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Culture and Discrimination – implications for Education

-An Interactive talk on inter-cultural issues relating to indigenous peoples, and intra-cultural issues relating to gender equity-

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Tuhia ki te rangi, Tuhia ki te whenua, Tuhia ki te ngakau o nga tangata, Ko te mea nui,
Ko te aroha, Tihei Mauri Ora!

Write it in the sky, Write it in the land, Write it in the hearts of the people, The greatest
thing is love. Behold there is life!

I began my interactive talk with a traditional Maori welcome (powhiri) which included the above Maori proverb. Why? I am not a Maori, but I was born and raised in their country, Aotearoa (New Zealand), and chose to live there before coming to Japan at the age of 46. Because of this and because I would be speaking on their behalf, I wished to acknowledge the indigenous people of the land I came from.

I had never met a Maori until I was in my late teens training to be a primary school teacher at Wellington Teacher's College (Te Whanau o Ako Pai). It was not until I was teaching in schools where there were large numbers of Maori and other Polynesian children that I became more fully aware of their culture, learning needs, and condition as a native minority living in a European dominated society. My heart grieves for the suffering and discrimination they have endured and continue to endure, and it is with utmost respect that I refer to them in the course of this talk (paper).

So, what is "Culture" ?

Some cultural differences are easily seen, but the most important aspects lie hidden. Culture can be likened to an iceberg floating in the ocean. We can see only about one eighth of the whole. The remaining seven eighths lies hidden beneath the surface, and is the most dangerous for shipping. We can easily see the obvious material cultural differences, such as clothes, music, architecture, food and to some extent language. The most important parts of culture like mores, manners, customs, beliefs, attitudes, values, perceptions, and the appropriate usage of communication style, remain hidden.

Perceptions

Culture can broadly be said to be a shared set of learned values/social beliefs/behaviors that become deeply imbedded and 'color' our perceptions. Our personal 'cultures' are very dependent on early experiences in our life and our perceptions of 'things' around us are 'colored' by this experience. Two people can see the same thing differently, but both are right. For example, when viewing carefully constructed pictures that could be interpreted as representing a young woman or an old woman, one person may only see the young woman and another the old woman. Sometimes a person can see both. When walking through grassy fields what may just look like a stone to many, may look like a rabbit to those who are used to hunting them in such locations.

If someone only sees only one side an object, they can make an accurate and detailed description of what they see. So can a person looking at the same object from another position. Their descriptions may differ greatly, but they are both right in what they 'see'. Unless a person can see the object from all angles, that is, the 'whole' thing, they can't infallibly make a definitive conclusion about what the object is. They will make guesses based on their previous learning. Sometimes they are right, but sometimes they will be wrong. We can use this analogy when viewing 'cultures' other than our own.

Misperceptions, which lead to generalizations, about different cultures abound, and are learned from an early age from our immediate families. I recall walking with my wife alongside our local beautiful little river here in Japan one late spring morning. A little girl, probably a first grader, was walking towards us with whom I assumed was her grandfather. On nearing us the little girl called out, "Ah ... Gaijin! Gaijin dai kirai!" The grandfather said nothing and both walked on past us. We were stunned, but I knew that the child was only reiterating and reflecting what she had learned from those closest to her. She was an innocent whose perception of foreigners was already deeply 'colored'.

It is important to note that whilst a 'national culture' contains some common elements, there are numerous other 'subcultures' within it, the smallest of which is the 'family' culture. Growing up in a working-class family in NZ, with a father who was an immigrant from the remote Shetland islands and my mother, a first-generation New Zealander (whose parents were run-away orphans from Australia) provided, like all other families in this world, a rather unique mini culture, all of its own. I was very close to my father and grew up identifying more as a Shetland Islander than a Kiwi, and even spoke the Shetland dialect with him. This gave me much satisfaction as we could converse freely on public transport with probably no-one else understanding a single word we said. It is also noteworthy that New Zealand English contains many Maori words, mostly place names and names of flora and fauna, and any child who is born in and reared in NZ will learn all of these without even realizing that they are indeed 'Maori'.

Cultural Advantage and Disadvantage

Within many societies there are the advantaged and disadvantaged. Whether we are speaking of inter-cultural or intra-cultural groups, the dominant culture within a given overall society is likely to be advantaged. So, what can be said about the current state of indigenous peoples (inter-cultural) in places like New Zealand, Australia, The USA, and Japan?

Maori – the indigenous people of Aotearoa (New Zealand)

Here are some interesting facts about NZ Maori. They make up about 15% of New Zealand's population. Maori is recognized as an official language. The first verse of the national anthem is in Maori. The NZ Parliament has 120 seats, seven of which are set aside for Maori representation. Of the remaining 113 seats 64 are electorate based and the others party based. These seats are open to all New Zealanders. The Deputy Prime Minister is a Maori.

NZ's foundation is based on the Treaty of Waitangi (1840) and has three underlying principles: Partnership, Participation and Protection. Equality is deemed for all. Waitangi Day is an annual National Holiday to celebrate that partnership between Maori and the early European settlers. Other forms of cultural recognition are affirmed in the NZ Coat of Arms, passport (bilingual) and Currency (bilingual and including Maori motifs). As I mentioned earlier, many street and place names as well as flora and fauna are in Maori. Primary schools in NZ have a strong commitment to affirming Maori culture and language (Taha Maori).

