

# What can we learn from alternative education in creating connectedness with Indigenous priority learners?

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In New Zealand, limited research has been conducted in alternative-education learning environments and yet some of our most vulnerable students are referred to them by their secondary schools. Since 2000, alternative education has been available for students identified as being behaviourally challenging or are habitual truants. This paper reports on a study that examined the perspectives of Māori adolescents, their experiences of secondary schooling and the affect that these experiences had on their self-efficacy. Importantly, it undertook a culturally responsive methodology. The study gained insights into the reasons behind the disproportionately high number of Māori students being referred to alternative education, and the key elements influencing the loss of connection with their schooling experience. In considering implications for teacher practice, the study identified ways in which teachers can create “connectedness” and therefore improve self-efficacy for these students.

**Keywords:** indigenous education, alternative education, professional development, teaching practice, culturally responsive, connectedness, relational practice

## Introduction

There is a scarcity of research in New Zealand that has been conducted on the alternative-education learning environment and yet some of our most vulnerable students are referred to these environments by their secondary schools (Lemon, 2017). Since the year 2000, alternative education has been an education option for students who are generally behaviourally challenging or habitual truants (Ministry of Education (MOE), 2016a). They have been identified as not engaging in formal learning (MOE, 2009). Additionally, these and other reluctant learners usually have no, or very few, formal qualifications, with literacy and numeracy frequently identified as areas where they are no longer engaged (Calder & Campbell, 2016; MOE, 2009). This paper reports on a study that examined the question: “In what ways do the perceptions of connectedness of Māori students in alternative education secondary schools affect their self-efficacy within the learning environment?”.

The lead author is a Māori woman from *Ngāi Te Rangi* and *Ngāpuhi iwi* (tribe). She is an Academic Advisor at Toi Ohomai Institute of Technology and has taught in both mainstream and alternative secondary school settings. She brings a depth of lived experiences and recognisable insights through her relational approach to the project and the lens that was applied to the data. She also acknowledged the importance

of reflexivity throughout the research and the use of a cultural advisor to best ameliorate any unintended interpretations of the data. The co-author is *Pākehā* (New Zealander of European descent), and uses culturally responsive pedagogy in his practice. He has been invited to research in externally funded projects using *Kaupapa* Māori methodology. (*Kaupapa* Māori methodology preferences the legitimacy of Māori language, knowledge, and culture, and is explained further in the Methodology section.) While acknowledging the tensions with educational equity discourses inherent to the notion of alternative schools, both authors nevertheless saw the key focus of the research as the examination of insiders' perspectives about their experiences, as situated within an Aotearoa New Zealand socio-political discourse.

The research study considered the perspectives of Māori adolescents and their experiences of secondary schooling at an alternative education centre (AEC) situated in a provincial city. More specifically, the study explored the perceptions of connectedness of Māori students in the alternative-education learning environment and the influences on their self-efficacy. The purpose of the study was to gain insight into the reasons behind the disproportionately high numbers of Māori student referrals to alternative education, and where they perceived the loss of connection occurred in their schooling experience.

The findings were consistent in participant perspective in that all four participant groups (students, teachers, director and police officer) felt that the AEC is a place where students are valued, loved, understood and cared for. It is because of this that these students regain a love for education, develop self-efficacy and re-build trust in adults. It was learned that, unfortunately, the alternative education teachers and managers feel that they are the ones who are left to "fix" what the students' referring schools believe to be "non-conforming, damaged" students. These alternative education teachers are remunerated at a far lower rate than their English-medium school teacher counterparts. They pick up their students in vans, are with them the entire day and return them home at the end of each day. Non-contact time does not exist, nor does access to the latest technology or resources. The centre runs on very limited resources, what the director termed "the smell of an oily rag". Further, the alternative education teachers receive only five weeks holiday per year. Given these considerable constraints, how is it that alternative education is successful in the eyes of their Māori students? Priority learners are groups of students who historically have not succeeded in the education system. So, what can we learn from alternative education students, teachers and management in creating connectedness with our priority Māori learners?

## Literature review

### Alternative education

Alternative education in New Zealand is described by the MOE (2016a) as being an option to ensure that all students engage and succeed in education. Students who attend AECs are described as having negative experiences in school leading to the student becoming a habitual truant, or deemed as being behaviourally challenging and, consequently, excluded from school (MOE, 2016a). They generally develop highly negative attitudes towards formal education and very reluctantly engage in any learning situation. While the range of reasons for students to become reluctant learners is eclectic, some common causes have been identified. The students frequently demonstrate low self-esteem and low-efficacy, while lacking in confidence and feeling frustrated. They often become disengaged and disruptive (MOE, 2009).

