Using pūrākau as a pedagogical strategy to explore Māori cultural identities

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KEY POINTS

- Pūrākau, or Māori narratives, have shaped the historical accounts of Māori throughout the generations.
- Pūrākau as a pedagogical strategy enables Māori learners to explore their own perceptions about being Māori.
- Teachers can support Māori learners to use pūrākau to explore their cultural identities in teaching and learning programmes.

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Pūrākau, or Māori narratives, have shaped the historical accounts of Māori throughout the generations. Yet they have historically been misappropriated, misrepresented, and misinterpreted as "fables" or "anecdotes" (Lee, 2008). This article argues that pūrākau remain critical to Māori, as they preserve the cultural repositories of past generations. Not only that, pūrākau offer Māori huge pedagogical potential, as they allow us to transcend time and space (Lee, 2005). Drawing upon research with Year 10 Māori students, this article unpacks how pūrākau as a pedagogical strategy enables Māori learners to explore their own perceptions about being Māori. Practical ideas for teachers in how to support Māori learners to use pūrākau to explore their cultural identities in teaching and learning programmes conclude this article.

Introduction

Māori have a long and distinguished history of navigation as seafarers and explorers who migrated and traversed the Pacific Ocean over many generations. Māori navigational systems utilised patterns in the natural world such as star constellations and ocean currents to cross the Pacific Ocean, to travel back and forth to Hawaiki (the homeland), to also migrate to unfamiliar lands, such as Aotearoa. However, in a modern, multicultural, and colonised New Zealand, we traverse different "cultural landscapes" to those once negotiated by our tūpuna.[1] Through colonisation, assimilation, and urbanisation, the cultural narrative and trajectory of Māori have altered. Subsequently, Māori identities have become a more recent cultural landscape in which we, as indigenous peoples of Aotearoa New Zealand, must explore.

Drawing on research with five Year 10 Māori students experiencing complex needs in their lives (Cliffe, 2013), this article illustrates the importance of developing a secure cultural identity for all Māori learners. I argue here that pūrākau are rich cultural resources, and because of their pedagogical intent (Lee, 2005), should be an integral pedagogical strategy to the classroom learning programme as a means for strengthening cultural identities for all Māori learners.

Literature

Māori identities. The trajectory for identity making for Māori nowadays has untold expressions. Often immersed in notions of a pan-tribal cultural identity, Māori now have multiple ways of identifying *as Māori* (Webber & Kukutai, 2017). Consequently, there is much debate about authenticity and what classifies as a "real" Māori in the 21st century (Borell, 2005; Houkamau & Sibley, 2010; McIntosh, 2005; O'Regan, 2001; Webber, 2007). Traditionally, identity formation for Māori was shaped from within the greater confines of the iwi or hapū and by virtue of proximity and interaction one would have learnt their whakapapa, tikanga, and their social status in society. O'Regan
(2001) explains that "each iwi had its own history, myths, proverbs, dialect, customs and practices, and therefore its own cultural identity" (p. 47). While questions about what constitutes a traditional Māori identity may have not changed, how identity was shaped for our tūpuna may be a distant reality for some Māori youth today.

Māori youth now grapple with complex issues. Their world is shaped by different influences to those of their tūpuna. Nowadays, Māori identity making is influenced by other factors beyond the traditional homelands. Factors such as colonisation, urbanisation, the free market, and contemporary lifestyles have all shaped modern Māori identities (Borell, 2005; Cliffe, 2013; McIntosh, 2005; Webber, 2007). Consequently, the rite of passage for Māori young people in the 21st century is fraught with complexity, making identity an elaborate and important sociopolitical process (Cliffe-Tautari, 2019).

A secure Māori identity. Research reveals that a secure Māori identity impacts positively on Māori student success, and culturally rich learning environments provide support to Māori students to develop a secure Māori identity (Bishop & Berryman, 2006; Bishop, Berryman, Tiakiwai, & Richardson, 2003; Rata, 2012; Webber, 2011; Webber & Macfarlane, 2018). Subsequently, a positive cultural identity supports Māori students to buffer negative

experiences in a mainstream schooling environment (Cliffe, 2013; Webber, 2011; Webber & Macfarlane, 2018). The Ministry of Education's Māori education strategy *Ka Hikitia*, stipulates that culturally locating Māori learners is central to Māori student academic success (Ministry of Education, 2013). *Ka Hikitia—Accelerating Success 2013–2017* specifies that Māori learners do better when their identity, language, and culture are taken into consideration (Ministry of Education, 2013). Pūrākau Māori and storying in contemporary contexts (Lee, 2005) may be used as culturally responsive pedagogical responses to this Ministry strategy. Pūrākau enhance and support Māori students to develop a secure cultural identity, therefore they should be essential to all learning programmes.

