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SUPPORTING INTERNATIONAL TERTIARY STUDENTS IN AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND THROUGH BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS AND FOSTERING BELONGING

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INTRODUCTION

Learning design has emerged as a distinct professional practice within tertiary education, concerned with the intentional planning of learning environments, experiences, and interactions that support diverse learners (Bennett et al., 2017; Goodyear, 2015). With rising numbers of families from diverse cultural backgrounds settling in Aotearoa New Zealand, the country is now described as "super-diverse" and faces emerging challenges due to heightened cultural complexity (Chan, 2019). International students, or those from migrant backgrounds, may find it difficult to navigate the social, cultural, and academic environment of Aotearoa New Zealand (Coburn, 2020).

This reflection explores not only teaching and learning strategies but also the intentional learning design decisions that help build strong reciprocal relationships and develop students' sense of belonging in culturally diverse classrooms at one tertiary institute. It draws on the Māori model of wellbeing, Te Whare Tapa Whā (Durie, 1994), to inform the design of learning experiences through positioning whanaungatanga (relationship building) and manaakitanga (care and hospitality) as relational learning principles. Māori are the indigenous people of Aotearoa New Zealand, and their rights are upheld under Te Tiriti o Waitangi. This reflection argues that whanaungatanga and manaakitanga function as both cultural values and learning design principles that intentionally shape curriculum architecture, learner interaction, and assessment experiences, particularly for international cohorts. These principles influence student experiences of belonging, wellbeing, and academic success. This reflection also draws on slow pedagogy (Clark, 2023), which emphasises giving students the time and space to engage deeply alongside tuakana-teina (Mead, 2016), a reciprocal learning relationship in which the older sibling (tuakana) guides the younger (teina).

As the author of this reflection, I write from my position as a Pākehā/tangata Tiriti lecturer and researcher working in initial teacher education. My teaching practice has involved supporting culturally diverse and international student cohorts. My understanding has been shaped through ongoing professional learning, collaboration with Māori colleagues, and guidance from kaupapa Māori advisers. This reflection therefore represents my experiences of attempting to enact te Tiriti-led, relationship-centred approaches within my practice. This reflective account of professional practice is informed by Goodyear's (2015) conception of teaching as design, which positions educators as active designers of learning environments, interactions, and experiences.

Through this lens, I examine how the principles of whanaungatanga and manaakitanga have shaped intentional decisions about classroom culture, learner engagement, and wellbeing initiatives for international students.

FRAMING THE AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT

All interactions in the Aotearoa New Zealand context are framed by Te Tiriti o Waitangi, the nation's founding document signed in 1840 between representatives of Māori and the Crown. This agreement established the foundation for Māori and Pākehā (European New Zealanders) to live together as citizens of Aotearoa New Zealand, based on principles of partnership, participation, and protection.

As government funded agencies, New Zealand tertiary institutes must address specific treaty rights and responsibilities (Pio et al., 2014). The Education Training Act (2020) articulates a commitment to culturally responsive, inclusive education from early learning through to tertiary education. Teachers in Aotearoa New Zealand also need to understand te Tiriti and how it applies to educational contexts (Education Council, 2017). Competency in te reo Māori (the Māori language) is also a graduation requirement for teachers in Aotearoa New Zealand, further reflecting the commitment to bicultural practice. O'Toole et al. (2019) define a Tiriti-led approach as one that honours Māori as tangata whenua (people of the land) and recognises culture and language as essential to Māori identity and wellbeing. Māori values such as whanaungatanga and manaakitanga, embodied in frameworks such as Te Whare Tapa Whā (Durie, 1994), are complementary to social and emotional learning and are explored further below.

A central idea in te Tiriti is the concept of tūrangawaewae (a place to stand) which affirms the right of all peoples to belong, as equals. With Aotearoa New Zealand's growing diversity, this principle has come to include all tangata (people) who call this land home (Webber et al., 2023). A Tiriti-led approach is one that acknowledges Māori as tangata whenua and draws on whanaungatanga and manaakitanga.

WHANAUNGATANGA AND MANAAKITANGA

Mead (2016) describes whanaungatanga as the process of developing respectful, reciprocal relationships, including caring for others and collective wellbeing. While originating from kinship and familial relationships, whanaungatanga extends beyond family ties to include collective relationships within educational and community settings. Closely connected to whanaungatanga is manaakitanga which Mead (2016) characterises as the process of showing respect for, and generosity, care, and hospitality to, others. Together, these values provide a relational foundation for teaching and learning (Ministry of Education, 2023). From a learning design perspective, whanaungatanga and manaakitanga function as relational design principles that guide how learning environments, communication protocols, and collaborative activities foster belonging and wellbeing (Goodyear, 2015). These principles underscore the importance of teachers and students getting to know each other and building a culture of trust and care in the classroom. Throughout this reflection, the examples presented are examined from the interconnected perspectives of whanaungatanga and manaakitanga, demonstrating how relationship-building and acts of care can be intentionally designed into tertiary learning environments for international students.

