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Singing in Harmony: Reflections on Forty Years of Teaching Art in New Zealand Schools

Abstract

This paper presents experiences and personal reflections on teaching art in multicultural secondary schools in New Zealand for over forty years. An educational construct that puts students' lived realities and cultural experiences at the forefront of their education—primarily through a process of respecting them and their communities—is presented by an art teacher whose career and practice have moved from a monocultural, Eurocentric system to a more equitable, diverse, student-based culture.

Keywords: *art, education, student-based, Pacifica, Māori, inclusive*

Let me begin by saying that this paper presents personal reflections on teaching art in New Zealand for over forty years—it is not intended to be an academic paper. It covers some of my thoughts and experiences as well as touches on some of the changes I have seen in multicultural secondary schools—changes to which I have, hopefully, contributed. The focus of my career and practice has been moving from a monocultural system that represents the dominant European culture to a more equitable, diverse, student-based culture—while always teaching art with the goal of giving students the best opportunities for personal growth and self-realization. Here I present an educational construct that puts students' lived realities and cultural experiences at the forefront of their education through a process of respecting them and their communities. I could support what I am writing with more citations and learned quotes, but I prefer to present what has worked for me and for my students through four decades of teaching art to Māori, Pacific Island, and other students in New Zealand. This is what they have taught me over those decades.

We are all aware of the continuing educational failures—according to Western ideas of education—of students from Indigenous, diasporic, and nondominant cultures. The statistics reflecting this calamity are found throughout the world. Explanations include socioeconomic factors and the privileging of the dominant culture's beliefs and value systems to create a hidden curriculum advantage that furthers assimilation as a solution. The lack of connection between nondominant students' visions of themselves and their environment and

an educational system created by the dominant culture promotes an ideology with little or no relevance to marginalized people.

Assimilation has clearly not been a useful agenda; many young minds and lives have been left behind, left out, and let down as a result and New Zealand society itself has suffered the loss of what those students have to offer. We need to embrace and promote all of our students by treating them all equally. This is accomplished not by offering all of them the same programme, but by offering each and every student instruction that is suited to that child and their family. Educators need to see both the dominant and marginal cultures with equal value and to present them with equal opportunities.

Abraham Maslow's classic hierarchy of needs sets out a clear and concise vision of what we each need in order to succeed and to nurture the capability of higher thought.¹ Once the basic needs of food, water, warmth, and rest are met, we move immediately to safety and security, and then belongingness and love. These are needs that, in the past, society has expected families and the community to meet, yet too many students are not given these basic conditions for success. As members of any society, we have a moral responsibility to do what we can to fill in these gaps; as educators, we have an even greater responsibility.

Culturally responsive teaching, as set out by John Dewey, is a system that recognizes the importance of including students' cultural references in all aspects of learning, and is the first step in providing safety and security.² Having your culture, vision, and individuality acknowledged and valued by others is key to inclusiveness. In recent years, the increase in and greater diversity of immigrants in New Zealand has presented even greater challenges to student-centered learning. Childhood is a time of discovering oneself and one's own place on this earth. In many ways, this is the most important task we have as humans. How scary! How, as educators, can we tap into this diversity of life experience?

When I immigrated from the United States to New Zealand as a teacher in the mid-1970s, I was put in the position that many young teachers face: I was given the classes that no one else wanted, with scant advice that included "Don't smile until Easter." In the small Bay of Plenty town where I taught, my classes included the Māori children who lived up in the valleys and out in the hills. These were the ones who often missed school because they were helping out at home, attending a *tangi* (a week-long ceremony associated with the death of a loved one), or were escaping for another reason, one being that school was not a safe or happy place for them.

Teaching such a class can easily knock the idealism out of you, and it was a learning experience for me. Coming from Berkeley, California, I had no experience or knowledge of New Zealand culture and even less about *Māoritanga* (Māori culture). I was finding my way as I went along in this new environment. My students were as resourceful as any others in their attempts to keep me from teaching my planned lessons; they gave excuses ("The *pakeha* [non-Māori of European descent] stole my book," "The horse ate my homework") and tried

to cajole me into talking about something off-topic and more fun (“Please tell us about America,” “Tell us about the famous people”).

