

Māori Academic Success: Why the Deficit Perspectives?

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Abstract

Academics have long discussed the power of communication to both motivate and discourage. Concerning education, Paulo Freire (1997) had explained the dialogical learning process and the empowerment that comes from the inclusion of student knowledge. Alternatively, Carlson & Dimitriadis (2003) describe disempowerment and underachievement among Afro-American students resulting from societal expectations that they will fail.

In a recent education environment scan focused on the Waikato-Tainui *rohe*, 28 *kaupapa* Māori education providers were identified as sites of high educational success, with one described as “outshining private schools and bucking national trends” (Carson, 2013). This aside, perceptions of generalized educational failure among Māori are commonplace in Aotearoa New Zealand. These impressions are fed by the media, the Ministry of Education (MOE) and in some cases, academic publications.

This paper discusses the power of deficit models and counter-narratives to academic underachievement. This will be juxtaposed with commentary on why some students and their education providers within the Waikato-Tainui *rohe* appear to be unaffected by these counter-narratives and deficit theorizing.

Keywords: *Māori; Waikato-Tainui; education; underachievement; deficit perspectives; empowerment*

Introduction

Until mid-2013, I was under the impression I knew quite a bit about Māori education and how today's descendants of the Pasifika voyagers, who settled in Aotearoa New Zealand (ANZ) approximately 850 years ago, were achieving academically. As a New Zealand born Pasifikan¹ of Fijian ancestry, I had negotiated and failed within the New Zealand education system during the 1970s, leaving without any qualifications, a situation that exemplified many of my Māori schoolmates. In one sense, I understood the struggle of those friends; education just didn't seem to make sense. Anyway, we had repeatedly been told by our teachers we were going to fail, and when this came to fruition, I don't recall feeling surprised. With very few options, I joined the Army shortly after leaving school at 16 years of age and, following an

¹ Pasifika/Pasifikan is a term often applied in ANZ and Australia to those of Pacific Island ancestry as a collective and/or those who live in a 'foreign' country, whether as visitors, recent migrants, or even those born in that 'foreign' country, who identify first and foremost with their ancestral homeland in the Pacific (Aporosa, 2015, p.59).

accident, left the Army and was accepted into the New Zealand Police, something I was told had only been possible because I had achieved highly from a practical sense in the Army, and that this had compensated for my lack of academic success. I enjoyed these jobs, greatly assisted by the high number of Māori associates I worked with, many of whom also seemed to do well in a practical setting that did not require above average academic skills. At the same time, I occasionally caught up with some of my old Māori schoolmates, often watching them struggle with employment opportunities or being restricted to lowly skilled jobs. And throughout these years, the rhetoric regarding Māori academic failure didn't seem to alter much either. Whether from the wider community, teachers, the New Zealand Ministry of Education (MoE) or the media, I simply sucked up what was being repeated or reported and unquestioningly accept that Māori, and the increasing numbers of Pasifikans entering ANZ, were always going to struggle academically.

In the late 1990s, after leaving the Police, I began a 10-year period as a development worker at an isolated rural secondary school in Fiji. During that time, I was increasingly asked to add to the teaching curriculum of the Year 9 and 10 students. This was most often in the area of geography as ANZ is the country of study for Fijian geography students although a place very few Fijian geography teachers had ever visited. As my teaching opportunities increased, I would often muse that I, a failure at school, was now teaching. More importantly, I realized that I was doing a fairly reasonable job at it, and that the success of this was due more to simply 'discussing' ANZ geography themes 'with' fellow Pasifikans as opposed to 'at' them, which included using local language and references to create links in order to teach a theme. An example of this was to bring sachets of dehydrated coconut cream from ANZ. I would have the students mix this without seeing the packaging and then ask them to guess what it was. This was used as a spring-board into discussion on export to consider dehydration as aiding weight reduction to facilitate freight volumes although we would also discuss disadvantages such as issues of taste when considered against locally grated and squeezed coconut cream.

In another example, I took ANZ yams to the school. This produce is extremely small (the size of an adult male's thumb) when compared with Fijian yams (often as large as a rugby ball). After cooking these and guessing what they were, this opened up discussion on climate as a factor in produce size, with ANZ being vastly colder than Fiji. Fijian culture, through joking and veiled suggestion, links the size of yams with the size of the farmers', usually males, genitalia. Due to the size of yams from ANZ, this naturally led to veiled jokes by the students about the appendage size of ANZ men, which provided a link into discussion on culturally framed joking and explanations on how this type of rhetoric tends to be ethnicity situated and understood as opposed to having universal understanding. Essentially, I would look at the curriculum theme, and even though it was about New Zealand geography, I would search for local references to create application and links to assist student learning, which I presented in discussion format as opposed to a presentation or lecture. This led me to consider how people learn, contrasting that with my own schooling experience in ANZ, which included me contemplating whether things would have been different had my teachers framed my learning around my world views and ways of understanding as opposed to a *one-size-fits-all* Eurocentric teaching approach (see Footnote 6 for more on Eurocentric "white-stream" teaching approaches).

This pondering moved to a new level when I was asked to advise on aspects of education development in Fiji, prompting me to enroll as a distance learning student at ANZ's Massey University. Eleven years later, I graduated with a PhD in Development Studies with my doctoral thesis having focused on the importance of cultural identity to academic achievement from a Fijian perspective. While the leap from improvising as a geography teacher to doctoral graduate sounds simple, it was the greatest challenge of my life and impossible without the support of many people including my extremely patient wife and Massey University's *Pasifika@Massey* Pasifika student support service. Although this led to new understanding on Pasifika ways of learning, which often differ from Eurocentric approaches, at no time did I ever stop and consider that those same conditions may explain the Māori education experience. I simply continued, blindly, unquestioningly accepting the rhetoric that Māori underachievement was inevitable.

