

Māori student participation in psychology

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Abstract: The primary aim of this study is to identify barriers and incentives that have affected academic achievement of Māori students in psychology at the University of Auckland. A secondary aim is to identify possible strategies to strengthen the participation of these students. Five participants (3 postgraduates, 2 undergraduates) who identified themselves as Māori, who had trained in psychology at the University of Auckland were interviewed. A thematic analysis of the recorded and transcribed data was implemented. The resulting data clustered into two main areas. These were sources of barriers and incentives to Māori participation in psychology and sources of support from within the psychology department. Five themes emerged from the data. These included: cultural identity, Māori presence, the provision of resources, and Māori students/peers. In addition, two distinct sources of support were identified. These were the psychology department and the Māori students and their peers. While this study is based on a small sample, it provides suggestions for future research by posing questions about establishing a combination of cultural and academic space for indigenous students in our educational institutions.

Keywords: academic achievement; barriers; incentives; indigenous education; Māori; psychology; tertiary education

Introduction

Māori achievement in tertiary education directly impacts on social and economic areas such as income levels, unemployment, incarceration rates, and health status. Sustained support is deemed a necessary requirement for Māori student success at the tertiary level. To date, the University of Auckland has implemented strategies to attract Māori participation in psychology. Māori psychology students from stage one have had ready access to 'streamed' laboratories and tutorials. A communal space is allocated to Māori psychology students; it is well resourced with computers, a lending library, and tea and coffee making facilities. Also the Tuakana Mentoring programme, a university-wide programme implemented to encourage the success and retention of Māori and Pacific Island students has been in operation in the Psychology Department since 2002 ("*Tuakana Programme Psychology Department*," 2009). The Psychology Tuakana programme was awarded the 2006 Excellence Award in Equal Educational Opportunities for Māori and Pacific student support. Currently, there is a half-time senior tutor position allocated to that programme. In addition, the department is in the process of filling a vacant lectureship position for Kaupapa Māori that had been previously held by Dr. Cleve Barlow.

The findings of three studies that have explored qualification pass, completion and retention rates provide further background. Scott (2005) for example, highlights the values of studying rates of completion. Earle (2007) showed that first year pass rates were a key indicator for retention and completion of their degree. Māori students with an iwi affiliation may continue in study after one year due to their cultural and personal identity, and access to social, cultural, educational and financial resources. He emphasised the need for support during the first year of study. Earle's later study (2008) also revealed that whilst the number of Māori entering degree study from secondary school is increasing, this group still has the lowest entry rate of all ethnic groups.

Nikora (2002) contends that psychology in New Zealand began as a 'colonial offshoot' originating from psychological practices and paradigms from the United Kingdom and Europe and more recently from the United States of America. Milne (2005) consulted with Māori and concluded that to increase Māori participation in the psychology workforce the following areas should be targeted:

- Mainstream psychology training: the increase of Māori and cultural awareness content.
- Mainstream trained psychologists and Kaupapa Māori trained psychologists: their participation in courses whereby they will gain competencies in Kaupapa Māori psychology or areas of mainstream psychological practice respectively.
- Kaupapa Māori psychology training: to be implemented within a wānanga structure.
- Kaupapa Māori scope of practice: to be developed.

One of the key barriers to Māori participation in psychology is the dominance of Western paradigms, frameworks and systems (Levy & Williams, 2003). Minority students will compromise their own identity and culture to 'participate' successfully in a tertiary institution (Zepke, Leach & Prebble, 2003). For example, Māori students in clinical programmes may encounter some difficulty with the course content as they must consider human dysfunction which may conflict with their Māori cultural beliefs and values (Skogstad, Skogstad & Britt, 2005).

A strong cultural identity can contribute to well-being and help moderate difficulties with academic achievement; and as Bennett (2002) argues, it validates the investment by the tertiary institution in Māori resources, such as, specific rooms, tutorials and other initiatives. Earle (2008) points out that when cultural diversity is welcomed and valued the tertiary student's participation and success will be enhanced.

Methodology & Results

The five participants were Māori practitioners and academics who had undertaken undergraduate and/or postgraduate papers at the University of Auckland. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The responses were categorized into two main areas. The first which is named 'barriers and incentives' is characterised by five themes and the second 'departmental support' is characterised by two themes. In the following sections, the themes are presented along with selected responses from the interviewees.