I cannot remember what precipitated the event, but one day two boys in my class started to have a bit of a push and shove. I stood between them. One boy let out a stream of expletives that would have made any of the local mill workers proud. In 1970s, small-town Aotearoa, this was far from acceptable and, as a teacher, I was obligated either to cane the boy myself or send him to the appropriate white man administrator. I decided to do it myself to expedite the process and avoid the notice of the older teachers and other busybodies in the staff room eager to give me unsolicited advice. I delivered the prescribed corporeal punishment for the boy’s offense. The boy became sulky and subdued and the lesson continued until the bell rang, at which point a clutch of girls came up to me, shy but full of anticipation. “You caned the *Tohunga*’s [traditional priest] son. He is gonna get his dad to put the *makutu* [spell] on you.” I am not sure if they were telling me this with regret or excitement, but my Irish ancestry, the folklore of which features many spells and curses, quivered.

The next morning, I went to school seemingly suffering no ill effects from a curse. A large Māori man met me at my classroom door. He was definitely not another teacher, as at the time they were all *pākehā* (Europeans), and this man was also wearing a bush shirt and steel-toed boots.

“Are you Miss Sunderland?”

Oh no, I thought, here comes the curse, right to my face. But what he said next was not what I expected.

“Thank you. Thank you for treating my *tama*, my boy, like all the other kids,” he said.

What that father wanted was for his child to be treated with fairness and equality, both in praise and in punishment. For educators to have the same expectations of his son, behaviorally and educationally, as for any other child. He wanted for his child what we all want for our own children: a just system that serves us all with respect and fairness, and offers success to all. This incident, although I did not recognize it at the time, would presage my teaching practice. It was a harbinger of my understanding of what worked for parents, caregivers, students, and myself. No, not the caning, which seems barbaric judged by today’s standards, but treating that student—and, implicitly, every student—equally. This was the parent’s desire, that institutions expect the same standards of, and respond in the same way to, all learners. Teachers’ low expectations of some students because of their race, ethnicity, or background are a soft bigotry that has been allowed to persist.

When I decided, after two years, to move from the Bay of Plenty to Northland, a different tribal area, my students were horrified, and insinuated that the Ngā Puhi, the dominant Northland *hapū* (subgroup) there, were still cannibals: “You can’t go up there, Miss! The Māoris up there still sharpen their teeth!” In short, fellowship did not extend among the

subgroups of what appeared to an outsider to be a single, homogenous group. I have had similar experiences with every group of people I have come into contact with in New Zealand: diverse Pacific peoples who each identify with first their kin group and then with their village, island, or home country. Similar examples abound worldwide—the Dutch do much the same, from Frisians in the north to Brabantians in the south—and can be broken into even smaller groups by religion, language, and social affiliation.

In New Zealand, our founding document, Te Tiriti o Waitangi (The Treaty of Waitangi), sets out the rights and responsibilities of Indigenous and colonizing peoples and is recognized by the department of education.³ Ka Hikitia, the policy document that sets out the government-approved strategy for Māori education, states that “school leadership will consider the principles of Te Tiriti o Waitangi by building a sense of identity, actively protecting and preserving the Māori language and connecting the culture of the community and whānau to what is valued in each school.”⁴ As an eventually naturalized New Zealander, I agree that the rights of the Indigenous culture must be recognized and protected. However, as an educator, I would argue that these rights and protections should be given to all cultures in our society and, by extension, to all students in our schools.

The recognition of my students as individuals with unique experiences and needs has been the intention of my teaching practice; it enables all my students to succeed—as Māori, Pacifica, Pākehā, Asians, and, simply, as humans. Like any practice, it has been built on pedagogy and my personal experience as both a parent and as a person. I believe each student should receive the best practice I can offer. This begins with safety, security, and belonging. Most of my career has been spent teaching art to teenagers—not the easiest group to admire. Who among us would be a teenager again? The hormones, the physical and personal growth, the weight of societal and family expectations... The challenge of teaching them deserves respect, as any epic task does. Try to begin with respect, honoring the process your students are embarking upon; we can only guess at their lived realities. Sometimes it is hard to like, much less admire, our students, but we can always respect their journey. Young people’s emotional sensors are fine-tuned and you cannot fake it; you have to work at it. Some teenagers are a greater challenge than others, but I endeavor to see them as individuals and show them regard. Begin this regard by learning to pronounce your students’ names correctly. Let them teach you, let them laugh at your mistakes, and try harder next time. To do this you have to listen; listening is the beginning. My last name, Sunderland, is often not heard or listened to, so sometimes I am called “Sutherland,” the more common surname. It can be annoying. I also know that if I do not correct the speaker’s mistake, it is either because I don’t value the speaker or it is a relationship I do not want to foster. Conversely, I show my students respect by allowing them to teach me about themselves; I show them respect and start to gain their respect so that I can teach them. I like to think of this as analogous to

learning harmony; I “sing” in harmony to my student’s “music” and the result is explicit inclusion.