In mid-2013, I joined the research team at the *Waikato-Tainui College for Research and Development* (the *Waikato-Tainui College*²), an academic and research institution established by Waikato-Tainui, about which I will explain shortly. One of my first tasks at the *Waikato-Tainui College* was to prepare an education environment scan to provide a foundation for the next step, the development of a Waikato-Tainui education strategy by their *Tribal Development Unit*. Within a few days of commencing that report (Tiakiwai, Kilgour & Aporosa, 2013), I found my assumptions about Māori education being seriously called into question.

This paper is the result of my learning and movement from a place of ignorance which, from experience, also reflects a position held by a large portion of New Zealand society and even some academics. I commence by briefly introducing Waikato-Tainui, a Māori sub-tribe who provide a valuable comparison with mainstream discourse concerning Māori educational achievement. This is followed with an overview of selected Ministry of Education (MoE), media and academic commentary which I argue

² The *Waikato-Tainui College for Research and Development* (the *Waikato-Tainui College*) was opened by the late Māori Queen, Te Arikinui Dame Te Atairangikaahu, in February 2000 and funded from the 1995 *Waikato Raupatu Settlement*. This 'Settlement', comprising land and cash valued at \$170 million, was awarded to Waikato-Tainui by the New Zealand Government as part of a formal apology for the unlawful confiscation of their land (887,808 acres/3596 square kilometres, and known as the *raupatu*) during the Aotearoa land wars in the 1860s (MHC, 2014). The *Waikato-Tainui College* was founded by Waikato-Tainui tribal statesman, Oxford University graduate and politician, Sir Robert Mahuta, and has two distinct arms; it is the tribe's research and academic facility and a venue for the growth of tribal leaders, researchers and academics. It is a "contemporary whare waananga [traditional house of learning] that draws on maatauranga Maaori [traditional knowledge] and indigenous knowledge systems to develop models of excellence" (Heremaia, 2013; double vowels deliberate, see Footnote 3 for explanation) guided by the principles and values of *Kiingitanga* (see explanation near the end of the Introduction section) and Waikato-Tainui's *Whakatupuranga 2050 Strategic Plan* (W-TCRD, 2013). The *Waikato-Tainui College* offers the *Taahuhu Maatauranga Maaori Masters Programme* (a two-year *kaupapa* Māori course) and an indigenous leadership inspired Masters of Business Administration (MBA) qualification as part of an affiliation with The University of Waikato's Management School for Corporate and Executive Education. In 2011, the *Waikato-Tainui College* was awarded an international MBA Innovation Award from the London-based Association of MBAs (Harmes, 2011) in recognition of the "quality of the programme [run at the *College*] and uniqueness of its curriculum" (Waikato Business News, 2013).

perpetuate the generalization that Māori are failing educationally. I then contrast this with my own learning which grew out of reports from *kaupapa* Māori schools within the Waikato-Tainui *rohe* (traditional boundary, area or region) which I used to inform the Waikato-Tainui education environment scan.

Pihama et.al. (2004) explained that *kaupapa* Māori early childcare (pre-school) and compulsory education (5-16 years of age) schools such as Māori-centric learning environments were guided and driven by Māori language, traditions, culture, values and “traditional concepts of learning”. Essentially it is education provision “*for Maori by Maori*” as opposed to the “educating of Maori”, and involves the wider family in a holistic approach to learning and identity solidification (2004, p.34). This is vastly different to main-stream education provision which is mostly Eurocentric in influence, with the exception that many secondary schools (year 9-12) offer Māori language as an optional, although standalone, subject. As at April 2016, the MoE recorded 74 *kaupapa* Māori schools (year 1-12) within their *Education Counts* website; this being slightly less than three percent of the total 2545 schools in ANZ. Concerning Waikato-Tainui *kaupapa* Māori schools, *Kiingitanga* values dominate as the guiding ethos³. *Kiingitanga* refers to the Māori King Movement which was established in 1858, and aimed at uniting Māori tribes under a single chiefly monarch with the goal to counter colonial land confiscation and preserve Māori culture. Today, the home of the Māori King and the *Kiingitanga* Movement is in the heart of the Waikato-Tainui *rohe* at Tuurangawaewae *Marae* (tribal, family village and/or meeting grounds) at Ngaaruawaahia. *Kiingitanga* values are structured under three dominant themes: “tribal identity and integrity” through the protection of knowledge, language and culture; “tribal success” including education, research and leadership and, “tribal social and economic wellbeing”, aimed at self-determination and economic growth (Waikato-Tainui Te Kauhanganui Inc., 2007, pp.4-5).

Following the discussion on *kaupapa* Māori educational success models within the Waikato-Tainui *rohe*, the impacts on student learning resulting from deficit models and counter-narratives will be explained, with reasons then offered as to why some students and their education providers within the *rohe* appear to be unaffected by this type of negative discourse. I conclude with several challenges, which I hope will assist in repositioning those who continue to think in the deficit model as I once did.