Whanaungatanga and manaakitanga in practice

Institutional systems supporting diversity are important, but ultimately, what matters most is how students feel in their environment. This begins with simple gestures, such as learning and using students' correct names and pronouns. Doing so affirms their identities and fosters a sense of belonging in the classroom (Spade, 2011). Early in my teaching of culturally diverse classes, I discovered that names were more complex than I had anticipated. A student might use a name from their passport, the name listed on the institute's student management system, a simplified version in their home language, or an English name adopted after arrival. Practicum placements sometimes highlighted issues when visiting lecturers could not locate students due to discrepancies in names. At other times students would not respond or be confused when their peers or teachers used unfamiliar versions of their names.

As an intentional learning design strategy, a name game was introduced at the beginning of the course to create the conditions for whanaungatanga and to establish relational trust and identity safety. For this game, students sit in a circle and choose an adjective that begins with the same letter as their name; for example, Radiant Rachael, paired with an action, such as mimicking the sun rising for "radiant." Pronouns can also be included. The second person repeats the first name with the adjective and action and then adds their own, continuing around the circle. Positioned at the beginning of the course, this activity forms part of a designed pathway to belonging, supporting learning outcomes related to collaboration and culturally responsive practice (Biggs et al., 2022). This playful activity allows students to share preferred names and pronouns, fosters connection from day one, and creates a supportive space for pronunciation correction. This activity promotes whanaungatanga by helping students establish meaningful connections with one another, while manaakitanga is demonstrated through the respectful acknowledgement of preferred names, identities, and pronouns.

This kind of relational engagement continues throughout the course. For example, students might be invited to bring a meaningful object from home to share its cultural or personal significance (Sammons et al., 2020). Whanaungatanga and manaakitanga are integral to every class. This relationship-building may take the form of group games or activities, sharing kōrero (conversations), moving outside the classroom, or sharing kai (food) together. Such activities can be linked to course content or serve as stand-alone community-building exercises.

In one activity, I asked: What brought you to this place in your life? Students were given 10 minutes to sketch key aspects of their life's journey, from the past towards the present, and into the future, considering family, professional and personal experiences. These life maps were then shared in small groups or as a class. It is through such sharing of stories and forging of connections that a community of learners is built. Reflective prompts included: How did you decide what was important to share about your life journey? How did it feel to share your story? What connections did you make with others? How might this relationship-building differ culturally from what you do in your own home country? These sessions often sparked deep emotional responses, cultivating empathy and mutual understanding among students from diverse countries and life experiences. The sharing of life stories strengthens whanaungatanga through the development of empathy and relational connection, while the respectful listening and valuing of diverse experiences reflects manaakitanga in action. These activities are not isolated teaching moments but are intentionally sequenced as part of a broader learning ecology design that scaffolds students' sense of belonging throughout the programme (Carvalho & Goodyear, 2014).

FOSTERING RELATIONSHIPS TO SUPPORT SUCCESS

Upholding whanaungatanga and manaakitanga also means actively fostering relationships that will help international students to be successful. I regularly invite learning facilitators, faculty librarians, health nurses, engagement facilitators, and international department staff into the classroom for focussed sessions. Kanohi ki te kanohi (face-to-face) interactions are prioritised, alongside class workshops on assessments and tasks, and the use of online forums to extend engagement. Introducing students to support staff in person demonstrates manaakitanga by ensuring students feel welcomed, supported, and cared for, while also strengthening whanaungatanga through the development of trusting relationships that extend beyond the classroom.

In blended and online contexts, the principles of whanaungatanga and manaakitanga inform the intentional design of digital learning spaces. Asynchronous discussion forums, structured peer-support activities, and multimodal communication channels are purposively designed to cultivate social presence and sustain connection beyond the physical classroom. These approaches align with Universal Design for Learning (UDL) which advocates for multiple means of engagement to support diverse learners (Hickey, 2021). Ample time is allocated for interactive activities that promote connection and understanding.

