February 2016

Where am I in our Schools' White Spaces? Social Justice for the Learners we Marginalise

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INTRODUCTION

We live in the world of the intensely market-driven lower case "i". Since the launch in 1998 of the "iMac", Apple Inc. has spawned a plethora of lower-case "i" devices and programmes. Even "non-i" users, like me, cannot help but be surrounded by fervent disciples of the iPhone, iPad, iPod, IMovie and iTunes. And I am not altogether immune. The model of the car I drive is the i30. What do these mean? According to Steve Jobs (1998), the "i" signified "the marriage of the excitement of the internet, with the simplicity of Macintosh" (Jobs, 1998), so the "i" stands for internet then? Never one to miss a marketing opportunity, Jobs suggested in the same speech it could also stand for individual, instruct, inform, and inspire. According to the vice president of Hyundai Europe, (Stein, 2007) the "i" in my i30, and their other "i" models, stands for inspiration and innovation. That is a lot to ask of one small letter!

Whatever the "i" signifies, which it seems can be anything you want it to be, there is no denying that it is pervasive. The small "i" is also insidious. It crept into our vocabulary, into our homes, our pockets and our handbags, and spun off into other products. The small "i" typifies many other takeovers, which marginalise or replace what we valued before, and become our new way of thinking. The question is, as these devices, and this language have become ubiquitous in our schools as essential tools to equip our children for the future, what has happened to the upper case "I"? Where am *I* – not only in our neoliberal market-driven education systems – but for students of colour, where am I in the omnipresent "white spaces" (Milne, 2013) which permeate our schools? Where is the crucially important "I" for Identity? Where is Indigeneity?

For students from indigenous and ethnic minorities the development of a cohesive cultural identity is severely challenged in the school environment in which you spend the major part of your daily life, when your norms and values are not those of the dominant culture. This tension is exacerbated during the years of early adolescence when the formation of identity is occurring developmentally (Caskey & Anfara, 2007; Ghuman, 1999). Dei (2011) aligns the struggle to retain one's identity and indigenous knowledge with resistance:

> Today, Indigenous knowledge is about the struggle to retain one's identity in the call for a global sameness. ...Indigenous knowledge is about resistance, not in the romanticized sense, but resistance as struggle to navigate the tensions of today's modernized, globalized world while seeking to disrupt its universalizing, hegemonic norms. (p. 168)

Kia Aroha College

This resistance is the experience of Kia Aroha College, a designated-character, Years 7 to 13 (Grades 6 to 12), secondary school, located in Otara, South Auckland, New Zealand. Kia Aroha College was established in 2011 through the merger Clover Park Middle School and Te Whānau o Tupuranga, a Year 7 to 13 Māori bilingual school, which had grown out of the bilingual unit in the middle school.

In New Zealand every state school is autonomous, governed by an elected board of parents and community. Each school has the authority to develop its own charter within the boundaries of a broad national curriculum. A designated-character school is a state school that has a particular character, which spells out its difference from regular state schools. Each change in the 30 year history of the schools on this campus was driven by Māori and Pasifika

parents, who demanded an education which was relevant to their children (Milne, 2004, 2013).

Kia Aroha College's special character focuses on bilingual (Māori, Samoan, Tongan), critically conscious, culturally responsive, social justice education. The school's approach resists and rejects school environments which alienate Māori and Pasifika learners, and is centred on students' identities as "Māori", "Tongan," "Samoan" – as who they are *first*. Kia Aroha College's story is a counter-story that chronicles the efforts of the school and community to step outside education's "white spaces" to create new space. This counter-story is juxtaposed against pervasive, deficit-driven whitestream explanations of "achievement gaps" and Māori and Pasifika "under-achievement" in New Zealand schools – in fact, the very big "I" that stands for Inequity.

