



Mana Ūkaipō: Māori Student Connection, Belonging and Engagement at School

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Abstract

This paper describes the background, methods and key findings from a research project conducted in one Kāhui Ako (Community of Learning) in a city in New Zealand. All 12 schools had significant numbers of Indigenous Māori students whose iwi (tribal) ancestry connected to the region over centuries. Using a mixed methods approach, the study investigated the specific ‘across and within’ school interventions that positively impacted Māori student engagement in learning. Evidence was collected by seeking the views and opinions of students, teachers and whānau (family). Interventions and strategies included collaboration between Māori teachers and across-school leaders, positive school culture focused on the health and well-being of students, localised curricula, and substantial use of te reo Māori and tikanga in most schools. School principals reported limited collaboration with each other due to perceived competition between schools for student enrollments, which is counter to the policy drivers for the Kāhui Ako initiative. Results indicated that culturally inclusive leaders and teachers must deliberately focus on motivating students for their positive futures. This is key to improving the academic and social outcomes for Māori students.

Keywords Indigenous Māori students · Teachers and leaders in mainstream schools · Culturally responsive pedagogy · Community of Learning

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Introduction

Disparities in student achievement between Māori and non-Māori in New Zealand schools have been recorded since the 1960s (Hunn, 1960). Despite educational reforms over the last 50 years that have sought to address these disparities, for most Māori there has been very little change in these inequities (Bishop et al., 2009; Rubie-Davies & Peterson, 2016). Recent statistics show that, in 2019, 64.7% of Māori school leavers attained NCEA level 2 or above compared to 73.7% of Pasifika students, 82% of Pākehā/European students and 89.7% of Asian students (Ministry of Education, 2020). Additionally, the objectives set by the Ministry of Education (2013) in *Ka Hikitia: Accelerating Success*—in particular the goal specifying that, “By 2017, Māori school leavers achieving University Entrance will be on par with non-Māori school leavers” (p. 58)—has still not been met. Māori students’ University Entrance statistics in 2019 remain significantly lower at 55.1%, when compared with Pākehā/European (70.8%) and Asian (71.3%) students (NZQA, 2020). It was clear that something else was needed to shift and lift Māori student achievement.

In 2014, the New Zealand Government announced the ‘Investing in Educational Success’ (IES) initiative with a \$359 million budget to help raise student achievement with a particular focus on Māori students. The initiative invited schools to form local school clusters called Communities of Learning (Kāhui Ako) with a specific focus on collaborating to better serve students that are most at risk of underachieving (Ministry of Education, 2016). Ninety-three per cent of Kāhui Ako identified culturally responsive practice as a core objective (Aim, 2019) and a Ministry of Education Monitoring and Evaluation Report (2017) noted that the policy was designed to shift and lift student achievement by recognising and utilising expertise across the system to raise academic and social outcomes for young people.

Kāhui Ako are led by a Community Leader, in the case reported in this research this leader was a deputy principal, who is Māori. Teachers in the member schools were appointed to remunerated roles with specific role descriptions that allowed them to share effective practice. These roles are called Across-School Leaders and Within-School Leaders (Ministry of Education, 2016). In this research project, three of the five Across-School Leaders are Māori who whakapapa to the local hapu and are fluent te reo Māori speakers. These roles were designed to encourage collaborative practice, bringing together the wisdom, experiences and expertise of many so that equity “challenges are addressed through a coordinated and collective effort” (Donohoo & Velasco, 2016, p. xii).

To genuinely meet the needs of their school communities, networks of schools must do more than simply exist (Rincón-Gallardo and Fullan 2016). Central to the success of Kāhui Ako is effective collaboration. This involves investigating a shared problem, and combining teachers’ professional knowledge with theory and research to generate new knowledge (Katz et al., 2009). This process is known as collaborative inquiry (Jackson & Street, 2005; Katz et al., 2009; Rincón-Gallardo and Fullan 2016). By evaluating practice in a professional group that balances support and critique, teachers’ beliefs and understandings can be altered, enabling changes in teaching practice (Katz et al., 2009).

This project was funded by the Teaching, Learning and Research Initiative (TLRI) managed by the New Zealand Council of Educational Research (NZCER). The TLRI seeks to enhance the links between educational research and teaching practices to improve outcomes for learners (NZCER, 2020). Therefore the funding of this study called “*Mana Ūkaipō: Enhancing Māori engagement through pedagogies of connection and belonging*” was a collaboration between researchers and school leaders to investigate the specific interventions that made the biggest difference to Māori student engagement in a Kāhui Ako. The Kāhui Ako involved in this study is comprised of one large secondary school, an intermediate school, three full primary schools, six contributing schools and a special school. It is located in a regional city in the North Island of New Zealand. The students who attend these schools live in an urban regional area. For the past 2 years, Across-School Leaders from this Kāhui Ako have been participating in cohesive collaborative inquiry groups to investigate approaches that improve student engagement for their large cohort of Māori students (approximately 64%).