Positioning Waikato-Tainui to Inform Māori Educational Success

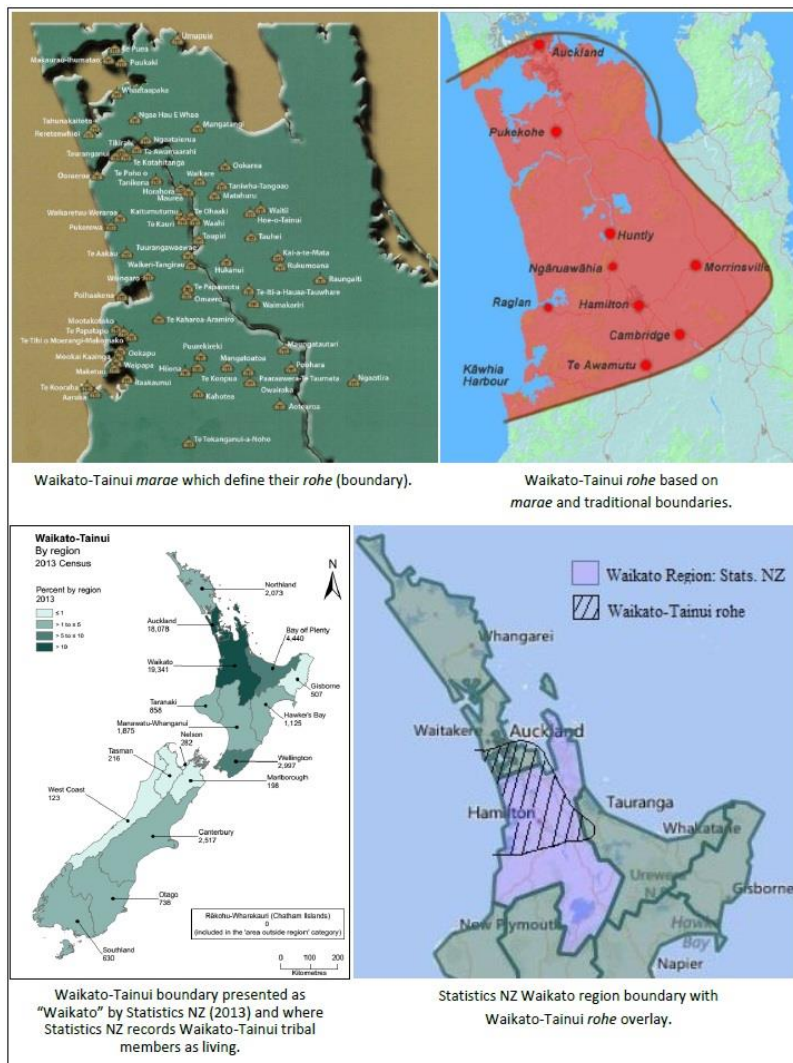
Population statistics concerning Māori can be confusing. This is because of a disparity between how tribal groups within Māoridom account for themselves based on their *rohe* and how the New Zealand Government (Statistics New Zealand) decides numbers according to colonially imposed land boundaries. An example of this variation is evident when considering Waikato-Tainui. This sub-tribe, comprising of 68,000 registered tribal members living across ANZ (Tiakiwai, Kilgour & Aporosa, 2013, p.8), is one of four

³ Waikato-Tainui linguistic protocol dictates the use of double vowels (aa, ee, ii, oo, uu) as opposed to macrons (ā, ē, ī, ō, ū). This protocol is observed in this paper when quoting Waikato-Tainui commentators, publications or Waikato-Tainui names and references. In all other cases, macrons are used. Quotes will be presented as per the original, with Māori occasionally presented as ‘Maori’.

sub-tribes within the Tainui confederation. Waikato-Tainui’s *rohe* is defined by its 68 *marae* and is situated across areas of both the Waikato and South Auckland regions of ANZ’s North Island.

In contrast, Statistics NZ records Waikato-Tainui as having 55,995 members across ANZ with its land boundary being that of the wider Waikato region, meaning Statistics NZ incorrectly categorized Waikato-Tainui boundaries into the *rohe* of other sub-tribes. Figure 1 shows the difference between how Waikato-Tainui recognize their *rohe* in comparison with the New Zealand Government’s perception. This difference in *rohe* and boundary understanding also applies to schools and school-age youth (between 5 and 16 years). The MoE collect student data, and therefore understand student ethnic makeup, attendance and academic achievement, based on Statistics NZ boundary definitions. This then creates a disparity between how education is represented and understood for tribes such as Waikato-Tainui and how the MoE interpret and present academic data.

Figure 1: Disparity between Waikato-Tainui *rohe* and New Zealand Government recognized boundaries



(Source: Tiakiwai, Kilgour & Aporosa, 2013, p.7)

How Māori Educational Achievement Tends to be reported

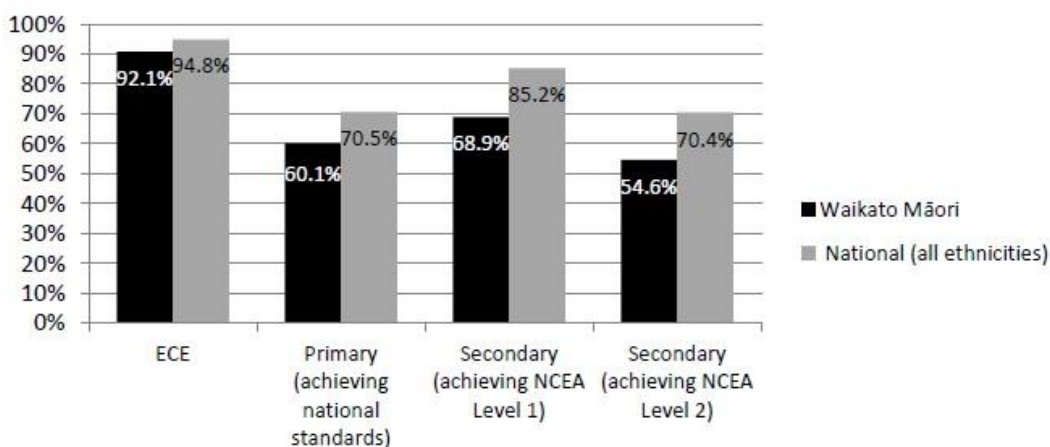
In a similar manner to Māori population statistics and boundary definitions, commentary on Māori academic success is far from clear-cut, frequently carrying with it undertones of negative bias, or in the not-so-distant past, blatant messages of failure. As Bell (2005, pp.147-8) explains, education policy in ANZ starting in the 1840s until the 1970s, was heavily influenced by "assimilation and integration ... based on racist assumptions" which perpetuated discourse on Māori underachievement (p.147). Assimilation was aimed at encouraging Māori to abandon their culture and integrate with a 'superior culture', namely that of the European Colonizers, which included learning and solely speaking the English language, mastering written literacy and embracing Christian values. It was argued this would reverse Māori inferiority while increasing intellectual capacity to produce academic scholars. The Education policy over a 130-year period then was underpinned by "dominance and subjugation", driven by notions of Māori inferiority and European superiority in which Māori were presented as underachievers who were destined to forever fail in their education (p.148).