Māori children make up 23% of our total school population. Although 16% of Māori children participate in bilingual education, just 3.8% of these attend Kura Kaupapa Māori (Māori language immersion schools), where the philosophy and practice reflect Māori cultural values. The majority of Māori learners are in 'mainstream' New Zealand public schools (Ministry of Education, 2015). The problem is, our education officials continue to push the rhetoric of New Zealand's "world class" education system – while avoiding the fact that we have one of the lowest equity scores internationally. New Zealand's school drop-out rates are among the OECD's highest, with one in three Māori students, and one in four Pasifika students, leaving school without formal qualifications (OECD, 2013).

As is the case for indigenous people the world over, the history of British colonisation in New Zealand had a profound effect on Māori. It decimated their economic, political, cultural, and social structures, invaded and appropriated their land and resources, and all but extinguished their language, through deliberate policies of assimilation and integration that used schooling as one of their most powerful weapons. As Māori academic, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) describes, "They came, they saw, they named, they claimed" (p. 80).

Our current neoliberal education reforms implemented ostensibly to "fix" the problem we

have created perpetuate the colonial project with a scarily similar agenda to the history that Linda Smith names. Tuck (2013) discusses similar reforms in the United States as "the relentless pursuit of accountability," (p. 324) and links this to "neoliberal ideology (the logic that prizes accountability)" (p. 325). The situation in New Zealand schools is no different. Māori scholar, Maria Bargh (2007), describes neoliberalism as a "translation of many older colonial beliefs, once expressed explicitly, now expressed implicitly, into language and practices, which are far more covert about their civilizing mission (p. 13). Bargh and Otter (2009) observe that neoliberalism is not new to Māori and these practices "are but the latest in a long history of colonial endeavours that have sought to inculcate Māori into Western forms of individualism" (p. 155).

Middle Years and Identity

This drive for individualism and accountability is a key point for Māori and Pasifika children in the search for "Where am I?" in New Zealand schools. In Western cultures individual needs and characteristics, personal freedom, and independence are highly emphasised (Triandis,1995, cited in Milne, 2013). In collectivistic societies, however, the interests of the individual are considered subordinated to those of the collective. The "self" we sought at Kia Aroha College was not the independent or individual self. It was self in relation to the Māori concept of whānau. Whānau is often translated as 'extended family' but where the concept originally linked relatives who could trace their genealogy to a common ancestor, the concept of whānau in recent times includes those who are linked due to a common interest, such as a school, or a location, or a goal.

The change of status in 1995, from a traditional two-year New Zealand intermediate school to a four-year middle school, one of the first in New Zealand, was the result of four years of struggle by Māori parents to have their children stay longer in the then Māori bilingual unit, Te Whānau o Tupuranga. This group of Māori parents were very specific about their expectations. They wanted continuity of a Māori whānau learning environment and te reo Māori (Māori language). They wanted teachers who knew their children

well, and with whom both students and whānau could establish a reciprocal relationship. They wanted high academic outcomes and consistently high expectations. They wanted their children to have clear boundaries and they worried about their children's safety and learning in a secondary school system where Māori values and knowledge had little worth and where they had to relate to many different adults each day. Several families spoke from the schooling experience of the parents themselves and also of older siblings in the family.

Moeke-Pickering (1996) believes that the sense of collective affiliation from the concept of whānau, with its obligatory roles and responsibilities, played a major role in forming and maintaining a pathway through which Māori identities could be formed and developed. What our Māori parents were asking for brought together their understanding of whānau, with the basis of middle school philosophy and the core developmental needs of this age group. These goals became the foundations of our learning programme, with the development of a secure identity as Māori, Samoan, Tongan, and Cook Islands Māori at the centre (Milne, 2013, p. 8). There was a definite 'fit' between middle schooling and the culturally relevant environment that Clover Park Middle School set out to develop in 1994 that has formed the backbone of Kia Aroha College's current practice. However, it is also important to keep in mind that Western perceptions of adolescence are not universal; ideas about child development differ from culture to culture.

