

Closing the gaps: Maori and information literacy

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Presented at *User Education for User Empowerment: Commonwealth Library Association Conference 19 – 20 October 2000 Christchurch, New Zealand.*

Abstract

This paper focuses on the reasons why information literacy is a concept that has yet to make an impact on Maori. Although Maori participation as librarians and library users has increased dramatically over the last decade there are still a range of barriers that continue to inhibit access to library and information services for Maori. The relevance of these barriers to the 'information literacy divide' are analysed and actions are identified which will allow a strategy to be created to close the gap.

Introduction

Over the last two decades New Zealand's public and social policy frameworks have had a very heavy emphasis on Maori development. In the 1980s we had 'Tu Tangata: Stand Tall', and 'Partnership Perspectives' and in the 1990s 'Ka Awatea : The new dawn' and 'Closing the Gaps'. The latter has been carried over to the new millennium and has been joined by a new catch-phrase 'Capacity Building'.

The primary focus of these programmes has been to increase the social and economic well being of Maori. Unfortunately these programmes have not managed to make as bigger impact as they would have desired. The evidence of this lies in the social statistics collected by a range of government agencies. Regrettably these reveal that Maori dominate all the negative statistics in New Zealand.

The May 2000 ⁱprogress report on the Closing the Gaps initiative demonstrates that Maori continue to experience poorer health status, lower income levels, higher unemployment, higher prosecution and conviction rates, lower standards of living and lower rates of home ownership, and lower educational status than non-Maori.

It is the last category that I wish to elaborate on further. This is commonly referred to as the education gap.

Education Gap

This gap exists for a variety of reasons including a lack of family resources, barriers at schools, literacy and numeracy competencies of other family members (particularly parents) and negative perceptions of school and the education system.

The education gap is best represented through rates of participation, achievement and under-achievement levels at the various stages of the education system.

In the early childhood sector the rate of Maori participation has improved significantly over the last two decades mainly due to the success of the kohanga reo (Maori language nests) movement. In 1981 the participation rate for Maori was 50 % of the non-Maori rateⁱⁱ. By 1991 this gap had closed through a participation rate of 80 %. Although by 1994 this rate had only grown to 81%. So although the gap had narrowed it had also slowed down considerably.

In the school sector Maori account for approximately 20% of the school population. Although the retention rates for Maori have improved over the last decade. Figures from 1996 reveal that 65.7 % of Maori students remained at school to the age of 16 and 39.2 % to the age of 17. For non-Maori students the percentages were 88.1% and 64.2% respectively. Maori are also less likely to sit formal exams and of those that do they are also less likely to attain A or B grades. Maori students are also more than two and a half times more likely to leave school with no qualifications than their non-Maori counterparts.

In the tertiary sector significant progress has been made in participation rates. Between 1991 and 1996 the number of Maori enrolments increased by over 50% from 11,911 to 24,228. As a proportion they increased from 7.8% to 11.9% over the 5 years. The number of Maori graduating from tertiary institutions more than doubled in this same period. Most Maori studying at tertiary level are enrolled in bachelors degrees or trade certificate. Less than 5 % were studying for a post-graduate qualification.

The magnitude of these statistics is best realised when demographic trends are taken into consideration. In the year 2000 about 15% of the population identify themselves as Maori. In 2025 this figure will increase to approximately 18% and by 2051 approximately 22%. Although this increase may not seem significant it must be looked at in the context of the average age of the population. Approximately 42% of the Maori population in 2000 is aged 17 years and younger. If educational outcomes are not improved for this generation they will not only face a life of limited choices, but it will also mean that the future workforce of New Zealand will lack workers with the skills and productivity rates that will be required to support New Zealand's aging population.

Filling the education gap is therefore one of the highest priorities due to the impact that it has on other success/failure indicators.

The Divide

The library and information profession have not exactly been guilt free when it comes to choosing phrases that represent both professional and socio-economic concepts. Currently we have concepts such as the digital divide, we have had information rich and information poor, and the truly clichéd information is power.

However the focus at the moment seems to rest on the digital divide and the knowledge driven society/economy. As New Zealand continues to charge full speed ahead to a knowledge society it must be remembered that there are sectors of our society that are nowhere near being equipped with the right skills let alone the access to technology to participate in the knowledge society driven economy.

Yes there is a digital divide within New Zealand, but to focus on this is far too simplistic when it comes to looking at Maori issues relating to information literacy.

Literacy

In recent years the profession itself has focused heavily on the concept of information literacy. However the concept of information literacy relies heavily on other factors being equal. One of the most important factors is literacy itself. To be truly effective information literacy presupposes that other forms of literacy such as visual, and information technology literacy skills are already present or are simultaneously learned and that clients possess written, reading and comprehension skills.

Results from a literacy survey carried out in 1996ⁱⁱⁱ demonstrated that literacy was a major concern for Maori. The survey revealed that the majority of Maori participants struggled to meet the minimum requirements of understanding to enable them to meet the complex demands of everyday life and work in the emerging knowledge society. Skills measured by the survey included prose (ability to understand and use information from texts), documents (locating and using information in a range of formats such as timetables, charts and forms) and quantitative (ability to apply arithmetic operations on numbers in printed materials). Obviously these factors would seriously slow down any information literacy learning process for anyone possessing insufficient literacy skills. However it should not be used as an excuse not to offer programmes. It should still be possible to tailor a programme to meet the appropriate needs with a view to build on these over a longer period of time.