The MOE funds alternative education, which is provided directly to the secondary schools where the student is enrolled. It is left up to the secondary schools to choose how they use that funding. Some schools choose to use outside providers to deliver educational programs that meet the needs of their alternative education students (MOE, 2016a). In 2008, the New Zealand Council for Education Research (NZCER) examined the educational histories and pathways of alternative education students in New Zealand (MOE, 2009). Key findings were that all students interviewed at the AEC said that they enjoyed being at the AEC, with 95 per cent saying that, since attending the AEC, they enjoyed learning again (MOE, 2009). Interestingly, 75 per cent had become disengaged with learning at secondary school, with many students stating that they had become seriously disengaged at secondary school (MOE, 2009). Further, a quarter had become disengaged at intermediate school. Contrastingly, all student participants indicated that they enjoyed primary school (MOE, 2009). The main reported reason for disengagement at secondary school was that teachers did not develop effective relationships with these students (MOE, 2009). Further to this, the students identified a mismatch between their levels of achievement and teaching levels, with the teachers pitching the learning too high for student abilities (MOE, 2009).

Most of the students had experienced problems in their family lives, including, but not limited to, violence, drug and alcohol use, gang connections, government agency interventions, poverty and sexual abuse (MOE, 2009). However, most students demonstrated great resilience and strength in negotiating their personal circumstances. It has also been noted that teachers in alternative education are working with students first as people and secondly as learners (MOE, 2009). The report concluded that alternative education appeared to be successful in restoring these young people's sense of self and belonging, and was effective for re-engaging these students with learning and education (MOE, 2009).

In 2010, the Education Review Office (ERO) evaluated the work of six alternative education providers. Unfortunately, this evaluation did not have a specific focus on Māori learners, which the reviewers themselves highlighted. While the evaluation did not comment on the overall quality of alternative education nationally, it did identify some factors of good practice common between the six centres (ERO, 2010). The conclusion of this report outlined the critical success factors underpinning the good practice of these providers:

- The quality of the relationships between staff and students.
- The use of a curriculum that matched the individual needs of students.
- The passionate and compassionate approach of alternative education staff.
- The ability of staff to have students aspire for a more positive future for themselves.
- The ability of staff to address the wide range of social and educational needs of students.
- The leadership and teamwork of alternative education providers.
- The relationships with other schools.
- The relationships with *whānau* (families/extended family structure) (ERO, 2010).

Several of these factors, such as teachers developing caring and genuine relationships and having a commitment to students' wellbeing, resonate with findings from a study of alternative schools (flexi schools) in Australia (te Riele, 2014). Other studies have recognised the interconnectedness of the ways

that these alternative spaces might be inhabited and the social discourses from which they are constituted (Hirst & Vadeboncoeur, 2006).

Despite the identification of common elements of successful practice across a breadth of contexts, a fundamental tension related to equitable educational experiences for all citizens is also apparent. While the literature is relatively cohesive regarding the repositioning of students' engagement and positivity towards learning when they participate in alternative educational approaches, it can also be argued that in an unbiased democracy, based on principles of equitable opportunity, there should not be any need for alternative schools (Vadeboncoeur, 2009). While comparing successful alternative schools in three countries, Vadeboncoeur (2009) argued that this legitimises and adds credence to the neo-liberal economic rationale that a role of compulsory education is to "sort" learners by ability and character. She identified a tension between what is effective for the students and "the democratic ideal of engaging all young people in excellent and equitable public schools" (Vadeboncoeur, 2009, p. 230). However, given this and the socio-political discourse intrinsic to education institutions and practice, there is also recognition of practice that enhances the participating students' experience and engagement (Hirst & Vadeboncoeur, 2006).

While conducting scheduled reviews of 44 schools, the ERO collected data on alternative education schools and providers, including their at risk Years 9 to 11 students (ERO, 2011). This review focused, in part, on the partnership of the schools with their alternative education providers. The report highlighted that 63 per cent of alternative education students were Māori and two-thirds of alternative education students were male (ERO, 2011). Further, over three-quarters of the secondary schools placed at least one student in alternative education. However, two-thirds of those that placed students in alternative education were not sufficiently involved in the process, while too many schools did not actively work with the alternative education providers (ERO, 2011). Shay and Heck (2015) also found a disproportionately high number of Indigenous students were learning in alternative schools (flexi schools) in Queensland. Although some of the research reviewed gives voice to alternative education students in general, it does not give voice specifically to Māori students, despite identifying that 63 per cent (approximately 2205 students) of alternative education enrolments were Māori (ERO, 2011).

## Historical context

In 1840 the Treaty of Waitangi was signed. The treaty gave the British government sovereignty over New Zealand and for well over a century; the treaty, as it was translated to Māori, was not upheld (Bishop, 2010; Walker, 1975). It has been well documented that the British shed Māori of their *mana* (prestige, authority) and culture through enforcing British governance and the use of British politics, education, and law on New Zealand's indigenous people, and disregarding Māori culture and beliefs (Calman, 2012; Orange, 2013; Walker, 1975). Some might argue the premeditated motives of British colonisation, while others could argue the good intentions of the British (Fox, 1842). The reality of the situation is that, with respect to the original intentions of the treaty, there are two worldviews and two lived realities to consider. One is the worldview and lived realities and experiences of Māori, who feel deprived of their culture, *whenua* (land) and governance through the colonisation of New Zealand by British citizens (Bishop, 2008; Orange, 2013; Walker, 1975). The other is the worldview and lived experiences of the British, who may have felt that they were improving the position of their people (Fox, 1842).