Although Bell suggests a change in policy occurred in the 1970s, it was evident a hangover of sorts remained in the form of comments I heard at school in the 1970s in which teachers told Māori students they *were* going to fail. This continued into the following decade with Egan & Mahuta reporting in 1983 that a school in the Tainui *rohe* had stated it would not be having "Maaori classes in Form V [year 11] the following year because none of the Maaori students would pass Form IV [year 10]" (p.36). Levine and Vasil (1985, p.126), commenting two years later, reported, "when you have an educational philosophy that says 50 percent of the Maori students will fail anyway and you translate that into the actions of those who teach the children, a high drop-out rate is not surprising." (p.126)

Over the past 20 years, there has been a tempering of the language regarding Māori underachievement. For instance, while the MoE states that "Māori students do much better when education reflects and values their identity, language and culture" (MoE, 2013a, p.6), in actuality, success is measured on the attainment of credits and pass rates structured under a Eurocentric framework (Scott, 2009, pp. 101, 106). These pass rates are then used to create statistical profiles based on comparisons with other ethnicities on both a regional and national level. Finally, it is these profiles that are used to determine indicators of educational success and failure. The problem with profiles and comparisons is that they create generalizations that leave little space for specific representation. Using statistical profiles and comparisons, the MoE (2013b) report that Māori academic achievement within the Waikato region suggest two dominant trends; lower Early Childhood Education (ECE) participation rates together with lower achievement in the compulsory education (5-16 years of age) sector. The MoE presented these trends in several tables within their 2013 Pipeline Data summary which has been condensed and presented in Figure 2. This compares Waikato regional Māori achievement against national profiles from the MoE's perspective for the 2012 year and infers Māori educational underachievement in all areas from ECE through to the later years of compulsory education.

Perceptions of Māori educational underachievement, when presented as comparisons (such as the Waikato Māori and national averages graph in Figure 2) gain added traction when accompanied by negative reporting. For instance, in 2007, the then Minister of Education commented that “last Monday was another disheartening news story on Maori statistics...” (McCarten, 2007). More recently the MoE stated “inequitable education outcomes for Māori have persisted for too many years” (MoE, 2013a, p.5)⁴ whereas the New Zealand Herald newspaper reported “Maori underachievement” as a “disgrace” (Irvine, 2013), and News Wire stating, “The statistics say it all. Māori ... are at the bottom” (Nichol, 2015). Such representations feed impressions that generally Māori are failing in ANZ’s education environment. Moreover, these were generalizations that I had incorrectly accepted as representative of Māori educational achievement until mid-2013 when I joined the *Waikato-Tainui College for Research and Development*. This was regardless of my learning during my time in Fiji and my post-graduate studies. On reflection, I had simply accepted what I had been told without considering other factors. In a similar vein, Kiri Powick (2002), commented that profiling and statistical reporting tends to nurture public suspicion and stereotypes about issues such as Maori unemployment or academic performance in schools.

Figure 2: Waikato region Māori education achievement data compared with national profiles for 2012.



(Source: Ministry of Education, 2013b)

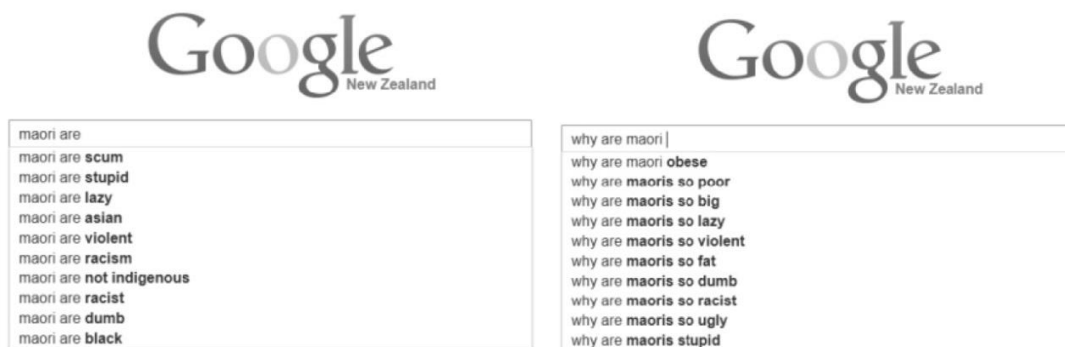
Additionally, in my case, my negative bias regarding Māori education had been further reinforced during a scan of the literature on Māori educational achievement during my doctoral studies. While I did not spend a lot of time in this space as my focus was Fiji, I recall much of what I did read as being dominated by negative commentary. Essentially, I did keyword searches through my university library database and Google, scanned what popped up, and from this gained an impression, one that fed my

⁴ Admittedly, this comment was prefaced with, “We need to move away from characterising the problem as the failure of Māori learners within the system to how the system can maximise Māori potential” (MoE, 2013a, p.5). While there may be a move of late to bring a greater sense of positivity to MoE commentary, the general opinion is that Māori are failing in education. Nichol’s (2015), in her article entitled “Māori students still struggling with stereotypes, racism”, acknowledges that there is a general ignorance in ANZ regarding Māori education. She seeks to excuse some of this; “I’m not blaming New Zealanders for that ignorance because we have had an entire history of colonisation” in which Māori have been expected to fail academically.

negative bias. An interesting and provocatively titled article, *Maori are scum, stupid, lazy: Maori according to Google* and published in *Te Kaharoa, The e-Journal of Indigenous Pacific Issues*, adds to this theme.