Barriers and incentives

Theme 1. Cultural Identity is important to participation in psychology

Cultural identity can contribute to a person's well-being; identifying with a culture can garner feelings of security and belonging. A further gain is that they will be able to access social networks which provide support and shared values and aspirations. These can help break down barriers and build a sense of trust between people. There were several comments about entering University to study, but also to find their own identity as Māori:

In the beginning I didn't feel that I knew Māori enough to be in a Māori space and stuff, you know? (KI-2)

However, this initial view did not necessarily persist, as indicated by the following excerpt:

...able to come up to this space and just feel like you don't have to say anything. You know, you don't have to qualify that you're Māori or that you think any differently to what they're possibly thinking. (KI-2)

The emphasis Māori culture places on community (rather than individuality) where sharing and being supportive is valued, is a view expressed by all the participants:

There's a lot of nourishment to be gained from just being together as Māori and the department has to support that because if they don't, yeah, then people won't participate. Because why would you? (KI-3)

However, it was also observed that cultural identity can be problematic because most Māori students continually adjust between the two cultures. There is a call for the sharing and supportive dynamics of Māori culture and the call for competitiveness and other expectations of Western culture as manifested in the University:

Like they (others) don't have to be bicultural...we have to constantly justify or to adapt or to think... It's hard to just be, as a Māori person. (KI-3)

Theme 2. Māori presence within the Department encourages participation

All the interviewees petitioned for a greater Māori presence within the department as a means of attracting and encouraging Māori participation. Similarly, all felt the lack of Māori course content, the lack of Māori staff in the department and that Māori was generally not valued. For example:

...definite lack of any kind of kaupapa Māori psychology within the department and that's a direct consequence of not having any Māori lectureship position filled. (KI-4)

Great importance was placed on the Kaupapa Māori lectureship for the development of the department. However, concern was expressed about the 'lone' position of the Kaupapa Māori lectureship within the department. It was felt that there was the risk that the department would leave 'it all' to that person. One participant suggested that further support could come by "gathering the whānau around". Another participant suggested the following:

...build a [broader] base of Māori academics within the department...having more than one senior tutorship....more likely to attract a Māori to fill a lectureship if there are other Māori involved and working within the department. (KI-5)

Theme 3. Provision of appropriate resources encourages participation

A university-wide support system operating in a majority of departments is the Tuakana programme for Māori and Pacific Island students. Māori students recognised the need to support the student towards furthering their study and success in psychology. However, that fact that the Tuakana programme is only for Māori and Pacific Island students creates tension which may emerge as negative comments or behaviours towards those students.

...lot of people are put off by Tuakana programme...because I felt all the Pākehā asking, 'why are you getting that', 'you guys are obviously thick so you need extra help...maybe that's why Māori don't pick up that extra resource. (KI-2)

Despite peripheral tension from some non-Māori or non-Pacific Island students, participation has grown and activity is high in the Tuakana programme. Natural progression has occurred with more students moving towards postgraduate study and also providing mentoring support for their junior counterparts.

...that Tuakana model is excellent....build up capacitypeople stay ...people continue on because there's support ...those people stay ...they support others. (KI-3)

Theme 4. Culture-sensitive environment is relevant to participation

The experience of Māori students in the tertiary environment has often been one of alienation and isolation. They are encountering Western paradigms and dynamics that oppose their Māori culture. For example, being cut-off from their usual support networks especially their whānau support:

...foreign territory the university is....Māori aren't familiar with (it)...it's an unfamiliar environment (KI-4)

The undergraduate powhiri (mass welcome) was fondly remembered as helping induction because it brought the students together:

I remember the welcome that I went to in my stage 1 year.'wow, there's a space for me. And I don't know any of these people...Because in stage 1 psychology, that lecture is so huge you can't even spot the Māoris in there.... So to actually all be clumped in a room ... that's really uplifting, just to know that, at the end of the day, you're not the only Māori there. (KI-5)

One of the other spaces regarded by all the participants as being 'safe' and 'protective' was the designated space of the Kohanga room. It is used as a study environment but also as a whānau environment. A suggestion from one participant was to expand that room because the increased usage has exceeded capacity.

... when you walk into the Kohanga its like you're shutting the door on the rest of the world...why that space is so critical...like a little bit of nourishment so you can open the door and go back out there again. (KI-3)

...the Kohanga needs to be there forever and that back wall of the Kohanga needs to be taken out... we have tripled in size of Māori coming through...acknowledging that there's a population growth. A bigger space basically. (KI-5)

Theme 5. Meeting other Māori students/peers is important to participation

Peer relationships (across all disciplines) are seen to play a key role in the well-being of the Māori student. Peers will mutually give and receive support without thought of 'payment'. As one participant related, there was no Tuakana programme in operation when she attended university subsequently her peer supports were Māori students from Māori Studies. All key participants related stories of peer support.

...helping each other to get the right supports ...without that tautoko [support] from those key people who were like my whānau... I wouldn't have finished my degree without them.....because if any of us failed then we all failed. (KI-5)

Sources of departmental support

Māori students would be encouraged by the presence of a Māori amongst the academic staff of the department. Such presence would create a number of positive benefits, such as: mentoring and advising Māori students regarding present and future studies; providing a positive role model; and to foster the development of a whānau environment. The lack of a Māori presence was noted by all the participants with one stating:

...because by not actively seeking out someone to fill that position shows....that including Māori in psychology isn't important...sends mixed messages to people about the importance of Māori participation in academia. (KI-4)

There was a willingness by most of the participants to recognise the current support received from the department. That is, support was given mainly through the area of resources, such as, providing space in the Kohanga and a staff position committed to the Tuakana programme. In addition, individual staff members were known and warmly applauded for their support:

The Kohanga...support for Tuakana programme...that's supportive of Māori students...some individuals (staff) are sympathetic to Māori issues. (KI-1)

However, one participant did view the support especially in regard to lectures as being superficial, which was a view that was reinforced by her Māori and non-Māori peers:

When there is Māori stuff, it's tokenism Māori stuff. (KI-2)

Serious consideration was also given to potential future strategies that could be effectively supported by the department. As one participant points out, one such strategy could include more focus on the wider implications for Māori and the need to address Māori mental health issues.