The intentions of colonisation are brought forth through literature that evidenced years of British domination and assimilation (Bishop, 2008, 2010; Orange, 2013; Walker, 1975). The British brought with them Eurocentric worldviews and forcefully imposed these worldviews on Māori through violence, war,

and suppression of language and culture (Bishop, 2010; Orange, 2013; Walker, 1975). British governance and people were working towards replicating a British society in New Zealand (Orange, 2013; Walker, 1975). This social and economic domination by the British majority resulted in marginalisation of the Māori people. This occurred through the removal and disregard of the agreed partnership, loyalty and power-sharing that the treaty was supposed to offer (Bishop, 2008; Keenan, 2017; Orange, 2013; Walker, 1975). For more than 150 years, Māori were subjected to an education system that advantaged Pākehā (non-Māori) learners, their culture and their language, while in turn disadvantaging Māori learners, their culture and their language (Lemon, 2017). To this day, Māori have continued to be afflicted by educational, social, economic and political disparities in their own country (Bishop et al., 2014). There has been social injustice for Māori, as they have not been able to fully benefit from participation in a modern nation state; therefore, they have not had the cultural collateral to succeed (Bishop et al., 2014). More recently, New Zealand's society has been further reshaped, stretching to accommodate a new distance between those who "have" and those who "have not" (Rashbrooke, 2013). Because this gap has been accentuated in education in recent years, there is a need to examine the notion of education debt (Ladson-Billings, 2006).

## Education debt

The domination of the British and the planned assimilation of Māori to the British worldview and British education has resulted in what has been articulated as an education debt owed to Māori (Bishop, 2010). Ladson-Billings (2006), the pioneer of the term education debt, argues that the achievement gap is misplaced and instead we need to be focusing on the education debt. Ladson-Billings (2006) uses the notion of national debt as a metaphor, stating that an education debt is the annual accumulation of achievement disparities that add up over time, producing an education debt or deficit for indigenous people. She accentuates the need to engage with the wider notion of an education debt, as it is not just a matter of gaining more funding to solve the educational disparities, but rather, a matter of unearthing the causes of the debt (Bishop, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2006).

Bishop (2010) and Ladson-Billings (2006) argue that the historical, economic, socio-political, and moral decisions and policies that characterise our society have created the education debt. To be able to better understand the achievement disparities, behavioural problems, and the achievement gap of indigenous peoples within an education context, we need to first assess the extent of the education debt (Ladson-Billings, 2006). To address the inequalities within schools and the disengaged students, we need focus on the education debt rather than the achievement gaps (Bishop, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2006).

Once we have assessed the state of the debt, we can work towards strategies of repaying the debt to achieve equality in education. The focus on the achievement gap lends itself to short-term solutions and initiatives being implemented that are unlikely to address the long-standing underlying problems (Ladson-Billings, 2006). As valuable as initiatives such as the Te Kotahitanga and He Kākano programs have been in addressing the achievement gap in secondary-school settings and pioneering education reform, the focus now needs to be on the debt; how it will be repaid and developing strategies of repayment. This might allow long-standing, underlying problems within the New Zealand education system to be addressed with some sustainable resolution to better the educational learning environments for all Māori students (Ladson-Billings, 2006).

## Te Kotahitanga

Te Kotahitanga was a New Zealand MOE-funded, professional development and research project undertaken using action research and a Kaupapa Māori methodology (Bishop, 2010). The overall aim of the project was to investigate how to improve the educational achievement of Māori students in English-medium secondary-school classrooms. The project began by listening to the views of Māori students, whānau, teachers and principals. The Te Kotahitanga Effective Teaching Profile, developed for teachers of Māori students and as a framework for teachers' professional development, was implemented in English-medium secondary schools across New Zealand (Bishop, 2008; Bishop & Berryman, 2009).

The project drew on Kaupapa Māori principles. These principles underpinned a pedagogic framework forming an education project where power was shared between self-determining individuals within non-dominating relations of interdependence, culture counts, learning is interactive and dialogic, extended family-type relationships are fundamental to the pedagogy, and participants are connected and committed through a common vision of educational excellence (Bishop, 2008, 2010; Bishop & Berryman 2009). Te Kotahitanga drew on Māori understanding and sense-making processes, and sought to address Māori people's aspirations for self-determination within the wider context of a post-colonial reality (Bishop, 2008). The project was designed to support teachers to improve Māori students' learning and achievement, and enable teachers to create a culturally responsive context for learning (Bell, 2011; Bishop, 2010). Another focus was to enable school leaders and the wider school community to change school structures and processes to more effectively support teachers in this endeavour (Bishop & Berryman, 2009).

There have been three school-based implementation programs that have focused on improving educational success for Māori students that used Kaupapa Māori research practices, customs or *tikanga*, and methodology as their fundamental research base. These are Te Kotahitanga Effective Teaching Profile, He Kākano Leadership Professional Development and Kia eke Panuku Building on Success (Bishop & Berryman, 2006; MOE, 2009, 2016b). However, these school-based programs did not include the alternative education student's voice within their research and implementation programs. One element that all of these research projects did have in common was that they recognised the importance of relationships.