In the article, Steven Elers (2014) presents the results of Google searches using several keywords that include 'Māori'. Figures 3a and b present the search results using the keywords "Maori are" and "why are Maori". Elers states, "Google ... stipulated that the results of Autocomplete are driven by the search activity of their users and indexed websites" (p.20). He goes on to question "the morality and the mental wellbeing of a sector of society who input drivel into the Google search engine and publish or post hateful anti-Maori sentiment online" which is "stereotyping and misrepresent[ing]... Maori" (p.20) and perpetuating "racist discourse" (p.21). It appears that what dominates user keyword input influences how Google prioritizes search results.

Figure 3a/b: Google search engine results for keywords "maori are" and "why are maori".



(Source: Elers, 2014, pp.19-20)

Upon joining the *Waikato-Tainui College* in 2013 and learning the actual state of Māori educational success (which I will describe shortly) – I found illuminating reading works by scholars such as Durie (2003), Bishop, Berryman et.al. (2003; 2007; 2012), Herewini & Tiakiwai (2011), Earl and Associates (2008) and Milne (2013) to name a few – who questioned the negative and biased academic material that exists. For example, a recent NZ education journal suggested Māori "underachievement in the 21st century is simply unacceptable" (Porter-Samuels, 2013, p.17)⁵ whereas academics in the *British Journal of Sociology of Education* the following year argued that the *kaupapa* Māori "approach... contributes to maintaining low educational achievement" (Lourie & Rata, 2014, p.19).

⁵ Although this comment was presented within an article entitled, *Raising Pasifika achievement*, discussion included Māori. The opening comment illustrates this inclusion; "Pasifika learners, along with Māori, continue to experience high disparities in New Zealand's education system" (Porter-Samuels, 2013, p.17), with further references to Māori throughout. A similar comment can be found in Mercier, Douglas, McFadgen *et al.*, (2013, p.122), "Māori student underachievement is apparent at all levels of education, being particularly stark at secondary and tertiary levels", whereas Callister (2009, p.3) stated, "School data indicate a significant number of Māori boys leave school with no or very few level 1 NCEA [National Certificate of Educational Achievement] credits" (see Footnote 8 for an explanation on NCEA).

Regardless that there is a great deal of powerful academic commentary on Māori educational success (such as that discussed by the authors listed above), public perception has mostly been driven by negative reporting from the MoE, media, a number of academics together with pop-ups during online search. This is what I had been guilty of too before my Tainui experience. To paraphrase Dr. Ann Milne (2013, p.3) from *Kia Aroha College* in Auckland, I too had embraced the “pervasive, deficit-driven whitestream⁶ explanations of ‘achievement gaps’ and the ‘long tail’ of Māori ... ‘underachievement’ in New Zealand schools”. In my ignorance I thought I was beyond this, considering I had taken a post-development, anti-hegemonic, post-colonial critique position in my doctoral thesis to argue the critical position of cultural identity to academic achievement for Fijian students, a stance which I genuinely believe in.

Before I discuss the impacts of deficit approaches and counter narratives to educational achievement, together with a little more on my own learning upon commencing the Waikato-Tainui education scan, I will first present a snapshot comparison between the deficit models presented above by the MoE, the media and selected academics, and how education is experienced for some Waikato-Tainui. In doing so, I argue that the latter is a vastly more accurate representation of the Māori position in education. Moreover, it was this learning that opened my eyes to the actual state of Māori academic success, challenging my “deficit-driven white-stream” misunderstanding and bias.

How Education is Experienced for some Waikato-Tainui

The Waikato-Tainui education environment scan, which I completed in late-2013, includes seven pages of what is best described as very impressive academic achievement at 28 *kaupapa* Māori schools within the *rohe*. Space constraints here prevent a full breakdown of that achievement in which I drew heavily on Education Review Office (ERO)⁷ reports. Highlights include *Te Koohanga Reo o Ngaa Kuaka* situated in Silverdale, Hamilton. This *koohanga* (*kaupapa* Māori pre-school) has two campuses; an under-two and an over-two-year-old facility. ERO described this ECE provider, with its education delivery based on cultural practices, as “highly effective” and providing a “smooth and well-managed” transition between the two campuses (Rolleston, 2012, p.2). *Te Koohanga Reo o Ngaa Kuaka* also acts as a *te reo* (Māori language) based training and development site for ECE trainee teachers where it is not uncommon to have a wait list of 50 pre-schoolers wanting to enroll (Gilbert, T. 2013. Personal communication Oct. 21). Another is *Kakano Early Childhood* which operates three ECE centers within the Waikato-Tainui *rohe*. ERO described this provider as producing students with a strong sense of self who are “capable learners and communicators” (Smith, 2012, p.4). I found many more ECE providers within the *rohe* of which the ERO was highly complimentary.

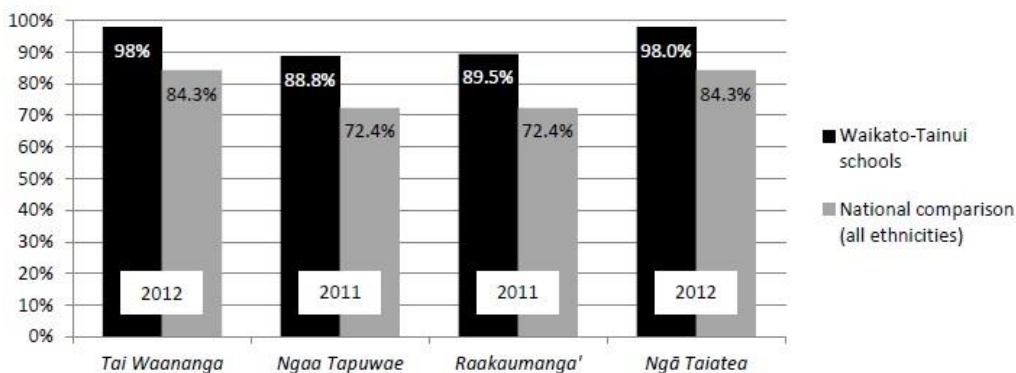
⁶ In her doctoral thesis, Milne (2013:3-4) draws on several commentators to define her use and application of “whitestream” throughout the study. She explains “whitestream” as the culture of the ANZ education system, influenced and driven by the “White’ [Eurocentric] experience” in which Māori and Pasifika learners are subjugated, monitored and measured against “White” achievers. Milne adds that the Māori-centric approach, one structured around Māori lifeway’s that include a high standard of living and health together with participation and inclusion as Māori, is the antithesis of “whitestreaming”, although this is critical to Māori academic success.