This study is strengths-based in that it focuses on the culturally responsive and relational pedagogies, and te ao Māori approaches required to support increased engagement and outcomes for Māori students. In collaboration with the researchers, Across-School Leaders in the Kāhui Ako developed collaborative inquiry questions to investigate the change in pedagogies that resulted in positive educational outcomes for Māori students, extending to their homes and communities. Researchers, Across-School Leaders who were also the practitioner researchers, examined the practices that were perceived as effective and needed to be sustained, the practices that were ineffective and needed to be discontinued, and the practices that needed to change in order to become more effective for Māori learners.

Māori Education Policy Directives

New Zealand is a bicultural country, whose tangata whenua (Indigenous people) are Māori. The founding document of the country is Te Tiriti o Waitangi (The Treaty of Waitangi), which was written and signed in 1840 as a means of partnership between Māori and the government (represented by the Crown) of New Zealand (Walker, 1990). The 2020 Education and Training Act (Ministry of Education, 2020) stipulates that, even in contemporary times, Te Tiriti O Waitangi obliges schools, as government organisations, to ensure that they are bringing Te Tiriti into effect. The 2020 Act specifies that one of the primary objectives for Boards and schools is to give effect to Te Tiriti o Waitangi by:

- Working to ensure their plans, policies and local curriculum reflect local tikanga Māori (protocols), mātauranga Māori (knowledge/wisdom) and te ao Māori (worldviews);
- Taking all reasonable steps to make instruction available in tikanga Māori and te reo Māori; and
- Achieving equitable outcomes for Māori students.

These objectives put Māori identity, language and culture at the centre of teaching and learning, with an expectation that Māori students should be engaged, challenged, and affirmed in their cultural identity at school. To this end, two projects in particular have changed teacher and leader practice in relation to Māori student achievement in New Zealand secondary schools.

Te Kotahitanga was a research and professional development programme designed to support teachers to improve Māori students' achievement in mainstream secondary school classrooms (Bishop et al., 2007). The programme was premised on the need for teachers to create culturally sustaining contexts for learning that were responsive to evidence of student performance and understandings (Bishop et al., 2007). An external evaluation of Te Kotahitanga (Hynds et al., 2011) found that schools involved in the Te Kotahitanga project retained Māori students at a higher rate than comparison schools, prepared Māori students for university at a higher rate and had higher academic results. Te Kotahitanga had a positive impact on student–teacher relationships and was perceived to be highly effective for teachers involved in the project (Hynds et al., 2011).

The Starpath Project was a longitudinal, multifaceted secondary school intervention designed to fundamentally change pedagogy and challenge the distribution of opportunities for students in some of New Zealand's most underserved communities (McKinley & Webber, 2018). Starpath worked with 39 low- to mid-decile secondary schools to: (1) improve academic goal-setting; (2) understand and utilise achievement data; (3) engage teachers, whānau and students in academic counselling conversations; and (4) grow effective school leadership (McKinley & Webber, 2018). The study found that goal-setting, improved data use and academic counselling to support Māori student achievement were key factors in supporting Māori student achievement, but the overall effectiveness of the programme depended on the quality of relationships embedded within school cultures, systems and structures (McKinley & Webber, 2018).

The aforementioned initiatives that were introduced to English-medium schools offered a range of practical strategies, teacher professional development programmes and support for schools to enhance Māori student engagement and achievement. However, participation in these initiatives was not compulsory. Culturally sustaining practice should be integrated within the curriculum and pedagogies of teachers and leaders in all schools, throughout all levels of the school, and in partnership with Māori (Averill & McRae, 2019). The Ministry of Education's strategy, *Ka Hikitia* (2013, 2019), stipulates that schools should provide Māori students with opportunities to achieve educational success "as Māori," through quality educational provision and strong engagement with communities. The Ministry of Education (2019) further suggested that enabling Māori to succeed as Māori involves implementing teaching and learning approaches in schools that are engaging, effective, and enjoyable for all Māori students, having appropriately high expectations for all Māori students, tracking and monitoring what works to support excellent Māori educational outcomes, and developing productive partnerships with whānau, iwi, and community that are responsive and reciprocal—leading to collective action, outcomes, and solutions. This project examines to what extent these principles are being operationalised.

Culturally Sustaining Schooling

Culturally Sustaining Schooling (CSS), also known as culturally relevant pedagogy or culturally responsive teaching, is a collective approach to teaching that focuses on raising the achievement of diverse students who have, historically, been underserved by the education system (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008). CSS assumes that a firm grounding in one's language, culture and history is a fundamental prerequisite for the development of culturally healthy students and communities, and thus is an essential ingredient for identifying the appropriate qualities and practices associated with culturally sustaining educators, curricula, and schools (Alaska Native Knowledge Network, 1998). A CSS approach requires a shift in teaching methods, curricular content, teacher dispositions, and school–community relations.