Cunningham (2011) explains that "Māori concepts of adolescence are different than mainstream; the terms taiohi (youth, young person), taitamariki (young person, teenager) and rangatahi (younger generation, youth) approximate but do not match the term 'adolescent'" (p. 145). He uses the term, "rangatahi development" (Milne, 2013, p. 54). Tatum (2003) points out that while all adolescents look at themselves in new ways, not all adolescents have to think of themselves in racial terms (p. 53). If we are not from the dominant culture, we are seen as being different from, or "diverse" compared with, society's accepted norms:

Who am I? The answer depends in large part on who the world around me says I am. Who do my parents say I am? Who do my peers say I am? What message is reflected back to me in the faces and voices of my teachers, my neighbours, store clerks? What do I learn from the media about myself? How am I represented in the cultural images around me? Or, am I missing from the picture altogether? (Tatum, p. 18)

Middle schooling and its developmentally responsive philosophy is not a panacea or a substitute for a culturally responsive approach, nor should it be mistaken for one. May (1994, 2002) uses the term "benevolent multi-culturalism" to describe the 'one-off' cultural weeks, ethnic meals, ethnic costume days, and in the "dial-a-Māori" pōwhiri (welcome ceremony) many schools view as a sufficient response to the ethnicities and cultures of their students. Such activities represent those aspects of Māori culture that whitestream teachers can feel comfortable with for specific, and short, periods of time. Slightly "shading in" the white spaces in this way actually diminishes and demeans Māori and Pasifika children because these activities contribute to trivialising, belittling and marginalising cultural values and practice.

White Spaces

Tomlins-Jahnke (2007) calls the term mainstream "a euphemism or code word for schools that privilege a western/Euro-centric education tradition" (p. 6). I find the concept of a "main" stream to be an offensive and blatant judgement about whose knowledge really counts in a system that normalises practice that damages Māori and Pasifika learners. So I choose to intentionally reject that notion and to use the term "whitestream" (Denis, 1997; Grande, 2000; Urrieta, 2010) as a more truthful descriptor.

In Kia Aroha College our thinking about this pervasive whitestream is underpinned by a very simple premise (Milne, 2013). If we look at a child's colouring book before it has any colour

added to it, we think of the page as blank. It is actually not blank, it is white – that white background is just 'there' and we do not think much about it. Not only is the background uniformly white, the lines on the page dictate where the colour is allowed to go. When our children are small, they do not care where they put the colours, but as they get older they colour in more and more carefully – they learn about the place of colour and the importance of staying within those pre-determined boundaries and expectations. That is what happens in our whitestream schools – that white background, and its unspoken privilege, is the norm.

When schools talk about multiculturalism and diversity, what we are really referring to is the colour of the children, or their difference from that white norm and how they do not fit perfectly inside our lines. If the colour of the space does not change, we are still in the business of assimilation, no matter how many school reform initiatives we dream up. What we have to do, is change the colour of the space – so that the space fits our children and they do not have to constantly adjust to fit in.

Although, internationally, there is a significant body of research on whiteness, white privilege and supremacy, we have been largely silent about white spaces in New Zealand. However, when I talk to senior Māori students in Kia Aroha College about the "white spaces" they have encountered in their schooling experience they can identify them all too easily. "White spaces," they tell me, are anything you accept as "normal" for Māori – when it is really not, any situation that prevents, or works against you "being Māori" or who you are, and that requires you to "be" someone else at school and leave your beliefs behind. White spaces are spaces that allow you to require less of yourself and that reinforce stereotypes and negative ideas about Māori. Most telling of all was the comment from a student that goes straight to the root of the problem, "White spaces are everywhere," she said, "even in your head."

And those "white spaces" are certainly in our heads. If we are serious about providing authentic spaces in our schools for indigenous and minority ethnic groups we have to ask the hard questions about the purpose of schools, whose knowledge counts, who decides on literacy and numeracy as the primary indicator of achievement and success? We have to understand the importance of relationships and the power of whānau. We have to name racism, prejudice, stereotyping, deficit thinking, policy and decision-making, power, curriculum, funding, community, school structure, timetabling, choice, equity instead of equality, enrolment procedures, disciplinary processes, poverty, and social justice. We have to eliminate these white spaces and mitigate the damage they have caused.