## The importance of connectedness, in particular connectedness for Māori

What is connectedness for Māori and what does it look like? Māori believe that there is a deep kinship between humans and the natural world, and that all life is connected. Māori see humans as part of the fabric of life (Macfarlane, 2004; Royal, 2007). Māori consider themselves as the people of the land, with particular groups having authority over certain places due to their ancestors' relationships (Kidman, 2012; Macfarlane, 2004; Royal, 2007). Māori believe that human life is about aligning oneself to the natural world, and that the natural world is able to speak to humans, giving them knowledge and understanding (Royal, 2007). Māori connect through whenua (land) and *whakapapa* (genealogy); Māori are able to whakapapa right back through the generations to *Papatūānuku* (the earth mother), which, in turn, connects Māori to the whenua of New Zealand (Royal, 2007).

When Māori people first meet each other they commonly go through their whakapapa, identifying themselves to generations of people, and the whenua of their ancestors to find common links and connections (Kidman, 2012; Macfarlane, 2004; Royal, 2007). This establishes a common ground, including

understandings, relationships and respect between individuals. Therefore, it is integral for Māori to establish connections with others in forming and building relationships (Kidman, 2012; Macfarlane, 2004; Royal, 2007). *Whanaungatanga* helps to create connectedness for Māori and is defined as a relationship, kinship and sense of family connection (Reilly, 2003). It is about strengthening relationships through shared experiences and working together to provide people with a sense of belonging (Reilly, 2003). Māori place a great deal of importance on relationships, in being able to work in partnership with one another. Positive connected relationships between students, school-wide, and with community help to improve the learning environment for Māori students (Kidman, 2012; Macfarlane, 2004; Reilly, 2003).

Students feel like valued members of the environment when they have a connection and connectedness with their environment (Macfarlane, 2004). This also implies being able to bring Māori culture, values and worldview into the classroom. Centuries of the Eurocentric education system, Pākehā domination, deficit thinking and a monoculture society has led to Māori feeling disconnected to society, and, in turn, education (Bishop, 2010). The importance of learners being able to bring themselves into the classroom, with a strong sense of their culture, is vital to their success.

Culturally responsive pedagogy refers to a student-centred approach to teaching, where students' cultural strengths are identified and nurtured to promote student achievement, as well as a sense of wellbeing about the students' cultural place in the world (Bell, 2011; Bishop & Berryman, 2006, 2009; Bishop et al., 2014, Bishop & Glynn, 2003). Culturally responsive pedagogy has been shown to raise the achievement of students whose culture is not the dominant Eurocentric culture in English-medium schooling (Bell, 2011; Sleeter, 2005). Culture is seen as multifaceted and cannot be linked just to ethnicity (Bell, 2011). Culture is socially constructed and therefore influenced by social, economic and political discourses; culture is constructed by humans, hence the dominant discourses at any time can determine what will be valued or not (Bell, 2011). As stated by Bell (2011), "Teaching can be viewed as a cultural practice as our teaching is embedded in and determined by culture" (p. 39).

Whether teachers acknowledge the important role that culture plays within teaching practices or not, literature heavily supports the notion that culture is an important aspect to consider within teaching practices, and to be active in and culturally responsive to (Bell, 2011; Bishop et al., 2009). Teachers need to acknowledge their own culture and how that informs their teaching, and also acknowledge and validate students and their culture to ensure an optimal environment to support cognitive growth and connectedness (Bell, 2011; Bishop & Berryman, 2006).

## Methodology

A critical theory approach was employed guided by Kaupapa Māori methodology. Kaupapa Māori research is research by Māori, for Māori and with Māori; it is a method of regaining control over Māori knowledge and Māori resources (Cram, 2009; Katoa Ltd, n.d.; Smith, 1999). The Kaupapa Māori research approach is not restricted to particular methods. However, research conducted within this paradigm naturally fits with more qualitative methods in representing Māori voice.

Kaupapa Māori methodology has two intellectual influences: the validity and legitimacy of Māori language, knowledge and culture, as well as critical social theory (Smith, 1999, p. 12). A critical theory paradigm with a Kaupapa Māori methodology was the most fitting approach for this research. A critical theory approach is a social theory and process of inquiry that goes beyond surface illusions, to uncover the real structures in the material world, in order to help people to change their conditions and build a better world for themselves (Neuman, 2011).

It is important to note that such research is not done in a vacuum; some non-Māori researchers have committed transgressions against Māori, which has led to suspicion and a lack of trust of research within Māori communities (Cram, 2009; Katoa Ltd, n.d.; Smith, 1999). Over the years, some non-Māori researchers have disempowered Māori through either misrepresenting Māori voice or claiming Māori knowledge as their own (Cram, 2009). Kaupapa Māori research is literally a Māori way of doing research (Katoa Ltd, n.d.). As an analytical approach, Kaupapa Māori research is about thinking critically, developing a critique of Pākehā constructions and definitions of Māori, and affirming the importance of Māori self-definitions and self-valuations (Cram, 2009; Katoa Ltd, n.d.; Smith, 1999).

