ACTIVATING CRITICAL THEORIES

Māori students enjoying and achieving success as Māori

85% NCEA Level 2 & qualifications for tertiary education

Socially constructed structures and institutions

Many things that happen in school have been socially constructed. The good thing is that once we start to realise and understand this, we can start thinking about our own agency, and our own ability to contribute to doing things differently. This can be not only individually but also systemically - within the Strategic Change Leadership Team, or within our department, or within our classroom - in order to disrupt some of the 'taken for granted' assumptions that have often remained unchallenged.

Conscientisation

Conscientisation is becoming aware of the part I play in keeping things the same. How I support the status quo, how I perpetuate that. And becoming very conscious of how and why I am doing that and the implications of my actions.

This new awareness may disrupt my thinking; disrupt what I thought to be the truth and becoming consciously aware of that.

In our context, conscientisation is understanding what part I am playing in supporting this system that's actually inequitable, particularly for Māori learners in New Zealand and challenging myself about that, to be agentic on a personal level.

I can become conscious of something but then not do anything about that. I can spiral around, become more and more conscious, but that alone isn't going to help me to promote the kaupapa of Kia Eke Panuku - to give life to Ka Hikitia.

Resistance

Conscientisation may make me aware but if I'm not going to do anything with that thinking, I'm of very little help to Māori students. Resistance is the 'doing' following the disruption to my practice on account of that conscientisation.

'What are the things that I need to do differently?' 'What have I been doing unconsciously that I need to unlearn or that I need to undo, so that I can be sure that I am supporting Māori students to succeed as Māori?'

Resistance is about understanding and activating your own agency . 'What am I going to do about it?' 'What can we do in order to disrupt the status quo?' 'What can we do to improve the social condition of this group of children through education in order to provide them with better choices for the future?' Big questions, critical questions.

One of the questions that's central to critical theory is, 'whose interests are being served by the current arrangements that we have?' And that's fundamentally a question about power.
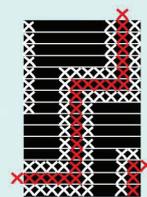
Kia Eke Panuku

building on success

Simultaneous Success Trajectories

Resistance cont'd

Having those open and honest and courageous conversations in front of their colleagues, whānau and community members is incredibly powerful.

'We're not here to talk about you over there; we're talking about us in here.' I think that inclusiveness is a very different way of being. A conversation that is deeply open to learning.

Praxis

Praxis means becoming deliberate and conscious about what I do, and why I do it. It's my practice and the theory behind my practice coming together so that I move forward in a very mindful way. New theories help me to establish new practices.

By being quite deliberate I can start to transform my everyday practice until it becomes the new normal for me. I know exactly why I am changing and I can talk to people about why I'm doing it in the way that I am.

Transformative praxis

Transformative praxis is the merger of that theory and practice. It is the merging of conscientisation and resistance, aimed at creating a new, more equitable, social reality - challenging and changing the social conditions that may be marginalising a particular group. In the case of Kia Eke Panuku, we are talking about Māori students in secondary schools where education is meant to be about preparing them for their role in wider society. We're transforming the status quo of Māori students into something where they can experience greater equity.

The goal is that both Treaty partners are represented - that both Treaty partners are resisting together and both Treaty partners are more successful together.

Critical questioning

Critical questioning is something we use to focus the challenge and deepen the thinking. We're making the invisible visible in these meetings, things like power, control and privilege.

Critical questions open up our thinking and learning. We could ask pretty straightforward questions such as, 'is that an assumption? What are you *actually* saying? What do we *actually* mean?' One of the things we're seeing that tells us that a Strategic Change Leadership Team is really starting to get the bit between their teeth is when we hear them critically questioning each other. Somebody brings some evidence to the table and someone across the table says, 'hang on, how is that related to Māori succeeding as Māori?' Then somebody else goes, 'yes I've been wondering that too' and then you get this dialogue that's evidence-based. That is the beginning of sustainable change.