Of course, long before I even meet them, I tacitly acknowledge my students by making the physical space of my classroom welcoming—as welcoming as it can be in a Eurocentric school environment. Objects and imagery from many cultures are on the walls and are part of the still lifes and functional objects that the students will draw or paint. For example, I have both plastic European brooms and those made from local organic materials that are used in many Pacific Islander homes.

I dress modestly, as a respected woman in most cultures would, and carry myself with pride and authority. I wear necklaces and other adornments from the cultures of my students. In my classroom, the speaking of other languages and the correct pronunciation of names of objects and places are fostered by example. I ask students to help me pronounce words correctly, and I encourage the rest of the class to also make an effort to get pronunciations correct, using my students’ language skills as a valuable resource.

Art education in Aotearoa is a very teacher-led but student-centered process. The arts section of the New Zealand Curriculum provides a framework for arts educators to build their own individual programme based on their students’ and the community’s needs, as well as the faculty member’s own teaching strengths.⁵ Students are expected to not only make art, but also to understand the art-making process and to understand artworks as social and historical texts. Unfortunately, this official document only suggests that artworks from all cultures—including Māori art from the past and present—may be included in art curricula. In other words, there is no edict requiring that an art-teaching programme must be more than a Eurocentric imagining of the world. This perception of art-making is no longer acceptable in the art world; to assume it is good teaching practice is folly.

I have always designed my art-teaching programme to include opportunities for all students to explore their own identities. One way I have done this is by developing units based on art-production methods that can be found across cultures. In this way, their individual cultures are included, but as part of a matrix of interconnected humanity. For example, for the Māori and other Pacific cultures, weaving is a very important part of the material culture. Hand-woven objects are highly valued, both aesthetically and spiritually. A teaching unit on weaving in Oceania can be extended to include forms from other cultures, such as Middle Eastern rugs, Swedish tablet weaving, and Filipino *pina* weaving. Contemporary and traditional practitioners can be found as role models and artistic examples. When I present a unit on weaving, I ask practicing weavers—including Alexis Neale, a contemporary Māori artist who combines weaving and printmaking—to come and demonstrate their art in my class. I have had grandmothers from the Cook Islands share their knowledge of *rito* weaving and Tongan mothers showing their *kiekie*.

I also take my classes outside the classroom, to visit the Auckland War Memorial Museum, which has a large selection of *tukutuku* woven panels and *whariki* woven mats, plus an extensive collection of other Pacifica textiles. Other opportunities also exist: the Auckland-based group The Pacifica Mamas is a collective of older women originally from Sāmoa, Tuvalu, Tonga, Tokelau, Kiribati, and other island nations who present their handcrafts and music to groups.⁶ The Te Whare Raranga traditional weaving school, part of the New Zealand Arts and Crafts Institute at the Te Puia cultural center in Rotorua, is another invaluable asset to teachers. The opportunities to include each student in experiential learning are endless and diverse, if teachers are willing to make that effort.

As a naturalized New Zealander, I felt my first loyalty must always be to the Māori culture, and I was always the second in command to the Māori teacher in charge of this mission. Having previously been a caterer, I was the *ringa wera* (cook) on school trips and made sure the students got nutritious Indigenous food. I have taught in boys' schools for the last twenty years, and we all know how important food is to teenage boys and how evocative it can be of memories of home. *Māoritanga* (Māori culture), as with most Polynesian cultures, has a strong tradition of hospitality or *manaakitanga*. I am ashamed to say my spoken Māori was never strong or confident, but there was always good food, and plenty of it.