Kaupapa Māori research is based on six principles (Katoa Ltd, n.d.). These principles were embedded throughout this study:

- *Tino rangatiratanga*: self-determination. Tino rangatiratanga is about having meaningful control over one's own life and cultural wellbeing.
- *Taonga tuku iho*: cultural aspirations. This principle acknowledges the strong emotional and spiritual factor in Kaupapa Māori research.
- *Ako*: culturally preferred pedagogy. Promotes teaching and learning practices that are unique to tikanga Māori (custom).
- *Kia piki ake i nga raruraru o te kāinga*: socioeconomic mediation. Addresses the issue of Māori socioeconomic disadvantages and the negative pressures this brings on whānau (Māori families) and their children.
- *Whānau*: extended family structure. The whānau and the practice of whanaungatanga (family connectedness) is an integral part of Māori identity and culture.
- *Kaupapa*: collective philosophy. Kaupapa Māori research initiatives are held together by a collective vision and commitment that connects Māori aspirations to political, social, economic and cultural wellbeing.

Kaupapa Māori principles within research practice dictate that Māori tikanga and processes are followed throughout the research (Katoa Ltd, n.d.). The police officer participant, who is regarded nationally within the police force for implementing tikanga, along with co-workers at a local Institute of Technology, assisted with ensuring that correct tikanga was followed throughout.

Further to the cultural guidance throughout the research process and the six intervention strategies, Cram (2009) and Smith (1999) suggest seven Māori cultural values that can further guide Kaupapa Māori research. This research project was guided by:

- *Aroha ki te tangata* – having respect for people and allowing people to define the research context (for example, where and when to meet) and maintaining this respect when dealing with the research data.
- *He kanohi kitea* – being a researcher face that is seen and known to those who are participating in research.
- *Titiro, whakarongo, kōrero* – looking, listening and then later speaking; researchers need to take time to understand people's day-to-day realities, priorities and aspirations.



- *Manaaki ki te tangata* – looking after people, by sharing, hosting, and being generous with time, expertise, and relationships.
- *Kia tupato* – being cautious; researchers need to be politically astute, culturally safe and reflexive practitioners. Staying safe may mean collaborating with elders and others who can guide the research process.
- *Kaua e takahia te mana o te tangata* – the researcher not trampling on the mana (dignity) of people.
- *Kia mahaki* – being humble; researchers should find ways of sharing their knowledge while remaining humble.

To ensure that this study was valid within a Māori context, the six intervention elements as described by Katoa Ltd (n.d.) and Smith (2004) and the seven research practices as described by Cram (2009) and Smith (1999) were adopted. These research interventions and research practices guided the development of the entire study, including the research design and research process. The practices and principles set the tone for the survey, focus group interviews, and semi-structured interviews and the practices around dealing with, representing, and respecting the data. Additionally, they were influential on the reflexivity of the whole research process to best ensure validity, trustworthiness and cultural responsiveness.

## Research design

The study worked within a Kaupapa Māori methodology, with a mixed-methods approach proposed. A mixed-methods approach uses a range of data generation methods. As the focus of this study is around examining the experiences of alternative education students, the majority of the initial methods rested within the qualitative approach. However, there is value in using quantitative methods to cross reference data from two or more sources. While a mixed-methods approach was planned, upon consultation with the student participants they suggested a restructure of some of the planned data collection methods. *Aroha ki te tangata* was exercised; that is, having respect for the students' involvement and inviting them to have their say (Cram, 2009; Katoa Ltd, n.d.). When consulted, the students expressed that they were not interested in completing the survey.

They unanimously decided that they were willing to participate in focus groups and talk about their experiences but did not see value in the survey. Therefore, the survey as a means of data collection for this study was removed. It was felt that the collaboration with the students over the research process and data collection methods really empowered the students, helping them feel a sense of ownership over the research process. After removing the survey was agreed to, the students were more vocal about the whole process, meeting times and focus group structure; they were active participants (Cram, 2009). The semi-structured questions prepared for the focus group allowed more depth to be gained and enabled collection of the students' "stories of experiences". Being an insider gave the researcher an advantage in being able to create a casual atmosphere where the students could be themselves and be quite expressive in their responses.

## Participants and procedures

A purposive sample was used with the participants invited to participate in the study. The participant group comprised of five students, two teachers and the director from the AEC, and the AEC-associated

police officer. The students and staff participated in focus group interviews, with the director and police officer having individual interviews. Prior to the focus groups and interviews, all of the participants were met with to discuss the research project and informed consent. This helped ensure that all participants knew the key ethical principles of research: that participation was voluntary, that they had the right to withdraw, and that the information that they give was considered confidential. The University of Waikato, Faculty of Education Research Ethics Committee, granted ethical approval.

