

The Research Files: Episode 4 with Mere Berryman

Jo Earp

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Welcome to Teacher's podcast series The Research Files – I'm Jo Earp.

In this episode, we focus on a program aimed at increasing engagement among Maori secondary school students in New Zealand and the implications for educators here in Australia. Associate Professor Mere Berryman, of The University of Waikato in Hamilton, spoke about the success of the Te Kotahitanga program at this year's ACER Research Conference. I caught up with her after the presentation.

Jo Earp: I'm here with Associate Professor Mere Berryman. Welcome to *Teacher* magazine.

Mere Berryman: Thank you.

JE: First of all then, can you tell me a little bit about the research and the program that you've done in New Zealand?

MB: The research began in 2001; Russell Bishop [foundation Professor for Maori Education in the School of Education at the University of Waikato] and myself were really keen to identify how we might engage Maori students more effectively in the education system. As an education system, we'd spent 10 years identifying the barriers to learning and what we were keen to do was identify how we might actually achieve educational engagement for Maori students. So, rather than thinking about what the problems were, what were the solutions?

JE: So, how did you go about doing that - can you summarise briefly what you did?

MB: We talked with Maori students, both engaged and non-engaged, we talked with their teachers, we talked with their family members and we talked with their school principals. Basically we were asking 'What would engage you in education?'. If we were talking with teachers we were asking teachers to think about what would engage Maori students in education. [From there] we identified an Effective Teaching Profile. [That] then was used through an iterative professional learning and development program to work in a number of schools to try and implement that Effective Teaching Profile into classrooms.

JE: Was this at secondary school level?

MB: It was at secondary school level, yes. We interviewed Maori students who were in Years 9 and 10, because that was the area in education where more of our students were falling out of the education system than any other level.

JE: Was this government schools or across sectors?

MB: This was government schools, but the research was also funded by the Ministry of Education and so it was really a partnership between the University and the Ministry to look for solutions to a problem that has been longstanding in New Zealand schools ... We've worked with five phases of schools, so five different groups of schools, and [in] each phase we've used the research to learn iteratively through the next phase. So, we've built on and that's been one of the things that we need to acknowledge the Ministry for, that they did continue to fund the program, they did continue to let us ask questions and find solutions, and then ask a new lot of questions. I think that's why in Phase 5 we were actually able to accelerate the learning of teachers to work with Maori students in a far faster way.

JE: I'm interested in the actual process then. Can you share some of the findings and then what that led to, because there was a program that it was built around this research.

MB: From the narratives of experience we developed an Effective Teaching Profile and we used [that] in a professional development program with teachers. So, teachers were observed, they were given feedback, they set goals, they worked through co-construction meetings using evidence to help them to identify new solutions within their classrooms and we supported them through shadow coaching to help them achieve their goals. That led to us clearly identifying that if school leaders weren't part of that process then teachers could not achieve all that they wanted to achieve. Having the school principals and senior leadership team in support of teachers was really important. Finally, we worked out that you also needed the middle leadership as part of a whole school reform and so by the time we reached Phase 5 it was a whole school reform. Something that started in Phase 1 at classroom level moved quickly through senior leadership, through the middle leadership, and began to become a much more school-wide reform movement.

JE: Are there any concrete examples of engagement strategies that applied in this setting with these students that you discovered?

MB: There were two things I think that stand out for me. The first one was that Maori students identified that they wanted teachers who respected their cultural location as Maori and part of that [is] teachers who are culturally appropriate; so, who understand some of the features of Maori culture, and use in the curriculum and use in the classroom what I would call 'Maori iconography' - so students could see themselves in the curriculum. More importantly was teachers who were responsive to the student's prior knowledge and experience. So, for example, I remember one student who said 'They ask the Chinese girl about their culture, they try and tell me about mine'. So, Maori students wanted to be able to use their prior knowledge and experiences as contemporary Maori living in the here and now, to be able to use those experiences as the basis for new learning. And so, teachers who were both culturally appropriate and culturally responsive are the teachers that would engage Maori students. The other aspect that Maori students wanted were teachers that cared about them, cared about them as Maori, but also teachers who had high expectations of them as learners. So, the things go together. I remember reading in Geneva Gay's book and she talked about it as 'hard caring' and 'soft caring'. Maori students told us, if you could take the sternest teacher and you could combine her with the nicest teacher, then that would be the best teacher.

JE: Now, obviously this work that you've done is in New Zealand ... but

I'm thinking that this has implications, of course, for schools and educators on the ground here in Australia?

MB: Yes, it probably does and I believe Russell [Bishop] has a group of people who are working with some people up north. Certainly I've been working with some people in Canada and they have been gathering the same type of narratives of experience and the students there are saying the same things, the parents are saying the same things and so are the teachers. So, this certainly has got implications of this as a process that can work for other Indigenous people.

JE: That's great, thanks ever so much for joining us today. Good luck with your research in the future.

MB: Yes, thank you.

For more information on the research discussed in this podcast and to access other articles and videos - visit www.teachermagazine.com.au, or join our community on social media via Facebook and Twitter.

UPDATE: In recognition of her work, including the research and program mentioned in this podcast, Professor Mere Berryman was one of three finalists in the New Zealander of the Year Awards 2017.

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