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He Kurahuna – Māori Expressions of Educational Success

Introduction

Ko te angitu, no te ao Maori tera tikanga. Ka whakatata te manuhiri ki te marae, me tika, me kaha, me marama te pa o te karanga. E kore e pai te pai noa iho. Ka tu te kaikorero i te paepae, e kore e tika te korero noa. Me whakapau kaha te katoa kia eke ki te taumata – he mana kei reira. Pera ano te hakari – me hora nga kai whakawai i te karu, whakawai i te korokoro. E kore e reka nga toenga. (2010, p. 1).

I have chosen to begin with the words of the Hon. Dr Pita Sharples, who was, along with numerous other stalwarts, instrumental in the establishment of *kura kaupapa Māori* [KKM - Māori immersion schools] in *Aotearoa* in the 1980's. His words resonate with me for they highlight that measuring success is not a foreign concept to Māori, but rather, something that has always had its' place in *te ao Māori* [Māori World View]. This is highlighted for example in the expectations placed upon those who carry out customary practices, some of which Dr Sharples refers to. The ability to perform *karanga* [ceremonial call], and *whaikōrero* [oratory] of the highest quality, or demonstrate *manaakitanga* [hospitality] through mediums such as *hākari* [feast] are of utmost importance. An inability to uphold these practices could prove damaging not only to the individual, but also to their *whānau* [family], *hapū* [kinship group] and *iwi* [extended kinship group]. Therefore, when I am asked to consider success from a Māori perspective, I consider things such as the aforementioned to be at the forefront.

This paper draws on my own doctoral research which seeks to help define and illustrate measures of educational success from a Māori perspective, with a particular focus on

KKM, and Te Kura Kaupapa Māori o Hoani Waititi, my alma mater. 'He Kurahuna' is taken from the title of my PhD thesis, and posits that KKM cannot, nor should they, be merely considered schools. The term 'kura' has multiple meanings, one of which refers to very valuable *taonga* or treasures. In using 'He Kurahuna', I argue that KKM embody multiple meanings of the term 'kura' - they are schools, however, they are also *taonga*. The *ākonga* [students] who are nurtured in these *kura*, the *pūkenga* [skills] they develop and *mātauranga* [knowledge] they gain are considered invaluable *kura* or *taonga*. Subsequently, the benefits that ensue are far reaching, and impact not only these students, but their *whānau* [family] their *hāpori* [communities], their *hapū* and their *iwi*. I therefore pose the question, where do these 'kura', fit in the Western dominated discourse on educational success? The answer is simple in my opinion, they do not – rather, more often than not they are confined to, what Dr Timoti Kāretu (2008) has coined, *Te Kete Aroiti*, that is, the basket of '...those things not considered to be of any great import and therefore given scant regard' (p. 88). Many of these 'kura' remain 'huna' or hidden (for a number of different reasons), hence my use of the term 'Kurahuna'.

This research is about reclaiming a space where Māori theorizing of success can occur, and more importantly, where a Māori perspective of success can sit alongside other widely accepted notions. Indigenous values and ideals have long been overshadowed, disregarded and dismissed as irrelevant and unimportant. I am therefore focussed on illustrating inherently Māori expressions of success (in relation to KKM) which I contest are just as valid and important as those which are deemed as such according to the dominant mainstream perspective. To do so, voices of experience will be brought to the fore. None other than graduates, past and present *kaiako*[teachers], *mātua* [parents] and *whānau* should, or can truly speak to the successes of our *kura*. It is over 25 years since the *kura* was established, and graduates are out in the world making a difference. It is in their stories, their experiences and their memories in which I argue many hidden successes or 'kurahuna' are contained. My chosen topic was borne out of a passion for the initiative that is KKM, frustration at constantly being judged (from the outside) and challenged about benefits of KKM or lack thereof, and a desire to allow our *kura whānau* the opportunity to challenge the

dominant discourse on success by having their say, by providing their own explanations and definitions, and by expressing their own viewpoints and opinions. In sharing their experiences, *whānau* are encouraged to remember, reflect, and essentially, re-tell the story of our *kura*.