Interviews and focus groups were arranged in negotiation with the AEC with permission granted to have the *hui* (meeting) and research take place at the centre. This maximised student participation, as the research did not compromise the students' after-school time, and it was also a familiar, comfortable and safe environment for the students to share their experiences. A selected private room was made available for the student focus group. At the beginning of each interview and focus group, the purpose of the research and how the data would be used were explained, while a brief overview of the questions and the format of the interview/focus groups were given. At this point the participants had another opportunity to withdraw from the research.

The focus groups and interviews were audio-recorded and participants were presented with a copy of the focus groups and interview transcripts to review. Participants were again reminded that they had the option to withdraw from the research. Pseudonyms were used to keep participant confidentiality. The research process had general *tikanga* and customary routines. At the beginning of the focus groups and interviews the participants said a *karakia* (prayer) to open and bless the proceedings, with a *karakia* to close. During and after the focus group with students, *kai* (food) was available. This process addressed the practice of *manaaki ki te tangata*.

The practice of *titiro*, *whakarongo*, *kōrero* was embedded across the whole research process, which helped make this study rich; the researcher spent most of her time as a listener, ensuring the questions asked were relevant to the participants (Cram, 2009). Another embedded practice was *kia tupato*, where the researcher endeavoured to ensure that the research practices were culturally safe, and the researcher was reflexive in her practice. Staying safe also meant ensuring cultural responsiveness. The research process involved the following three stages.

The first stage was *whakawhanaungatanga* (relationship building), re-establishing relationships in a Māori context through *hui* and shared food. This stage addressed the principles of *tino rangatiratanga*, *taonga tuku iho* and *whānau*. Participants were introduced to the study, the purpose and the aim, and reminded that in this research project all things Māori are actively legitimated and validated. Participants were reminded of the importance of their control over their cultural wellbeing throughout the process, and were encouraged and invited to have a voice and involvement in the entire research process. This is how the student participant recommendations came about (Cram, 2009; Katoa Ltd, n.d.). Further, an important element that was considered when interviewing Māori participants was the development and maintenance of the relationships.

In the initial meeting with the participants, it was important they were given opportunities to discuss previous perceptions and experiences of education, negotiate their level of investment, and set guidelines towards a shared outcome of the focus group interviews, individual interviews, and research process, thus addressing the research practices of *aroa ki te tangata* and *he kanohi kitea* (Cram, 2009). Engaging in this process with the participants, especially the student participants, gave them a sense of ownership and power over the research and the process.

The second stage involved one focus group with five students, one focus group with two teachers, and semi-structured one-to-one interviews with the director and the police officer. The focus group interview transcripts were compiled and presented to their respective groups for verification that they reflected their viewpoints. This was important in working towards the research practice of *kaua e takahia te mana o te tangata*, in that researchers need to look for ways to ensure that participants' voices are represented how they want to be represented (Cram, 2009).

The third stage determined the themes that emerged from the interview data collected. This stage addressed the overarching question of this research, which was to find out how the connectedness of Māori affected their self-efficacy within the learning environment. A final hui with shared food was held to present the participants with a final draft of the findings and discussion, and to have final questions and answers on the process and research. At the conclusion of the hui, the teacher and director participants commented on how engaged, excited and proud the students were to see their voices represented.

An open-coded approach was adopted to analyse the data from the interview transcripts, where themes were selected and a summary reflection was written. As Kaupapa Māori methodology guided this research, a unique approach was taken. The student participants were involved in the research design and consulted throughout, along with a local iwi representative who ensured that the correct process and tikanga cultural practices were being followed.

## Findings and discussion

The findings from the research are reported as two sections: (1) unearthing the possible causes of an education debt and validating Māori student voice and (2) student voice on their alternative education experience. The first considers the students' perceptions of their disengagement. It gives voice to the ways that their school experiences influenced their engagement within the public school system. The second section reports on their perceptions of their learning experiences within the alternative school. While no attempt is made to identify transitions in perspective for individual students, the data was typical of the alternative school student group and, given the size of the school cohort, representative of their overall perceptions.

### Unearthing the possible causes of an education debt: Validating Māori student voice

#### Primary (elementary) school environment

The student focus group began with a conversation around the students' experiences of primary school, all students in the focus group positively reflected on their experiences of primary school. The following comments are from individual students.

I remember primary school like it was yesterday. Primary school was when my life was actually good. I meet all my friends there ... teachers actually helped you, teachers wanted to understand you, they wanted to help you understand what you were doing.

A female student, although stating that she had attended four different primary schools, reflected on all of those experiences as being positive: "I went to four different primary schools. And the best time of my life was at those schools."

The entire student participant focus-group agreed that their experiences of primary school was one of connectedness. They discussed feeling like they were part of a whānau (family). They described primary school as a time in their education where they felt that their teachers cared about them, would help them to succeed by working with them, and would take the time to get to know them and their stories.

### **Intermediate and secondary (high school) school environment**

As you move on through the schools it's like everything gets a lot harder but no one's there to help you – they are only there to do their job – pretty much.