Pūrākau Māori. As a culturally relevant tool, pūrākau Māori or pūrākau tawhito come from traditional Māori storytelling which has been used throughout the generations to shape and influence communities, and to provide guidance to up-and-coming generations. Lee (2008) states that "in many Indigenous cultural traditions, storytelling is one of the key ways knowledge is sustained and protected within communities" (p. 2). Pūrākau provides Māori learners with an indigenous construct to unpack their own perceptions about their cultural locatedness in a modern era.

Because pūrākau are primarily used for pedagogical intent (Lee, 2008), they afford Māori learners with the opportunity to learn about different tūpuna—their qualities, their legacy, how they made decisions, and how they dealt with circumstances in the past (Cliffe, 2013; Webber, 2011). In this way, tūpuna are remembered for their multiplicity of attributes, qualities, traits, characteristics and deeds, not only as relics of times past. While some ancestors in pūrākau are from the distant past, they may also only be three or four generations removed. It is not the distance between the generations that is crucial, but rather the opportunity to access these pūrākau, to learn about tūpuna and their experiences.

Methodology

Founded on kaupapa Māori theory, pūrākau as a methodology (Lee, 2008) reclaims storytelling as a valid research method. In the original study (Cliffe, 2013), pūrākau is brought to the fore to rouse stories of Māori identities for the 21st century. This methodology provided the participants and the researcher with an element of flexibility to articulate stories about the participants' lives and identity as Māori (Lee, 2008; Smith, 2012). Five participant pūrākau in total were produced which are "deliberately crafted re-presentations [written by the researcher] based on the interviews" (Lee, 2008, p. 36). Each participant had three interviews, of up to an hour in duration for each interview. All the pūrākau include verbatim comments which provide the reader with a "snapshot" or a "glimpse" into the participants' worlds. Very minimal additional words were inserted during the crafting, as it was paramount that the pūrākau remain a reflection of the young people they represent. To ensure that the pūrākau were valid and correct representations of the participants' stories and lives, the final pūrākau and preface were checked by the participants prior to dissemination. The next section exemplifies how the participants' pūrākau were constructed, to demonstrate how classroom practitioners can use pūrākau as a reflective tool and a pedagogical strategy.

Pūrākau as a pedagogical strategy

Here I discuss pūrākau as a pedagogical strategy—in particular, the crafting of the pūrākau including the format, how the participants were introduced in the pūrākau, and why certain characteristics were discussed separately as pedagogical points.

Introducing the participants. As I was crafting the pūrākau, my supervisor encouraged me to "imagine that I was introducing the participants in a Māori context, such as in a wharenui". She asked me, "how would you introduce them?" We discussed Māori protocol in which we would use mihi whakatau, we would stand up and introduce the participant and create a space for their kōrero in a way that was consistent with tikanga Māori. We would then invite the young people to introduce themselves, share what they wanted to say, and in the way that they wanted to say it.

We continued with this conversation to discuss how they would possibly locate themselves with their pepeha. Perhaps they would say a little bit about themselves first and something they were interested in. It is for this reason that the findings section is first presented with a mihi, followed by the author's preface. Next the participants' pūrākau are presented, with each young person introducing themselves. In the introduction section of the pūrākau, the young person introduces themselves first prior to discussing their perceptions about their own identity as Māori, and who, and what had influenced their perceptions. For one participant Anthony, introducing himself included his thoughts about his relationship to his ancestors, and his ties to the whenua. Anthony said:

> Kia ora, ko Anthony ahau [I am Anthony] and I know that I come from a long line of warriors. Being Māori is my identity because I am tangata whenua, I am Indigenous to New Zealand and it's just who I am.