In the New Zealand context, CSS approaches use Māori students' ethnic and cultural backgrounds as a context for learning, and attempts to connect “to and through [students'] personal and cultural strengths, their intellectual capabilities, and their prior accomplishments” (Gay, 2010, p. 26). Paris' (2012) definition of culturally sustaining pedagogy expands on these assertions by promoting learning opportunities where students and teachers deliberately perpetuate, foster and sustain cultural knowledge, practices and language. Māori student achievement initiatives, based on culturally responsive practices, have been a strong focus in Aotearoa New Zealand for almost 20 years (Averill and McRae 2019; Bishop et al., 2003), yet most Māori learners have not experienced these proven positive approaches (Hynds et al., 2017).

Research Context

Research collaborations between academics and practitioners that draw upon iwi perspectives with an inquiry-focused methodology have much to contribute to international research. The current project involved teachers as practitioner researchers (many of whom whakapapa to the local area) working alongside academic researchers, to identify the specific interventions, and teacher and leadership practices that Māori students and their whānau identify as supporting them to be successful on their own terms.

In this Kāhui Ako, the major aim was to broaden and improve the pedagogical and leadership response to Māori students and their whānau, and improved achievement, retention, engagement and attendance of Māori students. The overarching research questions were:

- What intervention strategies have been utilised to address inequity for Māori students?
- To what extent do strategies and interventions in these schools impact on Māori students' engagement and academic achievement?

This project was designed with Māori, for Māori, and by Māori (Durie, 2006) and provided an opportunity to address themes of strategic importance to New Zealand. This mixed methods case study, focused on Māori student success and thriving in education, was underpinned by Kaupapa Māori theory (Smith, 1997, 2005), a local theoretical positioning related to being Māori, which presupposes that: the validity and legitimacy of Māori is taken for granted, the survival and revival of Māori language and culture is imperative, and the struggle for autonomy over our own cultural well-being, and over our own lives is vital to Māori thriving. While Kaupapa Māori informed research can be viewed as having underlying principles or philosophies that are based on a Māori world view, methods may be drawn from a wide range of approaches (Moewaka Barnes, 2000). Kaupapa Māori provided a clearly defined cultural approach for the strengths-based Mana Ūkaipō work. This case study capitalised on and prioritised iwi ways of knowing, being, and doing to explicate, measure, and augment more broadly the drivers of thriving that result in Māori student success across the Kāhui Ako. The Kaupapa Māori project prioritised the key principles of whanaungatanga (enduring relationships), mana ōrite (shared power between researchers and school leaders), and whakamana tangata (strengths-based interactions that upheld the mana of all involved).

The project was conducted through a research–practice partnership (Coburn et al., 2013) of University of Auckland academics partnering with teachers and school leaders. Because the aim of this type of partnership is to study solutions and examine interventions which are framed around Māori student success, the entire research team was mindful of the ethical challenges such an approach presented. In addition to ensuring an ethical approach, the research team increased the trustworthiness of the research process through implementing practices known to enhance the credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability of the findings (Nowell et al., 2017). To ensure credibility, this project employed prolonged engagement and persistent partnership to address the ‘fit’ between the participants’ and researchers’ views and the ways in which they are presented. Author One has worked with the Kāhui Ako as an Expert Partner for 2 years prior to this project beginning, and Author Two has worked alongside teachers and iwi educational organisations for more than 10 years. Both researchers were ‘kanohi-kītea’ (seen faces) in schools in the region. The constant involvement of teachers as researchers in the intervention audit, analysis of student data, focus group discussions, and development process was designed to increase both credibility and dependability of the study process and findings (Nowell et al., 2017). A clear audit trail of field notes gathered through the audit of the interventions and associated student achievement data was an additional way to address dependability.

Method

This project employed a mixed-method case-study design gathering quantitative and qualitative data from teachers, Across-School Leaders, principals, students and whānau within a 1-year period. Case study is considered a qualitative method,

distinguishable by its use of multiple data sources (Yin, 2003), but with the potential for integration of qualitative and quantitative data (Baxter & Jack, 2008). It is the convergence, or integration, of multiple data sources that “adds strength to the findings as the various strands of data are braided together to promote a greater understanding of the case” (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 554). In this case study, we examined the specific interventions that made the biggest difference to Māori student engagement in learning. Particular attention was paid to iwi-initiated projects and localised curricula.

Evidence was collected through interviews ($n=11$), focus groups ($n=2$), and surveys completed by students ($n=2438$), family members ($n=694$), and teachers (inclusive of principals) ($n=226$). The mixed method data collection and analyses were iterative, and ongoing, as the project evolved during a pandemic. The study utilised multiple techniques and approaches to ensure “complementary strengths and nonoverlapping weaknesses” (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004, p. 18). More specifically, a mixed method approach was chosen because it is “cognizant, appreciative, and inclusive of local and broader socio-political realities, resources, and needs” (Johnson et al., 2007, p. 129).

The project adhered to ethical principles and practices, including informed consent, protection of vulnerable students, anonymity, and confidentiality, as outlined by iwi (tribal) protocols and the University of Auckland Code for Human Ethics. Following ethical review by the team, the project was lodged with the University and received ethical approval (UAHPEC Approval Number: 024166). In addition, iwi-centric and kaupapa Māori methodologies provided us with the most respectful, culturally responsive and appropriate pathways for doing this important work alongside iwi educators. We involved the Kāhui Ako Across-School Leaders (four of the six are Māori and whakapapa to the region) in the gathering of the data, liaison with Māori students and whānau, and included their perspectives in the findings of this study. This was critical in terms of ensuring that the study interpretations were presented from an authentically iwi perspective.