So, given the above, it would seem that Maori are doing very well in NZ. However, in spite of the so-called equal opportunity, the opposite is in fact the case. There is for example, over-representation in the courts and prisons. More than 50% of male prisoners are Maori. 58% of female prisoners are Maori. 34% of the prison population are aged between 20 ~ 29. These facts are rather alarming when one remembers that Maori only make up 15% of NZ's population. Poverty, violence, drugs, alcohol and other health issues also prevail. Maori also tend to have lower longevity, experience racism at local levels, and have higher suicide rates (especially among young men), and high levels of under-achievement in education.

Maori Under-achievement and teachers

The problems outlined above are not new. There have been numerous government interventions over the years to try to redress these issues, and especially so in the health and educational fields. Some intervention strategies had also emerged at the grass roots levels, where concerned teachers, including myself, embarked on a mission, sponsored by the Department of Education, to produce 'Schools without Failure'. We produced in-service training kits for schools to help focus on such issues as cultural issues relating to success in schools for all, and to develop strategies to achieve this. All have failed to make any significant change.

What has been missing from any of these interventions has been leadership and governance by Maori themselves in the creation, development, implementation and monitoring of such policies. It is basically a question of empowerment.

“It’s time for us to empower Māori and give them the resources they need to continue to strengthen our whānau and communities. We can’t ignore the social determinants of suicide, including poverty, violence and the legacy of colonization. We won’t see a shift in our suicide rates until we start to address these factors.” (Ellen Norman - Mental Health Foundation Māori development manager as reported in the NZ Herald, August 24, 2018)

In a recent address to Parliament a select committee from the Ministry of Education, teachers themselves were identified as being instrumental in the failure process:

“Teachers are contributing to Māori children’s poor performance at school, the Education Ministry has told Parliament’s Education and Workforce Select Committee. Secretary for Education, Iona Holsted, said Māori students’ poor performance was a long-standing problem.

Research is also increasingly showing that there are parts of the teaching workforce that do not respond well, do not respond to the identity, culture and language of those students.

So that becomes an area of concern for us in terms of the sorts of people we bring in to train as teachers, what happens during the initial teacher education period, and the support they get when they go out to schools.”

We are all focused on how do we shift the dial for those young people, and it does come down to being able to respond to identity, culture and language.” (Radio NZ News, 15th February, 2018)

Australian Indigenous People

Since the early colonization of Australia (1787~) the Aboriginal people have suffered severe discrimination. White assimilation policies (1901~1970’s) were aimed at breeding out the Aboriginal race. From 1910 to 1970 young Aboriginal children (mainly girls) who appeared to have some European blood in them were forcibly removed from their parents and taken to remote ‘Christian concentration camps’ where they were ‘educated’ in the western ways and trained to work in service related jobs, like housemaids. These children are known as ‘The Stolen Generations’.

Indigenous Australians were not even classified as citizens of Australia until 1967. It was not until 2008 that the then Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, issued a public apology to the Aboriginal people. This occasion gained considerable attention in the worldwide media.

The apology has done little it seems though to lessen the degree of racism that the Aboriginal people suffer. Their condition is even much worse than the Indigenous Maori. Life expectancy is very short, and the levels of alcohol addiction, sexual abuse, and poverty are very high.

Indigenous People of the USA

Indigenous people in America (including Hawaii) face similar issues of marginalization and discrimination. Native Americans are the poorest of the various ethnic groups living in America. Many live on remote reservations. Many Native Hawaiians live in the poorest areas of their Islands, out of sight of the bustling rich tourist areas. Their levels of employment are very low as is their general level of educational attainment.

Education is seen to be a key way of eliminating discriminative practices, yet the portrayal of Native Americans in Education tends to be one dimensional and reinforces stereotypes and ignorance.

The Ainu

What of Japan's indigenous peoples? What status does their culture have? Where do most Ainu live now? What educational implications are there? These questions were put to my audience for group discussion, along with other questions relating to discrimination. Most of the audience did not know that many Ainu now live in Tokyo because of the discrimination they experienced in Hokkaido. The questions I raise are ones for Japanese people to discuss in depth and develop and enact policies which address issues relating its indigenous people.

Intra-cultural Issues relating to Gender and Discrimination in the workplace

New Zealand has a small, but growing, population. Probably because of its rather isolated geographic situation, and the way it was settled by the early European immigrants, women have fared rather better than many of those in other parts of the world. Many New Zealand women settlers shared the work on the farms with their husbands, and in many cases managed their farms by themselves when their husbands were either away at war or deceased. Women were involved in local political movements. One of the key local issues that became a national movement, was that of suffrage. Kate Sheppard, whose image is on the New Zealand \$10 bill, was the key person in getting New Zealand to be the first country in the world to grant women the right to vote (1893), some 25 years before Britain and 27 years before America. This year (2018) celebrates the 125th Anniversary of that historic event. Kate Sheppard is reported to have said, "All that separates whether of race, class, creed or sex is inhuman and must be overcome". These words ring true for all, especially in today's world of division and discrimination.