A Critical Pedagogy of Whānau

In deciding to structure our school as a whānau we explored how whānau actually work out interaction, respect, expectations, responsibilities, and support. In your whānau at home do you work in age levels? Do bells ring to tell you change what you are doing every 40 minutes or so? Do you get new adults throughout the day, or at the end of each year?

Our answers to all of those questions determine how we structure the school. Several age or grade levels work together throughout the day, in the same classes and stay with the same small group of teachers for three or four years. Students work within their own ethnic groups, usually with teachers fluent in their languages, and learn bilingually. The Māori concept of tuakana/teina is a key learning process – older students are expected to be responsible for younger ones, more able students are expected to support less able. Learning is cooperative and collaborative, sometimes independent, but rarely individual. Teachers work across three to four classes of students in a flexible team-teaching organisation. Students work in small groups on tasks that are usually inquiry-based, and which give them a wide range of choices and options. Learning is inclusive and no students are withdrawn. Timetabling is also flexible and teachers typically allow time to work intensively on the current study. Key questions for our teachers, at the forefront of planning and organisation, are how does our work make a difference to our students' understanding of themselves, their cultural identity and their role in their families and communities? How is it counter-hegemonic? How does it challenge the status quo? How does

it challenge whiteness? If it does not, it needs to change.

Graham Smith (1995) aligns the concept of whānau with knowledge, pedagogy, discipline and curriculum in the school setting by defining these four elements:

1. **The whānau concept of knowledge** means that knowledge does not belong to you. It belongs to the whole group and is for the ultimate benefit of the total group. It is therefore not essentially for a credential for capital gain.

2. **The whānau concept of pedagogy** expects that core Māori values are taken as the norm. It requires that those with knowledge assist those who need and want to learn. It mixes local and traditional wisdom with global and contemporary knowledge; it is not simply a retreat to the past.

3. **The whānau concept of discipline** positions the total school as constituting a single whānau. It regards all parents as 'parents' to all children in the whānau. This is a very Māori concept, where all adults connected in a whānau, who are of the same generation as your parents, are considered aunties and uncles and all your grandparents' generation are considered your grandparents. Learning and behaviour is regarded as a shared responsibility and there is no 'one size fits all' when it comes to the type of support students need. This concept has major implications for Kia Aroha College. Whānau means you do not turn people away from your door, so we accept all students. Regularly students have been suspended from their previous schools and have found it difficult to re-enrol Whānau also means we will not suspend students so the number of students requiring specific support grows exponentially. Our mantra in terms of support is, "whatever it takes" to remove the barriers preventing a young person from engaging in learning. We established a Whānau Centre which has grown from one social worker initially, to

two social workers, a youth health nurse, and Māori and Pasifika health and social work students on supervised placement in their final year of study, to help expand this resource.

4. **The whānau concept of curriculum** requires that what counts in terms of knowledge and curriculum is what is relevant to Māori. It connects with the backgrounds of Māori learners. Māori is what is 'normal' and that Māori worldview is reflected and reproduced within the school. (Smith, 1995).

When these concepts drive your school practice and organisation, that upper case "I" for cultural Identity and "I" for Indigenous knowledge become central to the pedagogy of the school. When we talk about culturally relevant or culturally responsive learning in schools, I think we leave out a crucial piece of thinking, which is, it cannot be culturally responsive, if it is not also critical. Our Kia Aroha College curriculum has three goals, which Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008) identify as the goals of critical pedagogy: empowered cultural identity, academic achievement, and action for social change. A single focus in our schools on academic achievement, that ignores the other two, cannot possibly result in learning 'success' or excellence in my book, and can't possibly be culturally or community responsive pedagogy. We have to be working towards all three.