Data Collection Methods

The Kia Tū Rangatira Ai Surveys

These surveys elicited student, family and teacher/principal perspectives about how students develop positive attitudes, motivation and engagement towards school, future aspirations, and who their role-models for success were. Initially, participants were asked to provide demographic data and then complete 48 multiple-choice questions, 5-point likert scale items, and open-ended questions. The surveys were administered in the 12 schools with the support of the Across-School and Within-School Kāhui Ako Leaders. The surveys were completed between February 2020 and September 2020 and provided a descriptive data set by which we could measure the extent to which Māori students, teachers and whānau felt their schools were providing opportunities for Māori students to achieve educational success as Māori. This study discusses the mean scores

and/or percentages for two of the student and whānau survey questions, and one question from the teacher surveys.

School Intervention Audit

An audit of all teaching, learning and social interventions deliberately focussed on improving outcomes for Māori students within the Kāhui Ako schools was conducted, led by the Across-School Leaders/Practitioner Researchers. The purpose of the intervention stocktake was: (a) to explore the extent to which the existing programmes enhanced Māori student success; and (b) to understand how school resourcing was focussed on Māori student engagement and learning. The goal was to work with the Kāhui Ako leaders to examine the attributes of successful programmes in and across schools, as well as any implementation challenges or other issues.

This ‘stocktake’, undertaken via semi-structured interviews, provided evaluation indicators of outcomes and progress utilised by the school principals/leaders/teachers. A template to collect the data was designed and formed the basis for the discussion with respondents from each of the ten school leaders who chose to participate in this aspect of the data collection. Detailed notes were taken during these conversations, member-checked by the participants, and then analysed. In nine of the ten schools, the principal was part of the response team or conducted the interview alone. The Across-School Leaders (four who are Māori and two who are non-Māori) also completed the stocktake template to describe the across Kāhui Ako interventions that were being implemented.

Focus Group Discussions

Two focus groups (N=45) formed part of the data gathering and member checking in this project. The first focus group (n=23) involved the research team meeting with principals and school leaders to collaboratively analyse the data gathered during the survey and stocktake phases of the project. Interim findings were presented to attendees to ensure the data which had been gathered remotely, had been understood and captured correctly, and to ensure practitioner validation. The discussion was framed around the principles of culturally responsive schooling evident within the data collected. The school leaders worked in groups discussing the interim findings adding their own comments or adjusting statements they felt didn’t reflect their own experience. Following the first focus group, the researchers and the ASL team believed that the strength of the Māori medium pathways required further investigation. Therefore, the second focus group consisted of a 1-h focus group comprising 22 Māori medium teachers. See Table 1 for an outline of the study participants.

Survey Results

Student and family responses to three questions from the Kia Tū Rangatira Ai survey were selected for the purposes of this study. The survey items focused on the Māori students and whānau answers to the following two questions:

Table 1 Study participants

Participants	Surveys	Individual interviews	Focus group interviews
Primary students Y1-8 (N)	1449		
Māori primary ākonga (n)	896		
Secondary students Y9-13 (N)	989		
Māori secondary ākonga (n)	492		
Family members (N)	694		
Māori whānau (n)	475		
Principals/Teachers (N)	226	11	45
Māori tumuaki/kaiako (n)	112		22
Total	3358	11	67

1. What motivates students to engage and persist at school?
2. What job do they want to do in the future?

This study also focuses on a series of items in the teacher survey related to culturally sustaining practice:

1. Relative to other teachers in your school, how culturally responsive to students' needs do you think you are?

Motivation

Māori students were highly motivated by having “a good life” when they are older (4.47/5), they wanted to “get a good job” (4.38/5) and “make their family/whānau proud” (4.38/5). Whānau motivation scores showed that they encouraged their children to go to school “for the pleasure they experience when they are broadening their knowledge in subjects that they liked” (4.4/5), “because their studies allow them to continue to learn about things that interest them” (4.38/5), and “because they want them to have a ‘good life’ later on” (4.38/5). In addition, approximately 78% of Māori students reported that they enjoyed learning new things at school most or all of the time, 75% felt that school was fun, and 73% responded that they felt good at school. These percentages were very similar to non-Māori students, which suggests that the culturally sustaining schooling environment was generally experienced positively by all students.

The results suggest that Māori students are largely extrinsically motivated in that they see the value of education and want to both enjoy learning and reap the eventual benefits of a good education. The data also indicate that they are socially motivated, in that they see educational success as something that enables them to accumulate pride and that benefits their whole whānau. Whānau wanted their children to be intrinsically motivated—that is, they wanted them to develop a love of learning and an internal desire to excel. Ryan and Deci (2020) have distinguished between intrinsic motivation (activities done for their own sake) and extrinsic motivation concerns (activities done for instrumental reasons). The

primary difference between the two types of motivation is that extrinsic motivation arises from outside of the individual while intrinsic motivation arises from within.