Each school year in New Zealand begins with Polyfest, the largest cultural festival in the South Pacific, with over 10,000 students participating. Students practice their performances before and after school and on weekends, eager to share their pride in their culture. I participated fully in my school's Māori cultural group. I was often the *kaikaranga*, the first person the students saw on their first day of school, who called them onto the grounds to be welcomed into the school community. Since parents attend this welcoming event as well, they are able to see and recognize those teachers who fully participate in this welcoming ritual and those who hang back. In all the schools I have worked in, there was seldom support from the majority of staff for either the Māori or Pacific Island groups. Few teachers gave their time, especially for weekend camps or trips to cultural events. Experiencing a teacher who willingly participates in your culture strengthens ties between teachers and learners and between schools and Pacific Islander communities. In most schools in New Zealand, teachers are expected to take charge of a sports team either as a coach or as manager. Surely, this time given by teachers outside the classroom should have a broader scope than Eurocentric competition and include cultural and artistic activities as well.

In recent years, the Ministry of Education has recognized the value of these performances and students can now earn academic credits in both the performance and preparation aspects of their cultural performance group. Being the head of the Art Faculty meant that I had access to and the ability to produce much of the regalia needed for these performance groups. I was able to integrate the design and production processes into the student program and I endeavored to keep as much of the finished concepts in the students'

ownership while keeping the other participants—parents, teachers, and school management—on board with the final outcomes. This was a real juggling act that often needed more finesse than I naturally possess. I did this for all of the groups in my school to the degree that was needed. This included organizing *puipui* flax skirts, silk-screening *tapeka* waistbands and *lavalava* wraps, and lending *'ie toga* fine mats for students who didn't have their own. There was also the making of *teki* feather headdresses and then figuring how to attach them to a group of boys who had just newly shaved their heads so they would all match—and me with a pocket full of hair clips. All this work was important, but just as important was being there and being a positive and encouraging presence. Seeing the hard work, practice, and passion that goes into these performances, there is no way anyone could say these students are not prepared to strive for excellence.

The value to the students of learning in these experiential environments facilitates the assimilation of knowledge through the body and all the senses in a direct and unmediated way. Experiential education offers opportunities for ideological concepts to become realities. The next time you go to an art gallery, take along a reproduction of a work you plan to see, either on paper or on your phone. Compare this reproduction, no matter how good, with the actual piece in front of you; there is no comparison.

My knowledge is my *koloa*, my treasure. Sharing that treasure, and having students return that gift with their own gift of growing and learning, has been the keystone of my teaching: making each art lesson as real and meaningful as I can by enabling hands-on or in-person experiences such as inviting artists into my classroom and taking students out into the world to broaden their experiences. By sharing as much as I can, I hope to communicate the joy I find in learning and to empower my students to be lifelong learners and to see value in themselves and others.

What a wonderful resource we have in the children and families that still speak their mother tongue, who can tap into cultural traditions, and can make and explore an identity that is vibrant and alive. More and more young educators are bringing this richness to their teaching practice. I am proud to have been an agent for change and inclusiveness, but I am prouder to see a young generation of Pacifica and Māori, some of whom were my pupils, take up the challenge and help open up the sky for all children.

Laura Sunderland graduated from the University of California, San Francisco in 1977 with a bachelor of fine arts degree focusing on textiles and ceramics. Upon immigrating to New Zealand in 1979, she began teaching in secondary schools, retiring in 2019. She attended Auckland College of Education, receiving her diploma of teaching in 1986. She has served as chair of the Auckland Art Teachers Association and contributed to Ministry of Education curriculum development focusing on inclusion of Pacifica students. In 2019, she spent a term teaching in Pukapuka in the

Northern Cook Islands. Today, she lives off the grid on Rakino Island in New Zealand's Hauraki Gulf.

Notes

¹ Abraham H. Maslow, "A Theory of Human Motivation," *Psychological Review* 50 (1943), 370–396.

² John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Tarcher Perigee, 2005), chapter 3; David Kolb, *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development* (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1985), 197–234.

³ "Treaty of Waitangi" (website), last modified May 14, 2012, <http://www.treatyofwaitangi.maori.nz>.

⁴ New Zealand Ministry of Education (Te Hāhuhu o te Mātauranga), *Ka Hikitia - Ka Hāpaitia: The Māori Teaching Strategy* (Wellington: Learning Media Limited, 2000), 5–8.

⁵ New Zealand Ministry of Education (Te Hāhuhu o te Mātauranga), *The Arts in the New Zealand Curriculum* (Wellington: Learning Media Limited, 2000), 1–12.

⁶ For more information on the Pacifica Mamas, see "Who We Are: The Pacifica Mamas," Pacifica Arts Centre, <https://www.pacificaarts.org/who-we-are/the-pacifica-mamas/> (accessed Sept. 16, 2021).