⁷ The Education Review Office (ERO) is an independent Government body consisting of approximately 150 review officers tasked with evaluating and reporting on education for the MoE and wider government.

Concerning primary education (5-10 years of age), ERO cited *Te Kura Kaupapa Māori o Te Puuaha* at Port Waikato as having excellent parent teacher relationships and a student strength in their language, culture and values which in turn produces “a strong sense of belonging and pride” (Smith, 2013, pp.20-1) informed by “the philosophies of *Kiingitanga*” (Smith, 2013, p.2). *Kiingitanga*, the Māori King Movement, and their values was explained in the Introduction section. At the three bilingual units at *Knighon Normal School* in Hillcrest, ERO acknowledged “high quality teaching” where the majority of students were “achieving at or above National Standards” (Randell, 2013, p.5). Twelve other *kaupapa* Māori primary schools were also singled out as sites of high academic achievement.

A number of secondary schools (years 9-12, 13-16 years of age), sites where NCEA (National Certificate of Educational Achievement⁸) pass rates are the primary indicators of academic failure or success, proved even more impressive. Providers such as *Tai Waananga* near The University of Waikato, *Ngaa Tapuwae* at Maangere in South Auckland, *Raakaumangamanga* in Huntly, *Ngaa Taiatea* in Rotokauri, Hamilton, are four of fourteen high-performing secondary schools whose academic success was described within the education scan. For brevity, Figure 4 combines data to show the NCEA Level 2 pass rates – for the years that data was available – for these schools when compared with national averages. I have deliberately chosen Level 2 as the pass rates here were not quite as good as Level 1. Therefore, this offers some idea as to the impressive rates at NCEA Level 1, with *Ngaa Tapuwae* and *Tai Waananga* both achieving 100 percent pass rates in 2011, for instance.

Figure 4: Selected Waikato-Tainui NCEA Level 2 data compared with national average for 2011 and 2012.



(Source: Ministry of Education, 2013b)

The successes of these *kaupapa* Māori schools – education facilities that represent only a handful of the highly achieving campuses within the *rohe* not to mention other areas of Aotearoa – present a vastly different picture to that described by others. These schools also present an interesting counterpoint to Lourie & Rata (2014, p.19) who I discussed earlier, and who suggested that *kaupapa* Māori in education

⁸ The National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) is ANZ’s main secondary school qualification. It is recognised by tertiary education providers and employers as demonstrating that the Certificate holder has gained a sufficient level of skill and knowledge for the subjects recorded. NCEA has both a NCEA Level 1 and 2, with Level 2 demonstrating higher proficiency.

contributed to academic underachievement. Admittedly not all Māori education settings are idyllic whereas many mainstream teaching environments still have some work to do to reflect the results presented in Figure 2. However, MoE (2013a, p.5) discourse of generalized Māori academic failure, Māori educational “disgrace” as reported in the media (Irvine, 2013)⁹, and the “simply unacceptable” failure described in a number of academic publications (Porter-Samuels, 2013, p.17), misrepresents the position for a large number of highly successful Māori students and their *kaupapa* providers. These counter narratives are even more worrying when considered against the MoE’s 2017 target of an 85% NCEA Level 2 pass rate for all (MoE, 2014). The *kaupapa* Māori schools described here have surpassed this target. It was these successes that exposed my “pervasive, deficit-driven” ideologies and prompted me to re-evaluate my thinking. I will expand a little more on that learning shortly after first considering what the likely impacts are of these constant counter-narratives and deficit models on education success?

Learning Under a Counter-narrative, Deficit Model, Cloud

In the introduction to their edited text on education and democracy, Carlson & Dimitriadis (2003) make an interesting comment. They say, “Education is not ... about the transmission of knowledge so much as the formation of identity” (p.17). They go on to explain that as part of learning, students are positioned within spheres of empowerment or disempowerment dependent upon whether the teaching is perceived to affirm or invalidate their worldviews and identity makeup. Moreover, for those who identify with “historically marginalized” groups, they are more likely to have their position represented negatively and therefore have lower levels of empowerment (p.17). Paulo Freire understood this; it was a central theme in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. As a reminder, Freire (1993) argued that education, if delivered as “dialogical learning”, had the potential to transform the poor and disempowered through the creation of pedagogic spaces in which marginalized people groups could understand how social institutions and hegemonic power systems had shaped their lives and impacted their identities, and in turn, regain empowerment from this. Finally, with academics arguing that performance in education is closely linked with empowerment through cultural identity and affirmation (Shaffer & Kipp, 2010, pp.407-8), and combining this with Carlson & Dimitriadis and Freire’s commentary regards the power of deficit models to inhibit educational achievement, this would suggest then that what a student is told and taught has a profound effect on their sense of worth. This, in turn is a determinant on how well they do in the classroom.