The student qualitative survey responses suggested generally healthy attitudes towards academics and achievement. When identifying what they liked most about school, the students commented on motivating factors like being accoladed for extending themselves in their classwork and learning, the range of curriculum options, and strong friendships. Many students expressed that school was a safe social space where relationships with both teachers and their peers were important, and where they had opportunities to excel. Māori students commented, “It’s a place to be able to socialise and strengthen relationships. Personally, it’s also a positive place for me to be”, “I like the environment we have at my school, we are all whānau” and “ki te ako i ngā mātauranga hōu—learning new knowledge”.

In general, whānau encouraged their children to go to school because they wanted them to “do well” (4.9/5), “pay attention” (4.84/5), “ask their teacher questions about their learning” (4.79/5) and “work hard” (4.79/5). Some whānau mentioned that their children enjoyed both the healthy social environment of school and opportunities for learning. They commented that their children appreciated “learning new things, practising new skills, meeting with friends socially”, “teachers who are interested in their learning”, and “the variety of experiences he has, the weights room, sports development classes, science and what he learns, the social aspect”. It is evident that whānau members believe that learning, increased opportunities to broaden curriculum interests and making friends are critical motivators for their children.

Future Aspirations

Approximately 36% of Māori primary students and 41% of Māori secondary students in the Kāhui Ako wanted to go to university after they finished secondary school. The national average for Māori primary school students is 41%, and it is 45% for Māori secondary students. Therefore, student aspirations for university in this Kāhui Ako are lower than the national average. Approximately 43% of whānau indicated that they want their children to go to university once they complete secondary school. The national average for whānau show that 52% want their children to go to university. Therefore, whānau aspirations in this Kāhui Ako regarding their children attending university are also lower than the national average.

In general, these findings suggest that further attention to academic planning is needed with all students and their whānau—focusing on motivating students by linking their school learning to future jobs, career pathways, meaningful subject selection, and university entry requirements. The research shows that students who set challenging future goals and aspirations are more task-oriented, feel a sense of purpose, and achieve at higher levels (Webber et al., 2018). Future aspirations are also significantly associated with achievement outcomes (Walkey et al., 2013). Therefore, drawing on the extrinsic motivation levels of students by connecting school success to their career aspirations should be a key priority for schools.

Culturally Sustaining Practice

Approximately 44% of the teachers/principals who completed the teacher survey claimed they only did an “average” job in terms of how culturally responsive they were to students’ needs, and 54% said they did an “above average” job (44%) or an “excellent” job (10%). Nationally, 42% of all teachers (N=2094) believe they are doing an average job, and 57% believe they are above average (48%), or excellent (9%). In addition, a high mean score of 4.85/5 showed that 100% of teachers in the Kāhui Ako believed that “they treated Māori whānau and culture with respect” most or all of the time. Teachers also responded positively to the statements: “In my classroom, I respect the Māori students and they respect me” (4.62/5—97% of teachers), and “Māori students feel cared for” (4.67/5—97% of teachers). Many teachers also believed that “Māori whānau are made to feel welcome in their classrooms” (4.65/5—95% of teachers). In terms of areas for development, the lowest mean score was for the statement: “I know and teach the Māori history associated with where my school is based (e.g., hapū and iwi history)” (3.62/5—55% of all teachers).

Teachers/principals who engage in culturally sustaining practice believe that culture deeply influences the way children learn. Overall, the teachers in this Kāhui Ako had a slightly lower perception of their capacity to be culturally responsive than the national average—even though their responses to the individual ‘Culturally Responsive Practice’ items in the survey suggest a healthy respect for the role of culture, students and whānau. The results suggest that the Kāhui Ako think deeply about what they do differently to teach Māori students, to engage ‘hard to reach’ whānau, and to incorporate local/hapū/iwi knowledge and expertise into the curriculum.

Stocktake Results

Schools in the Kāhui Ako were involved in numerous interventions; one school listed 10 and another, 29. Many of the interventions listed were not specifically targeted at Māori students but school leaders identified Māori students who had benefited from them. In many of the schools there are a high proportion of Māori students and it is therefore understandable that principals would perceive almost every intervention as one that would benefit Māori students. The main interventions they engaged supported increased literacy development (particularly in the early years of primary school), numeracy, leadership, and physical health and well-being. Furthermore, many schools had developed their own localised curriculum, focussing on local histories, and connections with mana whenua and local marae.

Two additional key findings emerged from the stocktake process. Firstly, it was apparent that there was little collaboration occurring with respect to intervention activities despite almost all schools carrying out very similar intervention programmes to meet the same student needs. Secondly, school leaders had collected very little ‘hard’ evidence about the effectiveness of these programmes—so while school leaders believed their decisions about intervention efforts were having an impact, there was little data to quantify the impact.