I f\*\*\*en hated intermediate and college. But don't get me wrong there were some great teachers at college and intermediate – but the majority of them don't even care about the Māori students – they just look at you and already see that you're going to fail, so they don't bother.

The statement made by this student prompted me to ask her if she felt that her experience of secondary school was a racist experience. That particular student replied, "Straight up, yes."

It was just, like, I would put my hand up in my class and say "can I have some help" and they would just look over me like I wasn't even there. Like I was non-existent, so I stopped going to my classes.

Hard and your mistakes don't define you.

You want to be able to leave your home feeling happy, go to school feeling happy, learning feeling happy, and then returning back home and being happy. But it all just stops because they judge you, they judge you a lot.

Just because they're a teacher, and older, and mature they are on top of you like you are nothing. They think that they know everything about you just by the clothes you wear, by the way you talk, and the way you walk.

Some teachers they don't try to understand the background that you come from and that it's hard to learn, to get to school, to pay for class trips, to provide lunch – you know.

They put no effort into it, aye, they would just give you the answers to get you over with.

The students shared stories of times where they felt that fairness and consistency were not applied, and where teachers would pre-judge them because of their ethnicity, using their position of power to their advantage. The students felt that their teachers already had low expectations for both their behaviour and their academic achievement because of their ethnicity. Students expressed that they felt that their teachers had a low tolerance for their behaviour and actions compared to that of students from other ethnicities. They explained that the teachers could not be bothered to explain work to them, so would give them the answers instead. Students commented on the lack of understanding of their situation or background, and felt little attempt by their teachers to make a connection.

In being able to identify teachers who negatively impacted on their educational journey, the student participants equally remembered the few English-medium secondary-school educators who made a positive impact.

He didn't treat me like I was naughty, he treated me like I was a white person – like he gave me time ... I did more in that year, than I actually did in my whole life ... He had high expectations in general. He understood my background and he gave me another chance to actually prove myself.

They described the qualities of these teachers as teachers who did not prejudge; worked through their lapse in judgement and did not hold that moment in time over them; did not let students mistakes define their futures; treated them like white people; made connections; got to know their students' stories, interests and strengths; had empathy and compassion; empowered them; had high expectations; and helped them in their learning, ensuring that work was at their level. Students explained having a connection with these teachers, wanting to attend their classes, wanting to complete the class work and having a sense of achievement within their learning environments.

### **Student voice on their alternative education experience**

A sample of student voice on their experiences of the alternative-education learning environment could be grouped into three key aspects. The following comments are from individual students.

#### **Relationships**

Our teachers actually choose to connect with us.

They get to know you on a personal level. They will get to know you so that they understand where you are coming from.

#### **School expenses**

We don't need to pay for the buses and vans to get here.

At school we had to pay a whole school fee just to get on the bus.

#### **Collaborative and engaging nature of the learning experiences**

Because it's just so much fun and you're learning in the process of having fun.

Yeah, we got heaps of different types of levels at this course so we can learn off one another. We do learn off one another. We do pick up things off one another.

Yeah, like if one of us have finished our work we help everyone else instead of being made to let them figure it out.

We are like a family; we are one.

The alternative education environment was described by the teacher and student participant groups as being a safe environment free from violence, drugs and temptation. They described it as being whānau orientated – a high-trust environment where teachers go above and beyond their classroom duties for the students and genuinely care about their students. They indicated that teachers apply some flexibility with personal circumstances and acknowledge individual learning styles. The teacher participants discussed the importance of building trust with their students, and knew that by keeping to their word they would earn the respect of their students. They identified trust as an important aspect in building a connection with their Māori students, because students entering the school demonstrated a lack of trust

of teachers and other adults. Therefore, students were described by their teachers as being very sceptical, and aware of untrusting behaviours such as not keeping to your word.

## Conclusions

The findings were consistent that educators impact their students' mana and future educational direction through their choice of teaching practices, actions and dialogue with their students. The narratives of the student participants within this study support such a statement. The findings suggested that there are six ways in which teachers can help create connectedness within their learning environments, and therefore improve their Māori students' self-efficacy: culturally responsive practice, relational practice, flexibility, creating a sense of belonging and whānau, creating high trust and being non-judgemental. The significance of relational practice resonates with findings related to Indigenous students in flexi schools in Queensland (te Riele, 2014).

Further, development of self-efficacy and connectedness in any learning environment should start with the people, with the school and teacher—connecting with *he tangata* (the people), connecting with *marautanga* (the curriculum), connecting with whenua. Although the student sample size of this study was small—and hence not suitable for making generalisations about all alternative education schools or concerning Māori students in general—the participants' perceptions and experiences were consistent in both the English-medium learning environment and the alternative-education learning environment. The perceptions from the participants did give some insight into the experiences and perspectives of Māori students in alternative education settings. The student participants expressed feeling a sense of belonging and connectedness with their primary-school learning environment. However, these perceptions of experiences changed drastically when the student participants reflected on their English-medium intermediate and secondary-school learning environments. The perceptions and experiences encountered during their primary-school years were similar to those in the alternative education environment. The students identified similar key themes in relation to their experiences and enjoyment of primary school, as they did with the AEC.