I would argue then that the misrepresentation and creation of generalizations concerning Māori educational underachievement by the MoE, media and some academics is fueling deficit perspectives which are perpetuating some of the academic failure that is present, especially in mainstream education. Moreover, regardless that this is a misrepresentation of the actual as exemplified by a number of Waikato-Tainui *kaupapa* Māori schools, it would appear some of the blame for academic failure must be carried by those – namely the MoE – whose goal it is to improve educational standards. But then this observation

⁹ A scan of local media confined to the past four years was undertaken to assess positive reports. Although a large number of schools within the Waikato-Tainui *rohe* are achieving well above national averages, only one positive comment was located. That was *Ngaa Taiatea* in which the reporter stated was “outshining private schools and bucking national trends” (Carson, 2013).

is not new. In the 1983 *Tainui Report*, Ken Egan & Sir Robert Mahuta discussed the power of counter-narratives to educational underachievement. They stated that the continual criticism and portrayal of Māori education from a deficit perspective – or as they termed it, “the constant reminder of failure” – creates “a justifiably negative attitude to education [and therefore] it is to be expected” – academic failure will result (p.36). While this theme could be expanded to include other academics who discuss the power of discourse to disempowerment within the education environment (Fülöp *et al.*, 2007; Janks & Ivanič, 2013), the more important question in my opinion is; what do the highly achieving Waikato-Tainui schools put their amazing success down to? How have they countered the counter-narratives and deficit perspectives?

Identity Solidification and Empowerment to Counter the Counter-narratives and Deficit Perspectives

When it became apparent during the writing of the Waikato-Tainui education environment scan that Māori education was not quite what I had assumed, I then needed to understand why and how these campuses within the *rohe* were doing so well in the face of commentary that negated this. Through the reading of reports and discussions with the principals from some of these schools, a common theme emerged. For instance, *Tai Waananga* (2013) pointed to *mana Māori* (Māori authority, integrity, and dignity), *mauri* (life essence, life principle, life force) and *whānau ora* (family health) principles aimed at leadership growth as the reason for their success. For *Ngaa Tapuwae*, it was the values of *Kiingitanga* to nurture and ensure “that students’ identity and culture is supported” (Rolleston, 2012b, pp. 11, 16).

Raakaumangamanga’s principal stated that while NCEA passes were important, greater emphasis was placed on “cultural wellness, social wellness, physical wellness and even spiritual wellness”, as these led to student capacity to then meet the NCEA requirements (Heremaia, 2013). *Ngaa Taiatea’s* Principal stated, it is “those things that are precious to Tainui ... cultural, intellectual, physical, spiritual and *whānau* [family including extended family¹⁰] development and well-being” that lead to educational advancement (Ohia, 2013). Condense these indicators, and I would argue that these led to empowerment through identity solidification, or as Paulo Freire presented it, these schools have created pedagogic space in which cultural identity has been put first, and this has generated empowerment which has contributed to what one commentator referred to as, educational achievement within the Waikato-Tainui *rohe* that is “outshining private schools and bucking national trends” (Carson, 2013).

Essentially *kaupapa* Māori schools, by incorporating culture, language, traditional values and the involvement of *whānau* as part of the curriculum delivered by way of “traditional concepts of learning” (Pihama *et al.*, 2004, p.34) provide Māori learners with a medium they understand and one which aligns with their worldview. This, in-turn, influences learning excellence. Upon reflection, this is no different to the approach I took with my students in Fiji¹¹, albeit though, my situation was the result of improvisation

¹⁰ Māori, as part of their collectivist cultural expression and worldview, extend the notion of ‘family’ (*whānau*) beyond relatives to include those who are linked through “some common interest such as locality, and urban *marae*, a workplace and so on” (Milne, 2013, p.82).

¹¹ For more on the use of local systems, processes and worldviews to assist education delivery, see Aporosa’s (2014, p.51-3) post-development education framework.

and teaching ignorance whereas *kaupapa* Māori is deliberate, structured and underpins the entire teaching process. In contrast, the Eurocentric approach does not allow for such alternative styles. It has, and in many cases continues to be, dominated by auditory presentations from an individualistic "white-stream" perspective that uses examples, processes and ways of learning that are often foreign to Māori and Pasifika students. This has been the education model for the past 150 years, one dominated by Eurocentrism and characterized by top-down teaching approaches. This has been aimed at skill development for participation in industrialization (Webster, 1990, p.119), the creation of "human capital" (Youngman, 2000, p.56), and the growth of people with "modern cultural values" (Peet & Hartwick, 2009, p.223), skills necessary for facilitating capital output and economic growth (Tuinamuana, 2005, p.204) conceived and constructed solely to aid national level development (Webster, 1990, p.98; Huntington, 2002, p.21; St. Clair Skeet, 2007, p.31-2). The challenge now for ANZ is to accept that different cultures learn differently and that this understanding can be utilized to increase learning potential. This will also greatly assist in shifting the negative bias reporting regarding Māori educational achievement.

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper, supported by detailed ERO reports and the Waikato-Tainui education environment scan (Tiakiwai, Kilgour & Aporosa, 2013), presents some very impressive academic achievement by Māori students within the Waikato-Tainui *rohe*; achievement one commentator explained as surpassing national averages and challenging private schools who have traditionally been held academically elite (Carson, 2013). In doing so, this paper has highlighted three key themes. Firstly, it has exposed the "pervasive, deficit-driven" beliefs of someone – namely me – who thought they were beyond such influences; someone who has studied the educational struggles of Fijian students at post-graduate level which included a scan of the Māori educational literature. As part of writing the Waikato-Tainui education environmental scan and the reading of scholars (such as Durie and Commentators mentioned earlier) who reflect the findings of that report, I learnt that I had been drawn to my negative generalization that all Māori were failing academically as a result of a powerful deficit-focused discourse presented in early MoE policy and perpetuated more recently by sectors within the MoE, the media and academia. Although I may have "seen the light" regarding the actual position of Māori in academia, many in ANZ remain in the "dark". To complement my learning, enhanced from my time at the *Waikato-Tainui College*, I also wanted to know if there were other factors that had encouraged my biased perception, especially from the perspective of literature. Online search engines appeared to play a role in this.