Our learning model places *self-knowledge* (whānau, language, culture, and identity) and *global knowledge* (the worlds you navigate beyond school now and in the future) as equal in status and validity, to *school knowledge* (the mandated national curriculum). This learning model is driven through an integrated curriculum, and youth participatory action research approach (YPAR) (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008) at all levels. Topics for study are based in issues of critical, social, significance for our students, their whānau, our community, as well as national and international issues that affect them. We have developed an assessment tool, which gives us vital information about how our students are developing through the self and global lenses, and maps this against their academic outcomes (Milne, 2013), to support this model. This

learning and assessment puts cultural Identity and Indigeneity at the centre.

Warrior-Scholars

For Kia Aroha College, achievement as Māori, Samoan, Tongan, as who our students are, means developing "warrior-scholars" – Māori and Pasifika learners, secure in their own cultural identity, competent in all aspects of their cultural world, critical thinkers for social change, with all the academic qualifications and skills they need to go out and change the world. We have intentionally resisted thinking of school practice and pedagogies as "traditional" or "normal", when they have never been normal for our learners, and we have named them truthfully as colonial pedagogies.

Penetito (2010) explains that being Māori "goes all the way down" (p. 269) and that while there are many ways to be Māori, one constant is that the collective has priority over the individual. Think about that in terms of the way we assess, or the way we expect Māori students to fit into our individual focused school space. My own research (Milne, 2013), suggests that the development of a strong, secure, cultural identity for Māori learners in New Zealand schools also has to "go all the way back" to develop a critical awareness of the role of schooling as an intentional tool of colonisation and assimilation. It has to go "all the way across" to understand the policies and thinking that shape contemporary whitestream schooling in the present, and "all the way forward" to develop new knowledge and pedagogies to co-construct a different educational pathway for the future (p. 281).

These new pedagogies focus on what Akom, Duncan-Andrade, & Ginwright (2011) describe as, "radical healing". This healing develops pedagogical spaces of resistance and resiliency that lead to improvements in teaching and learning for youth of colour *in the midst of structural inequity,* as well as building the capacity of young people and adults to create the types of communities in which they want to live. Ginwright (2009) describes the four "Cs" or radical healing, as: caring relationships, consciousness, community, and culture" (pp. 9-10). These conditions are closely linked to the restoration of indigenous ways of knowing, which

are even more essential than ever for the future of indigenous communities, but which get left out of our conversations about 21st century knowledge.

As schools try to rethink education to fit a rapidly changing, information-driven future, we have to understand the damage we have done in the past or we will perpetuate it by making information technology the next colonising frontier and an all-consuming "white space." Kamira (2002) describes:

> The vulnerability that information technology represents for Māori, in areas of further colonisation, legally unprotected ownership of knowledge and information, unsupported views about collective guardianship of data, and a high risk of compromising the integrity of knowledge and its distribution. (p.5)

That means we have to navigate the world of information technology, typified by that pervasive small "i", with our eyes wide open. On our campus that has included developing an after school technology facility called Studio 274, the lead studio in the High Tech Youth Network (HTYN) which we pioneered in New Zealand, and which now has grown to eight studios across the country and another four in the Pacific. The objective of the network is developing confident, resilient, and creative life-long learners by linking cultural knowledge with advanced technology. The importance of enabling our youth to answer the question, "Where am I?" and "Who am I?" in this new world is evident in the comments of Māori community elder and HTYN Chair, Sam Chapman, in the opening pages of a book about the HTYN and Kia Aroha College:

> This is the story about a predominantly Māori and Pasifika community in urban Aotearoa New Zealand where young people, their families and a school community chose to create a different tomorrow. It is a story of convergence; of restored memory of cultural

tradition, values and beliefs, appropriate knowledge, information and technology, applied wisdom and spirituality. It is the story of Otara: where ancient and new technologies meet. (Hancock, 2015, p. 5) ❖

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