In some schools there were targeted professional learning and development programmes for teachers which supported them to understand the key principles of culturally sustaining pedagogical approaches. According to Patara (2012, p. 50) culturally sustaining pedagogical approaches “improve Māori education outcomes where the tamaiti [child], the whānau [parents and family], and hapū and iwi [tribal group] are integral to determining the education journey. The core of cultural responsiveness is exactly that: responding to “the child’s cultural experiences”—in this case as Māori and all that it encompasses”. All school leaders recognised that non-Māori teachers required on-going support and upskilling in order to increase their knowledge and understanding of tikanga, te reo and mātauranga Māori. In reference to culturally sustaining schooling, most school leaders commented that their schools made use of the resources and support of their local iwi and were keen to develop curriculum focussed programmes which drew on the knowledge and customs of local matanga (experts). The leaders discussed utilising iwi narratives and scientific, geological and historical information to develop interesting learning programmes that were engaging for tamariki Māori.

An additional focus in some primary schools, particularly where there were Māori medium units, was “to develop fluency in te reo Māori to set up tamariki Māori for the paepae in the future” (Across School Leader). Many schools listed activities that encouraged the use of reo within the mainstream context to support the learning of both Māori and non-Māori students. Kapa haka, waka ama, and *Te Ipu Korero* (an oral language programme for Māori medium classes) were all activities which were perceived to support the normalisation of Māori knowledge and reo in the whole school environment and community. Some school leaders discussed the importance of using te reo Māori themselves and observing tikanga protocols as an essential part of their validation of Māori students. Most of the school leaders seemed unaware which interventions to support the success of Māori students were occurring in other schools within the Kāhui Ako, although some were making use of the expertise of the Across-School leaders to support their teachers to improve their knowledge and understanding of te reo and local tikanga.

Hauora (the health and well-being of students) was a consistent focus for discussion in all ten participating schools. All schools had a focus on promoting positive behaviour, restorative practice, free lunches, breakfast club, physical activity, pastoral care, clubs to support special interests, and fully funded extra-curricular activities such as a swimming club in the school holidays. All principals were particularly focussed on ensuring the students in their school (Māori and non-Māori) had enough food to eat so that they were well set up for their learning throughout the school day.

Primary school leaders were focussed on ensuring the physical environment was welcoming for students and they were provided with high quality safe and secure infrastructure to ensure their school day was fun and enjoyable. The secondary school principal was cognisant of the impact of poverty on students’ ability to attend school. They were aware of the need for some secondary students to be in paid employment or looking after young children so adults in the house could go to work. School leaders at the secondary school looked to support students whose attendance was interrupted by work and other commitments by ensuring they could access class notes and additional subject specific teacher support.

All school leaders discussed the ongoing efforts to improve home/school partnerships and encourage whānau to feel comfortable about coming into the school to discuss their child's progress and learning. One school initiated student-led conferences to replace parent–teacher interviews and had a huge increase in parent participation when the power was shifted from the teacher to the student discussing their learning goals and aspirations. The use of digital pedagogies within the school and electronic communication within and outside the school was also present in some of the primary schools. One primary school was utilising a range of digital tools to engage students in the digital technologies curriculum. Other schools had very limited access to digital technologies to support modern pedagogies in the classroom. The difference in schools' government resourcing between these schools was negligible but support for digital technologies appeared to reflect the priorities of school leadership.

The school leaders were interviewed during the initial lockdown in New Zealand due to Covid 19 pandemic. One principal stated that the majority of the students from his primary school would be able to access digital devices to learn while at home, but the majority of schools in the Kāhui Ako were relying on some hard copy teaching resources that had been distributed by the Ministry of Education. These principals expressed grave concerns about the well-being of some of their students and worried how they were coping during lockdown without the physical and emotional structures of the school environment, free school breakfasts and lunches, or any electronic device that would allow access to teacher-generated learning.

Focus Group Results

A key discussion point that arose from the first focus group was the consistent and unresolved issue regarding competition for students across the Kāhui Ako. School leaders expressed their reluctance to share expertise, ideas or successful interventions with each other publicly because they were in competition with each other to attract students. The threat of school closure caused by a falling student role, continues to evoke a passionate response in many communities (Witten et al., 2003). This clearly articulated disinterest in collaborating is counter to the central goals of the resourcing provided by government for the Kāhui Ako. It was made clear in this focus group that, despite the funding and resources committed to collaboration, there was little intention from school leaders to share expertise because there was no vested interest in the school next door succeeding.

The teachers described the collaboration between Māori medium teachers as an important source for collective professional development. They believed that their deep knowledge about the work happening in the Māori medium units eased the transition for Māori students. There was also discussion about the challenges and depth of knowledge required by Māori medium teachers as students got older and the curriculum got more complex. One secondary teacher commented:

[T]he challenge is for us as teachers as well because a lot of them are coming with a full basket of knowledge and we've actually got to work a lot harder to

try and elevate that student's learning...we could lose them because we're not challenging them enough.