This study identified important influences that complement other research, for example, Te Kotahitanga, especially relational practice and being non-judgemental. One aspect that differed was that research such as Te Kotahitanga focused on factors to improve Māori student achievement, whereas this study sought to explore connectedness for Māori students within the learning environment. In this study, connectedness has been identified through the narratives of the participants to be the critical factor in these students' educational success. This indicates a key conclusion: that if connectedness is achieved within a learning environment, then, in turn, students' attitudes will become more positive and this will positively influence their academic success. The focus need not be on improving the achievement rates of Māori, but rather on teachers creating connectedness with Māori, as, once connectedness is achieved, then academic success is more likely to follow.

Why did the perceptions of experience change for these students in English-medium intermediate and secondary school? The student narratives seemed to focus heavily on a system that still does not cater for Māori learners, or rather learners that do not fit the "square box" as described by the teacher participants. Student narratives also indicated that some teachers lacked the ability to seek a connection with these students, exercised deficit theorising and were not culturally responsive. These findings are similar to that of the conclusions drawn from the student narratives within the Te Kotahitanga project, where the

major influence on Māori students' educational achievement lies in the mind and actions of their teacher (Bishop et al., 2003).

To solely identify teachers in the English-medium education system as the reason these students feel disconnected would be inappropriate, and all student participants identified at least one connection with an English-medium secondary-school educator. Many of the narratives focused on perceptions of a system that still privileges a Eurocentric style of teaching and learning. As suggested by the teacher participants, this is an institute that produces graduates, with a focus on outcomes and assessment, rather than an environment that is connected, caring, flexible, and able to cater for all learners. This gives rise to the claims of an education debt being owed to Māori, and may reopen conversations about resolving the education debt (Bishop, 2008, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2006).

The conclusions of the study were consistent with other research. The narratives of all the participants identified that connectedness for Māori within the learning environment encompasses the concepts of trust, flexibility, social wellbeing, high expectations, whānau, whanaungatanga, whakapapa and whenua (Bell, 2011; Bishop & Berryman, 2009; Bishop et al., 2003; Bishop et al., 2014; Royal, 2007). Creating a sense of family, relationships, kinship and connection was critical, similar to that connection a person has with their own family (Kidman, 2012; Macfarlane, 2004; Reilly, 2003; Royal, 2007). Quality student-teacher relationships were evidenced in the study through participant data to be strengths in the alternative education environment (ERO, 2010; Lemon, 2017). It is integral for Māori to establish connections with others and their environment in forming and building relationships – whanaungatanga.

Students in the study identified that connectedness began to form through the teachers getting to know them and their lived realities. The importance of connectedness suggests that it should be a principle for policy that underpins school and teacher practice in both the learning and social aspects of education. The alternative education teachers spoke of rejecting deficit theorising and students' past behaviours, and working to understand their individual students to be able to bring about change for them. The student participants spoke of feeling judged and racially discriminated against in their intermediate and secondary-school learning environments. For them, this created a sense of disconnect and low self-worth; however, the non-judgemental approach of the alternative education teachers helped to create a sense of trust, belonging, self-efficacy and whānau (Lemon, 2017).

Whether teachers acknowledge the important role that their minds, actions and culture play within their teaching practices or not, literature supports the notion that culture is an important aspect, to not only consider within teaching practices, but to also be active in (Bell, 2011; Bishop et al., 2009). Bell (2011) suggests that after a teacher understands their own cultural position, they then need to understand the culture of the students in their classroom to create that connectedness. The culture of care extends beyond students having their cultural recognised. These teachers actively work with students who have an unknown identity to locate their identity and whakapapa (Lemon, 2017; Royal, 2007). Could educators do more within their English-medium learning environments to help their Māori students connect with and understand their whakapapa? A further implication for policy is to enhance teachers' culturally responsive practice in English-medium schools. This should be further embedded into official expectations at policy and school level, and also be an ongoing focus of national monitoring agencies such as ERO. It would be beneficial and fair for teachers in alternative schools to receive equivalent recompense as teachers in English-medium schools. National education policy could dictate this, while also offering voluntary scholarships for any alternative-school teacher to undergo professional development of their choosing, for instance, study awards or leading groups of students and whānau on culturally or educationally significant experiences.

To conclude, according to the participant narratives, the alternative-education learning environment within the study appears to create connectedness, which has positively affected Māori learners' self-efficacy. This study suggests that this can be attributed to two central elements. Firstly, the management style of the centre, which is a style that puts the students at the heart of their decisions, addresses barriers to learning and attendance, and is financially invested in helping their students. Secondly, the teachers who are motivated by helping the students grow and develop appeared not to be motivated by money or time, but because they are highly committed to what they do. The data indicated that the teachers clearly know and understand their students, which influences how they target their teaching and learning approaches (Bell, 2011; Bishop & Berryman, 2009). Essentially, what is created within this alternative-education learning environment is connectedness through a whānau approach, and this is driven by the people – he tangata, he tangata, he tangata.

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