Barriers

Problems with literacy are only one of many barriers to improving information literacy levels among Maori

In 1996 the Library and Information Association of New Zealand Aotearoa and Te Ropu Whakahau (Maori Library and Information Workers Association) co-sponsored a research project that investigated Maori information needs. A key element of the research process was the series of hui (meetings) held in six different locations throughout New Zealand. These hui gave the participants the opportunity to express their opinions on their experiences with library and information institutions and to identify areas where their needs were not being met by these institutions.

A number of barriers to the uptake of library services were identified throughout the hui and these barriers are also highly relevant to whether information literacy is to make an impact on Maori.

Low Library Use

One of the biggest barriers to advancing information literacy amongst Maori is actually getting them into the Library in the first place. Anecdotal evidence points to Maori traditionally making little use of libraries. A number of Maori that participated in the *Te Ara Tika Guiding Voices* hui commented about their negative impressions of libraries. Comments were made that libraries were monocultural, threatening, silent, uncomfortable, unwelcoming, impersonal and daunting. Previous encounters with libraries probably helped to enforce these impressions but in all fairness it should be recognised that many libraries have worked actively to make their libraries more welcoming and relevant to Maori.

Maori Staff

There are approximately 3000 library and information workers in New Zealand. Approximately 200 (about 6%) of these identify as Maori. At the 1996 census, Maori accounted for 15.1 % of the total New Zealand population, so the number of Maori in the library and information profession is not representative of the national demographic profile.

Out of the 200 Maori working in the library and information profession about half of them are qualified. Although many public and tertiary libraries have Maori subject specialist or liaison positions it is quite common for those holding these positions to be thinly stretched. It is also not uncommon for some institutions to only have Maori staff only at junior levels

The importance of having qualified Maori staff working in the profession is demonstrated in the comments made by participants *Te Ara Tika : Guiding Voices* hui. Participants at all 6 hui stressed that they would be more comfortable using libraries if there were more Maori working there.

When I go to the library. I head for the first Maori face I see because that will

not make me whakama. I know that if I go and see them they will tell me as much as they can

You're faced with pakeha all the time. I would like to see Maori faces in there...so that us Maori people can feel more comfortable walking into a place like that.^{iv}

Recruitment of more Maori staff is not enough. Libraries also have a responsibility to ensure that Maori staff develop the appropriate expertise to not only assist Maori with their information needs but also in the development of information literacy skills.

Intellectual Access

Current cataloguing and classification tools used within New Zealand libraries are not suitable for most Maori information resources. The Te Ara Tika research hui revealed that there was wide discomfort and confusion associated with the use of library systems, particularly in the use of finding aids.

One of the major problems (other than a lack of research skills) is that up until recent times there has been a general lack of indexes and inventories of Maori material. Over the past decade this has started to change. However the construction of these resources has been made more difficult by the fact that there is a severe lack of thesauri that cater for Maori information. Many libraries have created their own thesaurus, others attempted to use He Puna Kupu Maori which had been created by the National Library of New Zealand. At this stage a gap still remains for a standardised thesaurus that meets the needs of Maori. The Bicultural and Cataloguing Special Interest Groups of Library and Information Association of New Zealand Aotearoa, and Te Roopuu Whakahau (Maori Library and Information Workers Association) are currently working on the creation of a Maori Subject Headings thesaurus with an aim to making Maori information more accessible.

Another problem with regard to intellectual access is the fact that many Maori information resources are written entirely in te reo Maori (Maori language). Access to these resources is limited due to the fact that there is a severe shortage of Maori librarians that are fluent in Maori and skilled in indexing and cataloguing.

Conclusion

It is obvious that the development of information literacy among Maori is a major challenge both for Maori and the library and information profession. Closing the socio-economic gaps and addressing the educational problems identified will take many years if not decades to rectify. Literacy and numeracy skills are essential as pre-requisite to

developing information literacy skills. The current coalition Government has pledged funding for the establishment of homework centres to assist with closing the education gaps for youth. This however does not address the problems of older generations without these fundamental skills.

Another major challenge for the profession is to devote more energy to researching and developing strategies to assist with information literacy skill development for Maori. While preparing this paper and an earlier article for *Library Life* I conducted a quick search of the library and information literature to see what I could find on the topic of information literacy and Maori or indigenous peoples. The only two notable items are a conference paper by Elizabeth Jones^v and the findings of the *Te Ara Tika: Guiding Voices* research.

In this paper I have presented a number of barriers to information literacy success for Maori. As library and information professionals it is essential that we eliminate the barriers we have control of. It is also highly important that we lobby central and local government authorities to provide the resources to assist in eliminating the barriers beyond our immediate control.

ⁱ Progress towards closing social and economic gaps between Maori and non-Maori. Wellington : Te Puni Kokiri, 2000. <http://www.tpk.govt.nz/publish/gaps.htm>

ⁱⁱ All statistics have been taken from the Closing the Gaps report (see above) or New Zealand Now: Maori. Wellington : Statistics NZ, 1998.

ⁱⁱⁱ Walker, Maurice. *Adult literacy in New Zealand : results from the International adult literacy survey*. Wellington : Ministry of Education, 1997

^{iv} Szekely, Chris. *Te Ara Tika: Guiding voices: Maori opinion on libraries and information needs*. Wellington : NZLIA and Te Ropu Whakahau, 1997. Pp.18-19.

^v Jones, Elizabeth. "Information literacy for Maori: a cultural context" in *Information literacy : the professional issue : proceedings of the third National Information Literacy Conference conducted by the University of South Australia Library and the Australian Library and Information Association Information LiteracyTaskforce, 8 and 9 December, 1997*. Adelaide : University of South Australia Library, 1998. Pp. 70-73.

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2008-01-30T03:09:42Z

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