On-going spiralling conversations

Spiralling conversations go round and round - but also coming back - to particular things and to look at them from other points of views. It's the same process - the same event or conversation - but we've got a whole lot of learning that's happened from the previous time we talked to this time that allows us to deepen our understanding, to ask different questions, and engage in richer conversations.

I haven't heard a school yet who have gone, 'actually those principles of culturally responsive and relational pedagogy are rubbish, we don't want to engage with those at all.' There's a lot of to-ing and fro-ing and making sense of the big words but when it's about fundamental principles, people kind of say 'yeah, we'll go there with you.' It is finding ways to allow people to make sense of the ideas, and experience those ways of being.

Listening and identifying what's really meant

I think listening is key because if you're constantly talking you can't hear anything. And it's not just thinking about the words that are being said, I'm also thinking about the tone of voice. I'm thinking about the body language, the facial expressions. I'm also thinking very hard about what's not being said, and where what's being said may or may not be coming from. This notion of discursive positioning involves a critical analysis of what people are saying and not saying.

Because it's listening to those things and often not the words being said that will open up the opportunity to take the thinking deeper. It could pose some critically reflective questions, perhaps challenge what's been voiced as a piece of common sense, where actually there's nothing 'common' about it. We are looking for the really subtle points within the discourses.

Unlearning, relearning

We are asking, 'where do we want to be? What sort of a school do we want to be? What kind of a team do we want to be? If this was rocking what would it look like and feel like? What would it sound like?' Once we have answers then we can come back to, 'where are we now? How do we get there?'

Part of 'what do we need to do differently?' might be 'who else do we need to be having conversations with and how are we going to make sure those conversations happen?' Also we could consider 'how are we going to hold the mirror up to our own practice and think about what we are going to do with what we learn in those conversations?'

It's like parking that old way of being by looking at where we want to be in the future, and this repositioning enables us to leave behind the old ways.

Once people get a taste of actually working in a group with these people that 'I thought I knew' it actually forms new ways of being, new ways of interacting, new ways of connecting with their colleagues. It's a different feel and there are different possibilities and all of a sudden these possibilities are real for us.

Engaging with the person

Part of deconstructing what has become the status quo is restructuring what we understand an effective teacher to be. An effective teacher is connected to society. They're not just isolated in a classroom, they are connected to and responding to what's happening out in our community.

We're very conscious about bringing examples of the fabric of New Zealand society into the thinking, to ensure that this is the big picture where we actually start. 'How do I engage with becoming conscious of the big picture? What are the implications for the position I hold in my school? What are the implications for the teacher I am in my classroom?' When we engage in those conversations you can't help but see where multiple sites of conscientisation, resistance and transformative praxis come together into the people that we are.

Spread and agency

In the wānanga, schools are coming together in groups, and the sharing that happens there is some of the most powerful stuff. Although no one school's got everything right, the more collaboration, the more transparent they are with one another, the more likely we are to learn together in ways that can accelerate the changes.

Schools that are engaging in the critical cycle of learning really want to talk to other schools about how it's going, what's working and the next steps for going forward.

Spread and agency cont'd

These are very, very good conversations. The whole idea of clustering in this work is a really powerful one. The sharing of good practice across schools is going to be an important dynamic going forward.

I think that as they really start to feel the new way of being, they see the potential. It's essential to focus on Māori students, absolutely core to it, but it is also about the entire school and the fundamental change that this could bring to the way the school is. They also start to see the change that it could mean for our country.

You can't consider spread unless you feel agentic, otherwise it's too big a job. Agency is when individuals, or a team, feel able to bring about change. They feel confident in their ability to spread their new learning, reform their own practices. It's classroom reform, school-wide reform and then societal reform. It has to involve that agentic response to change and then other people start to go, 'huh, I can do that.' It's infectious. Agency is infectious.