A voice of experience

I am myself a product of Māori immersion education, having attended *kōhanga reo* [Māori Language Pre-school], and KKM at Hoani Waititi Marae. I consider myself to be one of the 'lucky ones', having had the opportunity to be nurtured in such an environment, and I am eternally grateful to my parents for their determination in pursuing this pathway for my siblings and I, despite the struggles they endured as a result of that decision. I know that KKM has played an important role in shaping the 'me' I am today. I left school with an A bursary and a full university scholarship, and today I am working as a university lecturer and studying towards a PhD. However, I believe the greater success of my journey is that I am a confident young Māori woman, who treasures wholeheartedly and can speak her own native tongue, who knows who she is and where she comes from (and is proud of it), and whose career is also grounded within *te reo Māori*. I feel absolutely indebted to the initiative that is KKM for all that I have achieved and am able to do much of which I firmly believe would not have been realised had I been educated in another environment.

As I think of those who I was educated alongside I am overcome with pride. Graduates are out in the world living as confident and competent young Māori. In fact, we have doctors, lawyers, nurses, educators, tradesmen, sportsmen and women, television presenters, actors and parents as our alumni. In addition, they are doing these things all the while living by *Māori* values, speaking *te reo Māori*, practicing *tikanga*, and most importantly, bringing their children up with a strong sense of language and identity. Despite these very successes, which I firmly believe KKM have made a significant contribution to, I have been confronted (either directly or indirectly) on numerous occasions with questions, claims, and remarks, challenging the place and worth of KKM. This is essentially challenging the ability of KKM to produce 'successful' graduates.

Academic performance is the primary indicator of success in mainstream education contexts, yet when there is reference to the ‘mainstream’ qualifications I left *kura* with and have since attained through tertiary study, I still sense from many a surprised reaction – almost as if to suggest they never thought I could achieve those things having been educated in KKM. While I am not surprised at such reactions (how can one be given they are merely a reflection of dominant mainstream society), nor do I hold such reactions against people, interactions such as these were the impetus for this research project, as I have found myself constantly having to ask, ‘Is our *kura* successful?’, ‘What then does success look like?’, and ‘Who should define it?’

Background: Kura Kaupapa Māori

In 1985 there was a small group of parents who refused to follow the conventional primary school options and instead chose to enrol their children in what was to become the first KKM established at Hoani Waititi Marae in Glen Eden, West Auckland. The KKM movement was “...borne out of Te Kōhanga Reo, and the strong determination of parents’ and whānau [family] to preserve, protect and nurture further the Māori language and Kaupapa Māori knowledge of their children.” (Nepe, 1991, p.64), the ultimate purpose being the “...revitalisation of language, culture and community.” (Keegan, 1996, p.11). KKM provide a holistic learning environment guided by *Te Aho Matua* [the philosophical doctrine of Kura Kaupapa Māori] (Mataira, 1989), whereby “...all aspects of a child’s growth and development including physical, intellectual, social, emotional and spiritual dimensions” are nurtured (Cooper et al., 2004, p.2).

In its infancy, KKM struggled to gain recognition from government, communities and for some, even extended whānau; thus, without government funding, curriculum resources and proper classrooms, the decision by *whānau* to enrol their children in KKM was considered a brave and courageous move. Even more radical was their commitment to educate their children in *te reo* and *tikanga Māori* [Māori language and customary lore]. Ultimately, these parents hoped that the *kura* at Hoani Waititi Marae would enable their children and *whānau* to be able to speak *te reo Māori*, to practice Māori culture, and to effectively have the opportunity, to borrow Durie’s (2001) often quoted phrase, ‘to live as Māori’.

Despite the struggle, opposition and resistance from mainstream society, there was an enormous amount of passion and a desire to succeed amongst those who fought so strongly for this *kaupapa* [initiative]. Consequently, today, there are more than 70 KKM throughout Aotearoa (Ministry of Education, 2009).

Initially, KKM epitomised *Tino Rangatiratanga* [Self Determination] – *whānau* drove all aspects of the *kaupapa*. Constant lobbying by those who drove this initiative resulted in KKM being incorporated in to the 1990 Education Amendment Act which effectively gave KKM a legitimate place in the New Zealand Education system. While such recognition represented a victory of sorts, in that government financial support was now a reality, others saw it as presenting “...an increasing possibility of state encroachment on what were originally local *whānau*-based initiatives” (May, 1999, p.62). With recognition came obligations – obligations to meet government educational standards objectives, and expected outcomes.