International students are given opportunities to have their voices heard at the departmental level and can feed back opinions about their classes. Each class elects at least one class representative, although this role is often shared among students, to ensure regular communication and feedback. Institute-wide surveys, distributed via the online student management system, further encourage students to reflect on and evaluate their learning experiences. At the end of every semester, students are invited to provide anonymous feedback on my course and my teaching. Time is set aside in class for this purpose. In turn, I provide comprehensive, personalised feedback on their assessments, highlighting areas of achievement in relation to learning outcomes, as well as areas for growth.

DRAWING ON SLOW PEDAGOGY AND TUAKANA-TEINA APPROACHES

Slow pedagogy, as expressed by Clark (2023), emphasises giving students the time, space, and freedom to think, reflect, and engage deeply with their learning. This approach is particularly relevant for international students, who may need more time to process feedback due to language differences, cultural expectations, or unfamiliarity with academic standards. The values of slow pedagogy, such as care, presence, and trust, align with whanaungatanga and manaakitanga. When given thoughtfully and with aroha (love), feedback becomes an extension of a trusting, respectful relationships where students feel safe to make mistakes and grow. Student evaluations of my teaching indicate that slow, intentional practice fosters a strong sense of connection and academic growth.

I also draw on the Māori practice of tuakana-teina by bringing different cohorts together to foster peer learning and support. Tuakana-teina refers to the relationship between an older sibling (tuakana) and a younger sibling (teina). This dynamic encourages reciprocal learning: the older teaches the younger, and the younger reminds the older of patience and tolerance (Mead, 2016). For example, when weaving putitputi (flowers) from harakeke (flax), the more experienced students support beginners which models tuakana-teina in action. These types of shared group activities also help students to understand and embody matauranga Māori (Māori knowledge).

MĀORI MODELS OF WELLBEING

Māori understandings of wellbeing incorporate the principles of whanaungatanga and manaakitanga, recognising that wellbeing is nurtured through relationships, community connections, care, and support. One model that aligns well with this discussion is Te Whare Tapa Whā (Durie, 1994) which provides a holistic framework for understanding wellbeing and fostering a sense of belonging. Rather than viewing wellbeing as an individual responsibility, the model emphasises the interconnected nature of physical, emotional, spiritual and relational dimensions of health.

Te Whare Tapa Whā

Te Whare Tapa Whā, developed by Durie (1994) in consultation with Māori communities, presents a model of health as a wharenui (meeting house) with four walls (tapa whā), each representing a cornerstone of holistic health: tinana (physical health), wairua (spiritual health), whānau (family health), and hinengaro (mental health). While Western health models often acknowledge physical, mental, and social aspects, they frequently overlook the spiritual dimension which is central to Māori understandings of wellbeing (Durie, 1994). Rather than a biomedical approach to health, Te Whare Tapa Whā takes a holistic view of hauora (health) that recognises the interconnected influence of relationships, culture, environment, and personal wellbeing. The use of Te Whare Tapa Whā complements whanaungatanga and manaakitanga by recognising that individual wellbeing is shaped through relationships with others. Reflecting on personal support networks, emotional wellbeing, spiritual practices, and physical health encourages students to strengthen connections with themselves and others, while creating opportunities for teachers to respond with care and support.

Te Whare Tapa Whā in practice

Drawing on the help and advice of specialist kaupapa Māori advisors working at the tertiary institute where teaching took place, activities were designed to support students to explore the dimensions of Te Whare Tapa Whā. Firstly, they were asked to reflect on the four walls:

- Taha whānau – Who are the people, whānau (family), or friends who form your inner circle of support?
- Taha hinengaro – What helps you clear your mind? Perhaps talking to someone, or staying organised to avoid feeling overwhelmed?
- Taha wairua – What practices (if any) do you use for self-care? This might include spending time with children or friends, writing in a journal, yoga, using crystals, or saying karakia (prayer).
- Taha tinana – How do you care for your physical health? For example, by maintaining a good sleep routine, limiting social media use, exercising regularly, or eating nourishing food.

Students were then given time to create their own Te Whare Tapa Whā using a template that included the outline of a house and the grounding of the earth. They were encouraged to write or draw their thoughts next to each taha, considering their personal experience of hauora. As this was a reflective and individual activity, students were not required to share their work with the class. However, a follow-up activity was designed to build relationships and foster open communication around wellbeing. The design of these reflective and collaborative activities demonstrates how Te Whare Tapa Whā can guide curriculum architecture and assessment design, ensuring that learning experiences attend to students' physical, emotional, spiritual, and social dimensions (Carvalho & Goodyear, 2014).