As Steven Elers (2014) demonstrated by using keywords such as "Maori are" in online searches, the autocomplete function in sites such as Google can result in output which highlights racist stereotypes and misrepresentation. Admittedly, as a doctoral level researcher I should have consulted the literature widely instead of simply scanning what first popped up in search engines (including that from my own university library). That deeper search would have revealed quality commentators such as Professor Mason Durie (2003) and the other education specialists I mentioned earlier instead of allowing my narrow deficit perspective to be falsely reinforced. More importantly, I, of all people, should have been aware of the fallibility of search engines. This is something I am well aware of from other areas of my research,

especially in traditional Fijian practices such as *kava*¹² use. Google searches on this theme tends to present *kava* in a mostly negative sense in initial search result pages, misrepresenting this traditional medicine as dangerous (causing liver damage and, in some cases, death), which it clearly is not (Kuchta, Schmidt & Nahrstedt, 2015). I am unsure as to how to address this matter, as online search engines play such a critical role in today's literature review process. However, I do hope this first key theme will encourage further debate on the topic of search engines and their capacity to feed deficit-driven perspectives.

The second key theme in this paper is that while a powerful counter-narrative exists concerning Māori academic achievement, many students are nevertheless prospering in the face of deficit perspectives through a determined aspiration for, pursuit of, and the embracing of values associated with their culture and identity. To reiterate *Raakaumangamanga's* school Principal, once "cultural ... social ... physical ... and spiritual wellness" were established, this laid a foundation in which NCEA was both "expected" and achieved (Heremaia, 2013). Admittedly, there remains the challenge that, given that so much of the Māori high academic achievement is located away from where the majority of learners are (mainstream education), how can these successes be transferred to those other settings? Irrespective that this is an area in which others have addressed, I believe the MoE, media and selected academics must continue to be called to account for perpetuating falsities about Māori scholastic failure. Principally for the MoE, their selective commentary is potentially driving some of the Māori underachievement.

This paper has highlighted that Māori are not failing en masse in education as some – including sectors of the MoE – are leading us to believe.

Second, this paper has highlighted the inaccuracy of statistical profiling as the dominant mechanism for MoE classifications of success and failure. These simply perpetuate generalizations that tend to highlight negatives for Māori, failing to recognize and promote positive models from which those who are struggling can gain inspiration and empowerment.

The third main idea raised in the paper is the issue of why there is so much powerful material available on Māori academic success (again by Durie and others as presented earlier) although little is known about it, especially within the Pasifika and Pālangi (those of European ancestry) communities.

On reflection, I realize that this paper may about "preaching to the converted" (considering the focus of this journal and its likely audience), – I now partially put myself in this camp as I have a greater understanding of Māori educational realities – One important question that still needs to be addressed is: Is it possible that Māori educational researchers, *kaupapa* Māori teachers, and the parents of these successful Māori students, are so familiar with what they know that they assume others have the same level of knowledge? I know I have been guilty of this in areas related to Fijian cultural practice, especially *kava* use. I know the *kava* culture and this indigenous substance so well that I am often surprised,

¹² *Kava* is a drink made from the *Piper methysticum* plant. Both the drink and plant are potent icons of Pasifika identity and cultural practice (Aporosa, 2015).

although shouldn't be, when someone assures me that *kava* is an alcoholic beverage, which it certainly isn't¹³. This though is a very common misconception and one reported as fact in some internet search engine pop-ups. By educating on what we know, we have the power to create pedagogic space and empower those who may have traditionally been marginalized through counter-narratives and deficit perspectives.

Finally, considering that the highly achieving schools discussed here cited culture and identity as their primary focus, which then aided impressive National Standards and NCEA achievement rates, a by-product of this is the question of what should educational success for Māori be based on? It appears a structure dominated by a Eurocentrically prescribed, assessed and measured "whitestream" system is not working for Māori. Does more emphasis need to be placed on the creation of *kaupapa* Māori schools by the MoE? I rhetorically ask this question as I would argue that the future of Māori education and the broadening of that achievement into the mainstream, driven by the elements of "cultural ... social ... physical ... and spiritual wellness", will only be achievable once *kaupapa* Māori is legitimized and accorded an equal standing by the MoE, media and the naysayers within academia. I would add that this use of local language, traditions, culture, values and "traditional concepts of learning", as espoused by Pihama et.al. (2004) concerning *kaupapa* Māori, could be applied to many of the schools in the Pacific Islands. While many of these learning environments are led by indigenous teachers, some of whom were born in the village where traditional cultural values are embraced, many of these same people have since been molded into "whitestream" educationalists by their Eurocentric influenced training institutions. Is this also hampering the academic prospects of students in the Islands?

Rancière (1991, pp.45-9) stated in his interestingly titled book, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, equality in education is the start point rather than the end goal. He goes on to explain that no one culture or education system has the right to suggest their method of education prescription is the most potent, or that they are the ultimate qualification standard authority. It is once the dominant education providers recognize this, legitimize, acknowledge and promote alternative ways of learning, that intellectual emancipation and widespread academic achievement will be possible for all.

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John Donne (1572-1631) said, "No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main." I need to sincerely thank the "continent" of people who played a part in shifting this "island" from struggling school-boy to where I am today, a "continent" of people too numerous to name. I do though need to make special mention of my "students" at *Richmond Methodist High School*, Kadavu, Fiji. I say "students" as they were also my teachers in the same manner as my family (*vuvale* Vasu/Bainimoli) and friends at Rauni (the *Richmond* district), and more recently my *whānau* at the *Waikato-Tainui College for Research and Development*. Special thanks must also go to my wife Jan who encouraged me into higher learning and who has been tirelessly patient with me as my on-call tutor and

¹³ See Aporosa (2011). This article discusses the common myth that *kava* is believed to be alcoholic and have the same effects as fermented beverages.

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