Success, according to whom?

As briefly explained earlier, in educational contexts, Western values and a ‘one size fits all’ mentality have long dominated the discourse on what constitutes achievement and ultimately success. Emphasis is placed upon individual success, which is contributed to by academic excellence, proficiency in literacy and numeracy, wealth and status and competence in what Western society would essentially deem valid knowledge. New Zealand’s own education system has been described as one that “...gives first priority to academic and western values of success” (Lee, 2008, p. 81).

In Indigenous contexts however, “... *definitions of success, and the criteria used to determine success are likely to be unique to each school, community, and/or culture*” (Cockrell et al., 2007, p. 7). Therefore, a ‘one size fits all’ approach does not suffice. For Māori, success can not merely be measured by academic results – there are cultural factors which are considered important, such as knowledge and understanding of *te ao Māori*, *tikanga Māori*, *whakapapa* [genealogy], *hītori* [histories and tradition] and *te reo Māori* (Durie, 2001; Greenwood et al., 2009; Macfarlane, 2003; Mataira, 1989; Smith, 1997). Despite the goals and objectives of KKM, and the underlying principles of *Te Aho Matua*, the reality is that

Māori outcomes in education, as Tomlins-Jahnke asserts, “...are inevitably compared with, and measured against national and international norms, benchmarking tests and surveys embedded in western hegemonic values and ideals” (cit. in Milne, 2009, p. 25).

I refuse to accept that the widely accepted and prescribed westernised approach to success does, or should apply to KKM. But rather, as Bell (2004) argues, that “...their success also lies in more holistic ways of knowing and participating within a rich cultural context” (p. 30). I posit that as the philosophical doctrine of KKM, *Te Aho Matua* should form the basis of any discussion around success, and as such, any attempts to measure success must be holistic in approach and execution, and most importantly situated in *te ao Māori*. Success must be viewed through an inherently *Māori* lens, acknowledging that it pertains to more than the individual and rather, encapsulates *whānau*, *hapū*, and *iwi*.

Voices from the inside

The following section will provide a brief insight in to the notion of success from a KKM perspective through the voices of some of the *kura whānau*, whom I have been privileged to sit with as they reflect on their journeys with our *kura*. The chosen excerpts provide only a snippet of what has been shared with me thus far. Despite that, they illustrate what I argue to be some of the key successes of KKM, which often remain unrecognized for they do not necessarily fit within the boundaries of a conventional, mainstream, or Western framework of success.

Two of the excerpts belong to graduates of our *kura*, while the other belongs to a past teacher whose children are also attending *kura*. Perhaps it is pertinent to note before delving more in-depth in to their words that each informant featured here was interviewed entirely in *te reo Māori* – given status of *te reo Māori* as an endangered language, it is a credit to KKM that the very children who were nurtured in that environment are able to confidently convey their thoughts and experiences in their native tongue. A success factor – it certainly has to be.

The rapid urbanisation of the 1950’s drew many *Māori* outside of their tribal territories in to the cities in search of work. This caused many *Māori* to become detached from *whānau*, community, language, and culture. This declining social cohesion, over time, contributed heavily to, among other

things, a rapid drop in the number of Māori proficient in *te reo* and *tikanga* Māori, who were also able to participate confidently in Māori contexts. This informant illustrated the role KKM has played in counteracting this sort of detachment;

Ko te tino hua kua kite nei au, ahakoa, ehara i te hononga whakapapa, kei te noho hapū, kei te noho iwi, kei te noho whānau a Waititi.

She explains that there is a strong sense of *whānau* or *hapū* unity between the *kura whānau*, despite the majority of *whānau* living outside of, and a long distance away from their own *iwi* or *hapū* territories. She suggests that the *kura* has fostered an environment that ensures *whānau* are never left isolated and detached from what it is to be Māori, despite living in the city – as many urban Māori are. In many ways, the *kura whānau* functions as a *hapū* - we live together, our children grow up together, we play sport together, we work together, we perform together. If ever anything arises that affects one of our *whānau*, that requires the support of *whānau*, we can be confident that our *kura whānau* will be there to support, and fulfil those roles traditionally carried out by *hapū*.