They believed that many of their Māori students were highly successful speakers of te reo with strong knowledge about their own identity and te ao Māori. They feared for Māori students' futures as they became teenagers, and hoped that their cultural identity would remain validated throughout their schooling. In addition, they believed te reo Māori was not valued enough in all schools, and consequently some Māori students "felt foreign" when they transitioned into the English-medium schooling contexts. The belief among many teachers was that the secondary schools in the region gained students from Whare Kura primarily because those students wanted access to advanced mathematics and science options that their Whare Kura could not offer them. When te reo speaking Māori students did transition to an English medium secondary school, there were concerns that those students were not assessed adequately and they were streamed into the "dummy classes". One teacher stated:

The elephant in the room is that parents who choose auraki over rumaki are unaware that their tamaiti is at a high risk of being streamed out of maths, science, chemistry, physics, and biology... there is higher risk of that happening in auraki. That is my big bug bear at the moment ... our taura arrive full of excitement, and they're awesome kaipūtaiao, they're awesome mathematicians, and they get smashed. As soon as they arrive they're put in a 9 maths stream, which is code for 9 dummy, and they know it. So super bright Māori kids, te nuinga o te wā, are sitting in my dummy 9 maths class. I'll ask them "What are you doing here? This is not for you." They are being streamed out. To be fair though, some of them don't want to sit in the accelerated class. Why? Because streaming is code for ethnic streaming. Because there are significantly less Māori that are accelerated in our school. So, we have these levels—Cambridge, extension, then math. But where are our Māori kids?

Also known as tracking, banding, and ability grouping, academic streaming has been recognised as a systemic barrier to Māori educational success (Simon, 1993). Essentially, "dummy class" students learn more basic material, more slowly, via less challenging tasks. Across Aotearoa New Zealand, Māori students are over-represented in low-stream classes and therefore experience the predictable and well-established harmful impacts of streaming (Milne, 2013).

Discussion

The focus on a targeted and deliberate culturally sustaining schooling approach in the Kāhui Ako makes a difference to Māori students and their positive attitude towards school and their teachers as evidenced in the surveys. When Māori students feel confident and competent in both their own culture and in the culture of the school, they know that learning can occur without forsaking their Māori identity to attain an academic one (Webber, 2012). Authentic relationships between school

and whānau, focused on student learning, are a crucial lever enabling Māori student success (Webber et al., 2018). It is imperative that Māori students achieve highly at school, without forsaking their identity, language, and culture. This study shows that whānau are key in supporting cultural connectedness and schools need to engage in genuine and enduring partnerships with whānau and community by sharing power and extending opportunities for school staff to learn from whānau, hapū/iwi and community.

All school leaders promoted Māori culture and values positively, expressing a keen interest in Māori students achieving success at school in ways that do not come at a cost to their iwi identity and beliefs (Macfarlane et al., 2014). However, the data also show that, although school leaders articulate a commitment to Māori student success, and engage their teachers in a range of relevant in-school initiatives, most are not monitoring and evaluating the impact of these initiatives on Māori student achievement. In addition, Māori medium teachers believed that most principals were reluctant to collaborate with other schools for fear of ‘enabling the competition’. The competitive school funding system (Witten et al., 2003) results in a failure to support students in Māori medium pathways who need schools to work collaboratively so Māori students’ identities, te reo Māori and cultural efficacy are maintained and developed. In line with Ladson-Billings (1995), we argue that academic success and achieving cultural competence are critical to an effective culturally sustaining schooling approach. The evidence from the Kāhui Ako supports the idea that a culturally sustaining pedagogical approach is not only about teaching Māori students “merely to make them ‘feel good’” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 160); Māori students must also achieve well academically at school. School leaders must ensure better coherence between Māori student achievement goals, overall school strategies, and evaluation practices.

In their research with Indigenous students in the USA, Castagno and Brayboy (2008) warned that, in many cases, approaches like culturally responsive schooling can be “too easily reduced to essentialisations, meaningless generalisations, or trivial anecdotes—none of which result in systemic, institutional, or lasting changes to schools serving indigenous youth” (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008, p. 942). Sleeter (2012) raised similar concerns about this approach for Māori students in New Zealand. She argued that culturally responsive schooling was often focused on “cultural celebration, trivialisation, essentialising culture, and substituting cultural for political analysis” rather than academic engagement and achievement (Sleeter, 2012, p. 569). All too often, the integration of Māori culture in many New Zealand schools involves incorporating food, songs or the teaching of simple words or phrases related to a topic (Sleeter, 2012) instead of developing whole school programmes where the curriculum values the diverse knowledge and practices of its Māori students and their preferred ways of knowing. In some of the schools involved in this study, this criticism was addressed through an in-depth engagement with contemporary and historical Māori role models and localised curriculum that drew on the knowledge and histories of the local iwi.