Two other participants, Lincoln and Michelle, saw their interests as being more central to their identity at the time of the interviews. Lincoln said:

> I'm Lincoln, I'm fourteen and I'm interested in music. I like a range of music and I just like playing around jamming and singing. I have taught myself how to play the piano, guitar, bass, drums and ukulele.

Michelle was focused on pursuing her dreams—she wanted an education and to make something of her life. Michelle said:

> Hi I'm Michelle and I would say that I am fun, "kickback" and mischief, I guess. I like volleyball, playing basketball, dance, and photography. If I'm not doing my photography or dance then I'm just hanging out with my mates.

The preface. Based on the interviews, each participant was introduced with a preface. A preface precedes each pūrākau and is an account of my (the researchers') impressions of the participant(s) taken over the course of the interviews. The preface provides the reader with an impression of the young person's āhua. Notes and observations during the interviews were important to the crafting process. Each preface is titled as "Meet ...".

Meet Skylar. Skylars' preface provides an insight into how she was eager, bubbly, and keen to be involved in the research during the interviews. Skylar was not shy about talking about issues that she felt passionate about such as maintaining the Māori language for future generations. Here is a small excerpt:

> As Skylar shared her stories and perceptions, I caught a glimpse of an articulate girl who exuded nous when discussing some of the wider sociopolitical issues affecting Māori as a people and the journey to revitalising te reo Māori for future generations.

Meet James. In James's preface, I highlight how he felt strongly about whānau connections, and how we connected over sharing our own stories about going for local ngāwhā baths.

> First, we started off by talking about who's who in the area, our whānau names, people, places and shared experiences. Laughter filled the room when we talked about going to school after soaking in the ngāwhā (geothermal springs) in the mornings and the ensuing sulphur aroma that oozed out of your pores following you around all day long. What we were unconsciously doing was making our connections or following a process of whakawhanaungatanga.

The whakataukī (proverb). To further give the reader a sense of the key messages inherent within their pūrākau, whakataukī were included and headlined the pūrākau of each participant. Rather than being seen as "add ons", the whakataukī should be read in tandem with the participants' pūrākau and provide more understanding of the young persons' āhua in line with Māori cultural values and beliefs. For James, the whakataukī used speaks to the value of humility. In the interviews, James portrayed himself as a laid-back young man, who was humble and reserved. While humility may be frowned upon as a weakness in some cultures, for Māori, humility is a revered quality to be respected. Humility in this pūrākau was about allowing "others" to speak to your strengths. Although James had been a kapa haka leader, and was an expert pig hunter, he never boasted about his achievements or his strengths. It is for this reason that James' pūrākau is headlined with a well-known whakataukī:

> Kāore te kūmara e kōrero mō tōna reka
>
> The kūmara does not say how sweet it is

The whakataukī for Michelle's pūrākau alludes to Māori as navigators of our futures. Like our tūpuna who pursued dreams to attain distant shores and horizons through their expert navigation skills to Aotearoa New Zealand, Michelle was focussed on achieving her goals to make them a reality. For that reason, Michelle's pūrākau was headlined with the whakataukī:

> Whāia te pae tawhiti kia tata, ko te pae tata whakamaua kia tīnā!
>
> Pursue the distant horizons until they draw close. When the goal is in reach, seize it.

Crafting the pūrākau. Although presented in written form, I recognised as a teacher, and as a woman of Te Arawa descent, that I brought my own unique voice to the research. Therefore, I was cautious in my approach to this research, due to my understanding that my voice as the storyteller had the power to shape and deliver a message in a way that either esteemed, or undermined, the "voice" and the pūrākau of the participants. To ensure the balance between retelling the participants' stories (as the storyteller) and capturing "participant voice", the crafting of the pūrākau had careful consideration to allow each pūrākau to maintain "its own tone, style, and content" (Lee, 2008, p. 37). Therefore, the participants tone and voice were a key consideration in how the stories were re-presented in the research, as they are artists of their own stories and "each storyteller has their own approach, their own artistry" (Orbell, 1992, p.5).

Consequently, representing the pūrākau needed to not only uphold the participants' mana, but protect their identities and treat their stories with respect in the tradition of pūrākau. Intentionally crafting the pūrākau to exclude sensitive take or kaupapa was thus a deliberate act to protect the participants from being "framed" according to any complex needs or challenging behaviours. Sensitive take or kaupapa were mindfully discussed in a separate section entitled "key pedagogical points".