New Zealand has had three female Prime Ministers, the current being Jacinda Ardern (aged 38). She is the first Prime Minister in NZ to have a baby while holding office (the second in the world) and is one of 46 women in the current NZ parliament (38% are female). The first female Prime Minister was Jenny Shipley (1997~1999) who became prime minister after the resignation of the then Prime Minister Jim Bolger. Helen Clark was the first elected female Prime Minister in 1999, and she

served three consecutive terms up until 2008, after which she became the administrator of the UN Development Program where she served until 2017.

There have been numerous female mayors, judges, and of course business leaders in New Zealand. According to the WEF (World Economic Forum) report (2017) New Zealand ranks 9 out of 144 countries in gender equality ratings. Japan ranks in 114th place. Japan's low ranking mainly reflects the lack of women in politics and senior management positions. An obvious question is, why aren't there more women in politics or high-level work positions in Japan? Are the common answers that are given to this question accurate, or do they reflect a 'male oriented' perspective and 'institutionalized' discrimination? Why was Tokyo Medical University (and other universities with Medical Faculties) deliberately lowering the scores on female applicants' entrance examinations (2018)? These self-reflective questions were put to the audience. They are issues which only the Japanese themselves can rectify.

Whilst New Zealand can perhaps be a little proud of its achievements in terms of gender equity, it still has some way to go before it can proclaim to have achieved the goal of total gender equity, especially in the workforce. Whilst it is government policy that "An employee's pay, conditions, experiences in the workplace and access to jobs at all levels of their workplace should not be affected by their gender", pay parity is not quite equal yet. Many female workers in New Zealand work in occupations that are more than 80% female and these female-dominated occupations tend to be lower paid. Women are under-represented in higher-level jobs.

Sexual and power harassment is a global problem and is often under-reported. The rapidly spreading "Me Too" movement is helping to address these very serious issues and many prominent and powerful men have fallen from grace. Going back to one of my opening statements about discrimination, it is the early life experiences that are most important. In order to break the cycles of discrimination and abuse I believe that there must be a much greater emphasis placed on early childhood education, as well as on the raising of awareness through lifelong education. Below I outline some personal thoughts about culture and discrimination.

As educators we must:

1. know and value our own 'culture', but most importantly know why we think and behave the way we do.
2. recognize the strengths and weaknesses in our own culture and be able to see injustice/ discrimination where it occurs and be proactive to make changes.
3. recognize when we ourselves are basing our judgments about other cultures when looking at them only through our own cultural eyes.
4. raise awareness and understanding – maximize exposure and meaningful discussion – research learners' questions.
5. ask our students real questions, i.e. those we don't know the answers to, and there are many! Use

- students' questions to generate discussion and learning.
6. see and promote differences / diversity as enriching.

Some concluding thoughts about language learning and culture

Language and culture are inseparable. The knowledge of vocabulary and grammar are important, but what is most important is the knowledge of what language to use according to the communicative situation. This is the hidden part of the iceberg I spoke of at the outset of this address. Without such knowledge or understanding, miscommunication can easily occur. As an example, consider the use of the utterances "Please" and "Thankyou". They are very simple to learn but are probably the two most important words in English. Their usage (or lack of usage) can lead to serious misinterpretation of 'manners'! On the numerous study-abroad trips to New Zealand that I have taken students on, I have often received minor 'complaints' from host families that their Japanese student is rather rude! The reason given is always that the student doesn't say "please" or "thankyou" often enough. Those two words are often referred to as the 'magic' words, because using them correctly will result in harmonious relations.

So, my plea is that native speaker input when learning a foreign language not be overlooked. A trained and well qualified native speaker should be able to provide the key cultural aspects of the language as well as the 'language' itself. If there is no 'cultural' input, then language learning becomes an academic exercise that has no practical usage outside the classroom.

Motivation is a key to learning another language. Without it, learning won't occur. There has to be a good reason in the mind of the learner to learn it. I believe that a key to motivation is providing opportunities for success. Focusing on errors and failure, rather than communication, is not a useful way to motivate students, especially those who have had a 'history' of failure in learning a foreign language. The important question as to whether learning a foreign language should be compulsory or not is one that will no doubt be revisited many times.

Study abroad programs are attractive, but expensive. Only those who can afford it will go. Such programs though do provide important intercultural exchange, which lead to a better understanding of other cultures and help provide a good counter to cultural bias and preset (mis)conceptions about other cultural groups. On my trips abroad with students I have noted considerable attitudinal changes concerning language learning and cultural differences. Most often I hear students saying that their previous feelings / attitudes towards Chinese people have changed dramatically since studying in English classes in New Zealand with fellow Chinese students. They have become close friends. Regarding language learning, they have noted that they are now much less afraid of speaking English. They don't worry about making mistakes, but instead focus on communication. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could provide the same environment in our classes here and help create a discrimination free world? It's not an impossible dream!

He aha te mea nui o te ao?

He tangata, he tangata, he tangata.

What is the greatest thing in this world?

It is people, it is people, it is people.

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