Even though most of the interventions in this Kāhui Ako were targeted at ensuring Māori students had provision for a supportive, engaging, and safe learning environment at school with a culture of ‘care’, the majority of Māori students

were extrinsically motivated. Although there was clear evidence of high teacher expectations for students, 53% of the Māori students aspired to do well at school simply to ‘get a job’. In addition, whānau and Māori student aspirations for university attendance were lower than the New Zealand national average. A substantial body of literature has examined the challenges that Indigenous students face in gaining a higher education and in New Zealand having few family university role models is a large component of that challenge (Mayeda et al., 2014). At least four of the school leaders, and all of the ASLs, articulated a concern about Māori students aspiring to attend university in the future. Their main concern was that many of the students’ whānau had little knowledge or experience with university pathways. Therefore, deliberate change was being attempted in some schools to ensure that successful role models were celebrated and included as a natural part of the curriculum instruction to motivate students.

It is important for Māori students to see university and other post-secondary institutions ‘places for people like me’—places they can aspire to attend. Research from the Starpath Project showed that Māori students appreciate access to people ‘like them’ who could speak about university, and the visits some universities made to their school—but, all too often, this only happened in Year 13 (Webber et al., 2018). Māori students, particularly those planning on transitioning to university, value the opportunity to visit universities and participate in mentoring programmes that include Māori university students as mentors.

Self-determination Theory (SDT) can be used to understand Māori students’ motivation in this study because it proposes that all students are driven to learn, yet some learning environments can fail to engage students (Reeve et al., 2018). Central to SDT are the concepts of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Ryan and Deci (2000) described intrinsic motivation as “doing the activity for the inherent satisfaction of the activity itself”, and extrinsic motivation as “the performance of an activity in order to gain some separable outcome” (p. 70). Ryan and Deci (2000) also highlighted the positive effects of intrinsic motivation (including happiness and fulfilment) and the potential negative effects of extrinsic motivation (including self-doubt and despondency). Whilst this is one interpretation of the effects of extrinsic motivation, it fails to address the privilege of students simply being able to focus on their own interests and enjoyment at school. Many Māori students do not have the luxury of such educational experiences, as education is the means by which they hope to improve their lives and those of their whānau. In low socio-economic communities, like the one in this study, many Māori students could be extrinsically motivated because the ‘end game’ is survival. Māori student comments to this effect in the study were: “I admire my mum because she doesn’t let me starve”; “I want to work at Countdown for my first job because at least I get paid”; and “If I got a job I would give my money to my family.” Students from higher socio-economic settings might have the luxury of intrinsic motivation when the source of lunch is not a day-to-day focus. The findings of this study suggest that food, health and the collective well-being of their whānau is a dominant motivation for many Māori students in this Kāhui Ako. This finding also indicates that the government funded school lunches programme (Ministry of Education, 2021) supported by the principals in this Kāhui Ako, is an

initiative that will impact positively on the motivation for learning of students from low socio-economic backgrounds.

Māori students and whānau had few ideas about what the path to university might be, and most schools in the Kāhui Ako did not offer much in the way of information about careers. Positive Māori role models (historic and contemporary) were regularly integrated into the learning in some schools, but deliberate career planning or academic counselling was not available in the primary or intermediate schools. Many schools in New Zealand and internationally are placing greater emphasis on home-school-student relationships that are linked to student goal setting and career aspirations (Webber et al., 2016). A culturally sustaining approach—like academic mentoring—which is relationship focussed, face to face, respectful and whānau orientated with a focus on ‘working together’ could support more deliberate practice by school leaders and teachers to strengthen the intrinsic motivation and self-efficacy of Māori students (Webber et al., 2016).

Conclusion

This research project is unique in that it has investigated the schooling environment, and student, whānau and teachers attitudes towards educational opportunities for Māori student success—in an area with a large and dense population of Māori students. The evidence shows that the mostly non-Māori educators leading these schools took the well-being and care of Māori students seriously and were making efforts to ensure that their academic achievement improved. All leaders were focussed on implementing initiatives in their schools to ensure that the students had all they needed to learn, most importantly food, learning materials, access to a culturally sustaining curriculum, and te reo Māori.

In principle, the Kāhui Ako initiative requires member schools to move from an environment of competition to an environment of high relational trust and open sharing of data. This study shows that a culture of relational trust between schools in the Kāhui Ako was challenging because it required member schools to share sensitive data and good ideas, hold challenging conversations, take risks and support each other by creating a safe environment (Education Review Office, 2017). The Kāhui Ako in this study was focused on initiatives that were believed to enable Māori students to succeed as Māori. They supported teaching and learning initiatives that were engaging, culturally sustaining, and enjoyable for Māori students. They did not, however, systematically evaluate the outcomes of these initiatives in terms of student outcomes or use an evidence-based approach in decision-making. School leaders articulated appropriately high expectations for all Māori students but did not appear to be tracking and monitoring the effectiveness of those initiatives despite purporting to have improved educational outcomes.

The Kāhui Ako had developed productive partnerships with whānau, iwi, and community that were responsive and reciprocal—leading to transformative social and educational action, outcomes, and solutions. This Kāhui Ako cultivated a climate in which whānau felt comfortable to initiate involvement in their children’s education and provided them with appropriate opportunities to do so. The Kāhui

Ako's focus on enhanced cultural connections through engagement with Māori whānau, hapū and iwi were providing important opportunities for Māori students' learning, particularly the development of cultural identity and a sense of educational purpose that contributes to well-being.

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