There's a need...look at our mental health statistics...Mason Durie said that a mental illness is the number 1 epidemic for Māori people...we need to be upskilling the Māori population to be able to look after, to some extent, our own. And it's not that I'm all Māori for Māori necessarily, but at the end of the day, you know, there are a lot of not just Pakehas, New Zealand Pakehas, but foreigners looking after our Māori whanau that don't, again, don't have an understanding of our world beliefs and values and culture really. (KI-5)

Sources of student support

Māori students have proven to be the greater support to other Māori student's participation in psychology studies. Two key environments that have enabled positive support being sought from the Māori student are the Kohanga room and the Tuakana programme ("Tuakana Programme Psychology Department", 2009). A peer support relationship can be developed and nurtured in these environments. An observation made by one participant alluded that Māori 'do not like to do things alone'. Another emphasises the need and importance for 'people' to be in the psychology environment whatever their role:

There needs to be people doing the Tuakana programme and people tutoring and people hanging out in the Kohanga and people coming in from the community.....there still needs to be those people who aren't staff of the department but who contribute as Māori for a Māori audience. I think that's critical. (KI-3)

There are many benefits to Māori peer support. For example, verifying that one is 'on track' in an environment that can conflict with Māori values and belief systems:

Rather than feeling disillusioned by it and running off, I had a chat with...just to sort of keep my head in check...that I'm going to do my research with a Kaupapa Māori kind of [approach]...I need to check it with people and make sure that I'm not, you know, just sort of using Māori for research as a comparison as opposed to research that's going to help our people. (KI-2)

Great emphasis is placed on the Tuakana programme and the importance of the retention and success of the stage 1 Māori students in psychology. However, there is a concession that there will be a natural drop off rate towards postgraduate studies as the student progresses. Participant 5 makes considered suggestions to bringing Māori students through to postgraduate studies

There needs to be recognition that nurture and, you know, bringing people through the years needs to be recognised from the outset. It's not just 'let's see how they all drop off by stage 3 and then we'll look after them'. It needs to be from the outset. The tautoko [support], the input happens from there because people are going to weed themselves out as to whether this is a career for them or not. But, if Māori can have every chance to make it through the years then I think, by the time they get to postgrad there'll be a process of awahi [embracing] and tautoko. (KI-5)

Discussion

There is a growing body of research investigating the barriers and incentives to Māori participation in psychology. A search of a database used frequently for research elicited no research relevant to barriers and incentives to Māori participation in psychology at the University of Auckland. This study explored the barriers and incentives to Māori participation in psychology at the University of Auckland. The key themes and areas identified are:

- Cultural identity is important to participation in psychology;
- Māori presence within the department encourages participation;
- Provision of appropriate resources encourages participation;
- Culture-sensitive environment is relevant to participation;
- Meeting other Māori students/peers is important to participation.

The two distinct sources of support for Māori participation are the Psychology Department and the students (Māori student/peers). It is apparent that there was a natural linkage of barriers to incentives. Participants had a very commonsense approach to the barriers by considering that when a barrier is addressed or removed, an incentive for Māori students is created. For example, the barrier of a lack of Māori presence in the staff of the department can be addressed by the presence of Māori staff in the department. Therefore, the barrier becomes an incentive which will attract and encourage Māori participation in psychology at the University of Auckland.

Strong emphasis and concern was voiced by all the participants on the lack of Māori presence within psychology, that is, as course content, curriculum, students or as staff. All the participants recommended that there be action taken to address the 'lack' and that it is given priority status by the psychology department.

Despite the acknowledgment that there were barriers to Māori participation in psychology at the University of Auckland the key participants were positive and encouraging as there were some very real incentives in staying with psychology, or even staying at the University of Auckland. Most of the participants were aware of the sources of the support within the department. The participants had a united voice in calling for the psychology department to become more involved and active in supporting Māori students.

The strengths of this study are that the participants were Māori, of the same age group, articulate and willing to share their stories and their experiences. Also, they all had undertaken psychology training through the University of Auckland and were working in areas of psychology. An additional strength was that the qualitative nature of the study enabled the 'richness' of the data collected to come through. The limitation of this study is the interpretation of these results as a qualitative study; this does not allow for generalisations.

Additional research is needed to further our understanding of barriers and incentives that relate to Māori participation in tertiary study. As shown in the recent paper by Wolfgramm (2008), there are many opportunities for intercultural qualitative research. Wolfgramm's

metaphorical contrasting of the “haka” and the “ballroom” emphasises the need to find ways of strengthening the ‘space’ of Māori within academia by fostering the practice of tikanga and kaupapa Māori. This need embraces staff as well as students.

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