whole whānau because it contributes to the overall success of the whānau.

The four themes and the overarching lever emerged as key ingredients in a recipe for educational and workplace success. If the education and workplace sectors are committed to successful learning and development for Māori then they must also be committed to enhancing cultural continuity and cultural growth in their respective modus-operandi.

The full *Ka Awatea* report offered 40 recommendations, eight each for Māori learners, whānau, schools, iwi, and policy-makers. A selection of the recommendations are:

- Hold fast to your deeply held cultural values and moral standards.
- Value your mentors and friends within the context of the school or professional community because they are valuable sources of knowledge and support in times of struggle.
- Ensure that your home environment is positive, safe, caring and nurturing. Individuals who are products of such environments are more content, emotionally secure and resilient.
- Value Māori cultural distinctiveness and foster the development of a degree of academic, social, and cultural self-confidence and self-belief.
- Ensure educational and workplace programmes have meaningful links to the local people, their history and their language.
- Make provision for visionary and proactive leadership – ‘reach in’

to schools and workplaces; don't wait for schools and workplaces to ‘reach out’.

- Familiarise administrators with local tikanga (customs) and kawa (protocols).
- Institutionalise a clearly marked path to success for Māori.

Conclusion

The four themes and overarching lever that emerged from *Ka Awatea* propose a position on Māori success, which in turn, have guided recommendations for key stakeholders who are charged with fostering success for Māori. The challenge remains for schools and workplaces to adapt models of practice to include both individual and collective aspirations of success for Māori. Schools and workplaces that have embraced this duality will be seen to be responding to Māori potential by creating innovative ways in which an holistic approach can be implemented alongside Western methodologies and practices (see Gillon & Macfarlane, 2017; Macfarlane, Macfarlane & Gillon, 2015).

There is a clear correlation between the recognition of and support for an individual's cultural identity and their subsequent ability to translate that into the attainment of knowledge and skills. The proposition that emerges from the data stories of the *Ka Awatea* study is that Māori individuals will improve their chances of success if the mana factors (motuhake, tū, ūkaipō, tangatarua, and whānau) play a part in their lives. A further proposition is that ambitious schools and workplaces with high numbers of successful Māori have recognised this fact, and have engineered positive spaces and shared understandings that augment Indigenous knowledge alongside Western knowledge - thus enhancing the experiences for all. A final proposition is to concede that many

Māori excel despite the absence of the mana factors outlined above, such is the enigmatic nature of circumstance.

As the number of Māori experiencing success increases, so too do the calls for changes to school and workplace environments, communities, curricula, and policies to support and assure continued growth. More and more, schools and workplaces need to embrace and celebrate difference, and to manage these imperatives in such a way that promotes a way forward for Māori, and indeed for all. And most do – potentially they provide a rich tapestry of human existence that are points along a continuum toward a distinctly democratic and culturally-just ecosystem where Indigeneity and diversity are celebrated and encouraged phenomena.

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