Creating a whare as a group

According to Durie's (1994) model, all sides of the whare need to be strong and balance each other in order to achieve and maintain health. The follow-up activity involved preparing resources such as ice-block sticks, string, felt, and cardboard and dividing these among groups of students. Alternatively, the students could be asked to gather natural resources (such as leaves, sticks, or bark) to use for this activity. Each group was asked to use the materials provided to make their own Te Whare Tapa Whā. This activity not only supported their development in working collaboratively, a vital skill for professional ECE teachers, but also highlighted the significance of each of the four walls being equally strong if their whare collapsed, reinforcing the concept of holistic well-being.

Noho marae

An experience that may be relatively unique to the New Zealand educational context is the noho marae, which refers to staying overnight at a traditional Māori gathering place. Noho marae can last for several days but, in the case of this programme, students and teachers stay together for one night and two days. This embodied cultural experience supports groups to learn more about Māori culture in an authentic way. While noho marae naturally strengthens whanaungatanga through shared experiences and collective participation, it also provides powerful examples of manaakitanga. Through the hospitality, care and cultural guidance provided by marae hosts, students experience firsthand how relationships are nurtured and mana is upheld within Māori communities (Mead, 2016).

Sammons et al. (2020) argues that sharing artefacts can deepen cultural understandings within diverse groups. I used this approach again during noho marae, where students were invited to bring an item of cultural significance to them. Each student took a turn presenting their object and sharing its personal and cultural meaning. This process revealed many powerful stories of resilience, love, family, and childhood. The strong sense of belonging that developed among the group reflected their collective willingness to listen, remain open-minded, and learn about one another's cultures (Tomsett et al., 2023).

EMERGING EVIDENCE OF EFFECTIVENESS

Student feedback suggests that practices grounded in whanaungatanga and manaakitanga contributed to a learning environment characterised by trust, care, inclusion, and belonging. Comments describing the learning environment as "supportive", "inclusive," and "full of love and trust" indicate that students experience both relational connection and care which appeared to support confidence, engagement, and willingness to seek assistance from support services.

Observations during class activities and noho marae further suggested deeper peer connection, greater openness, and improved participation among students who initially appeared withdrawn or hesitant. While the evidence is reflective rather than formally measured, these patterns indicate that culturally grounded, relationship-first pedagogy can meaningfully strengthen international students' sense of belonging and readiness to learn.

IMPLICATIONS FOR OTHER INTERNATIONAL CONTEXTS

Although rooted in the Aotearoa New Zealand context, many aspects of this approach are transferable to international higher education settings seeking to improve belonging and wellbeing among diverse student cohorts. The core principles of whanaungatanga and manaakitanga as expressed through holistic wellbeing models such as Te Whare Tapa Whā (Durie, 1994) can be adapted as universal design elements rather than culturally bounded practices. For example, name-learning rituals, sharing personal artefacts, life-mapping, and incorporating peer-mentoring dynamics (similar to tuakana-teina) can be implemented in culturally diverse classrooms anywhere, and be adapted to various indigenous frameworks.

These practices align with global literature emphasising social connectedness, culturally responsive pedagogy, and the role of teacher-student relationships in fostering belonging among international students (Bi, 2025; Heddy & McCotter, 2025). In online environments, these principles might be enacted through intentionally designed discussion forums, peer-mentoring structures, welcoming video introductions, regular personalised feedback, collaborative group tasks, and opportunities for students to share aspects of their cultural identities. Such approaches can help establish social presence and belonging even when learners are geographically dispersed. By intentionally foregrounding relationality, emotional safety, and community-building, tertiary educators worldwide can create learning environments where students from any cultural background can feel seen, supported, and valued.

CONCLUSION

Supporting international students in Aotearoa New Zealand requires more than institutional policies and academic support structures; it requires intentional, relationship-centred practice. This reflection has explored how the Māori values of whanaungatanga and manaakitanga can serve as guiding principles for designing learning environments that foster belonging, trust, and care for international students. Through intentionally designed opportunities for relationship-building, sharing personal narratives, connecting with support services, and participating in culturally grounded experiences such as noho marae, students are supported to develop meaningful connections with both peers and teachers.

Te Whare Tapa Whā provides a useful framework for understanding wellbeing as holistic and relational, recognising the interconnected dimensions of physical, emotional, spiritual, and social health. Activities informed by this model encouraged students to reflect on their own wellbeing while strengthening relationships and communication. While this reflection is situated within the Aotearoa New Zealand context, the underlying principles of relationship-building have wider relevance for tertiary education internationally. By viewing whanaungatanga and manaakitanga as learning design principles rather than solely cultural concepts, teachers can intentionally create inclusive learning environments in which diverse learners feel seen, valued, and supported to succeed.

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