The pūrākau of the participants are rich, diverse, and complex. However, owing to length, they are not presented here. The pūrākau of James, Skylar, Lincoln, Anthony, and Michelle alongside the key pedagogical points can be read in the original thesis (Cliffe, 2013) which is easily accessed online. For the purposes of this article, I would like to provide a short snippet of Skylar's

pūrākau. Here Skylar discusses what being Māori means to her:

> I'm happy to be a Māori. There's not a problem with being Māori. It's just the fact that people think that Māoris are pohara (poor), rugged, dumb and stuff. But, really we're not. It's probably because of what their lives have been like that they are like that. Because I know some of the bros here at school they're brainy! Like this one boy, he is one of the brainiest in our class, but he just doesn't show that potential. Like some Māoris at school they never turn up to class, they're always going for a smoke and all I hear them doing is getting into rumbles and going to parties and stuff. I think it's just drugs. Just drugs and gangs are what mostly influence them. But, Māoris are very bright and have potential. We just don't show it to others. When we want to and try, we can blend in with others and we have our own personality and humour. I know that we are crack ups—funny and we can stand up for ourselves. I think that Māoris, we have the guts to do stuff! I just hate it on TV when they say that Māoris are the bad ones and that they're always getting into trouble and that Māoris are like the worst people in New Zealand. It's the political parties or whatever you call them who talk about Māoris and say what Māoris should do. I think "you don't even know anything about us". But, what they say influences Māori, they don't see our side of the point though and they don't even know what we've been through or what our parents have been through.

Recommendations to classroom practitioners

This section provides classroom practitioners with practical tips and suggestions of how to access and use pūrākau in their classroom programmes to support Māori learners to develop a secure cultural identity. Four points are briefly discussed: 1) Reading well-known pūrākau to include in your classroom programme; 2) Promoting and using local pūrākau from your area; 3) Encouraging Māori learners to find meaning in the pūrākau for their own lives; and 4) Creating space for Māori learners to write pūrākau about their own cultural journeys.

1. **Reading well-known *pūrākau* to include in your classroom.** A range of well-known stories are easily available that you can read and then use in your classroom. A good starting point is the creation story about Ranginui and Papatūānuku. You could read many different stories about Māui, or even the story about how Tāne obtained the baskets of knowledge and why he has different names. It is important to note that there are different tribal variations to some pūrākau. For example, some tribes believe that Tāwhaki obtained these baskets, not Tāne. Therefore, it is important to find out local interpretations of these stories, so that you can support what is believed to be the dominant versions of the pūrākau in your local area.
2. **Promoting and using local pūrākau from your area.** First, give yourself plenty of time to talk with people in your area about the most important pūrākau. You will need to find out who the tangata whenua are in your area. You could possibly ask kaumātua or elders of your school, staff, local people, local city/town librarians, or Māori advisors or parents at your school about local iwi or hapū names. Once you know some of the hapū or iwi names, you can start the process of connecting with local pūrākau. Sometimes areas have pūrākau based on multiple layers of settlement. For example, areas within Auckland may have different iwi who claim connection to a particular area. If in doubt, seek out staff members who can help you to navigate this information-gathering process.

   Key to this process, is not assuming that "all Māori staff" are from the area in which they teach. While some may know some stories, they may not. Sometimes asking about the local stories is like a domino effect. You ask one person, who leads you to the next, and then to the next—eventually you will have your answer. Therefore, be patient and allow yourself time at this important stage of your information gathering. Once you know the most appropriate stories, then you can consult on how the story could be used in your programme and what curriculum areas may be suitable.
3. **Encouraging** Māori learners to find meaning in the pūrākau **for their own lives.** As with the pūrākau methodology (Lee, 2008), the reader is encouraged to arrive at their own conclusions, or the "moral" of the story (Lee, 2008). Therefore, encourage your Māori learners to "see themselves" in the pūrākau presented. This gives them the opportunity to reconstruct elements of the past, and to reshape a new understanding, which may help them to find meaning for their own cultural journeys'. As you ask students to explore different stories about tūpuna, ask them to consider what learnings they can take away from the pūrākau to help them in their lives now.
4. **Create space for Māori learners to write pūrākau about their own cultural journeys.** As a useful tool, pūrākau can "continue to be constructed in various forms, contexts and media to better understand the experiences of our lives as Māori" (Lee, 2008, p.1). Providing space for Māori learners to write about their own cultural journeys can also provide the young person with the opportunity to explore diverse understandings of what it means to be Māori in the 21st century. In education, these understandings offer additional perspectives to senior management, classroom practitioners, and other professionals involved in making decisions that affect the trajectories of the lives of Māori learners. In doing so, pūrākau as a pedagogical strategy becomes transformative as it allows us to influence and shape the cultural narrative in this time and space. These

