

Critical moments from the education journeys of rangatahi in Alternative Education settings: Teacher inquiries for transformation

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Intro / Project description

This research explored how teachers can inquire into the education journeys of rangatahi in Alternative Education (AE) settings. Annually, at least 2000 secondary students are referred to AE, disenfranchised from mainstream schools due to suspensions, exclusions and truancy. Arguably, this cohort is one of New Zealand's most challenging to engage. Most often, rangatahi enter AE with a 'blank slate'; teachers receive inadequate information on students' schooling histories or achievements. Using action research (AR), teachers in AE explored critical moments from the education journeys of their rangatahi.

Aims

This research is positioned within studies that seek to investigate and understand education biographies as a basis for education theorizing, and asked:

1. How can teachers inquire about critical moments from students' past experiences in the formal education system?
2. What can schools learn from the insights gained from this inquiry to improve education experiences for vulnerable students?
3. How can this knowledge inform teachers' planning and pedagogy?

Why is this research important?

Our focus on the schooling stories of rangatahi sought to bring voice to their experiences to interrogate the systemic and pedagogic levers of school disengagement. In a focus group in preparation for this research, rangatahi were adamant about wanting their stories to be known to teachers, principals, Boards of Trustees, and the Ministry of Education. On having the opportunity to tell his story, one rangatahi stated that he would feel "cared for." An allied and critical focus of this study was the development of AE teacher AR capability.

Key Findings

1. **How teachers can inquire:**
"I feel confident and hungry to research! I feel as though this can make a huge impact on education." (AE teacher)

On the foundation of positive relationship with rangatahi, AE teachers approached AR as a learning process, designed inquiries based upon their own cultural identity, personal interests and rangatahi cultures, and were able to take a critical stance of education systems alongside rangatahi through 'radical listening'. Teachers inquired using methods of photo voice, journal writing,

talanoa and 'go-along' place-based interviewing. Of particular importance with providing a safe environment conducive to sharing experiences, was the employment of distancing strategies inherent in those approaches.

In total, 15 rangatahi stories were collected through teachers' inquiries.

2. What the inquiries into rangatahi experiences found

- a. Rangatahi are subject to continuous and insidious forms of micro-aggressions.
- b. The social and cultural contexts of learning determine positive school engagement. Rangatahi in AE were subject to bullying, had challenging transitions between schools, were subject to in-school exclusionary practices, and actively resisted although when culture was affirmed it promoted meaningful engagement with learning.
- c. Rangatahi often missed out on receiving a scaffolded approach to teaching, and specific help for social and emotional needs, and support for past and ongoing trauma.
- d. AE centres provide a safe place for learning and healing.

3. How rangatahi stories impacted upon practice:

Through engagement with rangatahi stories, teachers created bespoke interventions to improve rangatahi experience, such as in the areas of transition into AE, developing rich conversations in classes, implementing cultural assessments, and using rangatahi stories for wider professional development in AE settings.

Implications for practice

"I was a good kid in a bad situation." (AE rangatahi)

Listening to rangatahi in education spaces is an essential everyday pedagogical posture for all professionals in education. This listening 'between the lines' provides information on the lived experiences of rangatahi as a basis for pedagogical response.

To improve the engagement and achievement of rangatahi in education, the connection between AE and mainstream settings needs strengthening. Furthermore, learning in all settings must be relevant to rangatahi, with an equal focus on their socio-cultural and academic needs.