Tikanga Māori is an important aspect of *te ao Māori*, and thus, knowledge of and an ability to carry these protocols out is extremely important and invaluable. One of the graduate informants took the opportunity to reflect;

Ka toia mai ia ki roto o Ngā Tūmanako takoto ai. Ko mātou katoa ngā ringa raupā o te marae. Ko ētahi o mātou ka tū hei kaikōrero, ā, ko ō mātou hoa rangatira kei roto i te kīhini, ko ngā hoa kei te mahi i ngā mahi o te marae. Koia te whakatutukitanga ki a au nei o ngā akoakoranga o Te Aho Matua, o te kura kaupapa Māori.

The particular example he cites here was the *tangihanga* [funeral] of one of our own *whānau* who lay on our *marae*. Graduates of our *kura* carried the different roles required on the *marae* – some of the women led the *karanga*, while some men were *kaikōrero* [speakers], others were in the kitchen, tasked with looking after the *manuhiri* [visitors], while others ensured that the *marae* was running smoothly the entire time, all the while, our *kaumātua* and *kuia* [elders], who are normally left to maintain these responsibilities, were there to

guide us if the need arose. For the most part however, we were left to our own devices. The ability to carry out these roles is the culmination of our upbringing, a major part of which was spent being educated in KKM, and being immersed in *te ao Māori*.

As children we sat, observed, listened and participated in *hui* [gatherings] after *hui*, on numerous occasions. For many of us, city life was such that returning to our tribal lands, to our own *marae* or *kāinga* [homes] was not a frequent occurrence, and whilst I do not claim that our graduates are experts, I firmly believe that without KKM, and the constant exposure we had to things *Māori*, we would not have been anywhere near as confident or competent for that matter in participating in activities such as the aforementioned.

Our *kaumātua* and *kuia* were heartened to witness their *mokopuna* [grandchildren] continuing to uphold the traditions left by our forebearers. The key point here is that there were and most definitely still are key roles that must be played in order for *Māori* society to function properly, and this particular *hui* demonstrated that these graduates (despite living in the city and away from home) are still able to take up these roles and responsibilities and carry them out correctly, and with integrity.

Te reo Māori is still considered an endangered language – the population of proficient and active speakers is in decline, the language spoken in *Māori* homes is primarily English, and intergenerational transfer and transmission remains a concern. As such, the following excerpt highlights what I argue is one of the most telling successes of KKM, and that is in the upcoming generation;

‘Kia kōrero au mō taku irāmutu, ka rongo au i a ia e kōrero Māori, ka rongo hoki taku ngākau, ka rongo ōku pāpāringa i tōna reo – arā tonu te tino hua o tēnei mea o te kura kaupapa Māori – ko ngā mokopuna pēnei i a Kāterina.’

This informant expresses how she is overcome with joy when she hears her young niece, who is all of 4 years old, whose parents were also educated in KKM, speaking *te reo Māori*, and moreso, thinking absolutely nothing of it because it is the norm for her. We are of the generation who for many of us, although we have been educated in KKM, *te reo Māori* was not the language in the home - our parents are of the

generation who were deprived of the language as children. This young child is part of the new generation who are now being exposed to their native tongue from birth. Therefore, KKM in many respects are helping return *te reo Māori* to its rightful place where it will be allowed to flourish, that is, the home. This must therefore definitely be a critical success factor for KKM.

Summary

The measures of success illustrated here provide a snapshot of the many *taonga* or *kura* that have emerged out of KKM, and are by no means exhaustive. They have been used to show that success for our *kura* cannot, nor should it be merely defined and quantified according to national examination results, and the number of students continuing on to tertiary study. Rather, success from a *kura* perspective is more far reaching and must therefore consider the wider impact *kura* have had, and will continue to have on language, identity, culture, and communities. Only then, will we begin to paint a truer picture of what success looks like in the context of KKM and in this case, Te Kura Kaupapa Māori o Hoani Waititi Marae.

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