narratives could become a valuable resource for other Māori students struggling with similar issues in the future.

Students writing their own pūrākau

Here I present five helpful hints for teachers to consider how they may support Māori learners to write their own pūrākau about their own cultural journeys. There are numerous ways to use pūrākau as a pedagogical strategy, I have provided one way. Whatever process you choose, make it age appropriate, and keep it as a fun and enjoyable learning experience for the student, rather than something that is too cumbersome.

1. According to Māori pedagogies, oral accounts are a preferred way of collecting stories. Therefore, a good place to start is to get learners to pair up with their friends to tell one another their own ideas and perceptions about being Māori. Use a recording device, or a video recorder, or phones if the students are older. If the students are younger, perhaps they could work with the teacher or a teacher aide who can scribe a few thoughts for them. These ideas could be collected and written into a learning story of sorts over time.
2. Support the student and the peer who acts as the "prompter" to have some key words, phrases, or open-ended questions that they can ask if they they get stuck, such as "can you tell me about a time when you felt proud to be Māori?" or "tell me about someone who is important to you in your family and why".
3. Fundamental to crafting their own pūrākau is reminding the students to be themselves, to share what is important to them, and to not feel like they have to use a "special voice" when retelling their own story about who they are and where they are from. While a pepeha is formal and usually structured, a pūrākau should be informal, natural, and unscripted. One minute to a maximum of five minutes should be plenty to start with (dependent on the age).
4. Once recorded, get the students to write word for word what they said (transcription). Tell them to write all the ums and the ahs, and anything else that they said, as this is their real voice. This is not an assignment, where they need to have the correct register. Tell them that this learning activity is an opportunity for them to not worry about being absolutely correct. Instead, it is a snapshot of their cultural journeys and perceptions at this time in their lives.
5. Encourage students to choose up to a page from their scripts. Tell them to choose the parts that stand out the most. At this point they may need some help from the teacher to put these ideas into a sequence and to include linking words. Don't rush the final outcome in order to "get a result" or a written piece of work. As the old adage says, "the journey is just as important as the destination". Therefore, the learning, the processing, and the talking about their cultural journeys are an important outcome too. As such, it may take some students one or two weeks; for others, it may take two to six months. The timeframe is not the most important. What is important is that it does not become a difficult task, but something that is fun, engaging, and inspiring to the student.

Conclusion

Pūrākau as story-telling alongside other media was, and still is, a fundamental aspect of Māori society. Story-telling has fashioned our cultural world views and cultural identities as tangata whenua. As a source for pedagogical intent (Lee, 2008), pūrākau will continue to add to the cultural repositories that will take Māori forward well into the next millennium. Classrooms provide an opportune environment for Māori learners to explore multiple understandings of their tuakiritanga in a modern era. Pūrākau tawhito and the storying of pūrākau in contemporary contexts, provide classroom practitioners with powerful pedagogical strategies to strengthen Māori cultural identities. To know who we are as Māori we must return to our rich and complex pātaka kōrero of the past.

Note

1. Māori-language words are glossed at the end of this article.

Glossary

āhua	appearance or nature
hapū	subtribe
Hawaiki	the homeland
iwi	tribe
kōrero	talk
mihi whakatau	formal greetings
ngāwhā	geothermal springs
pātaka kōrero	cultural storehouse
pepeha	tribal saying
pūrākau	Māori narratives
pūrākau tawhito	ancient stories
take or kaupapa	topics or themes
tangata whenua	local people
tikanga	cultural practices
tikanga Māori	Māori cultural practices, cultural laws
tūpuna	ancestors
tuakiritanga	identity
whakapapa	genealogy
wharenui	meeting house
whenua	land

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