



Myth-Making: On-going Impacts of Historical Education Policy on Beliefs About Māori in Education

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Received: 24 March 2022 / Accepted: 19 May 2022 / Published online: 13 June 2022
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Abstract

The history of educational policy-making in Aotearoa New Zealand is also a history in myth-making. Myths about Māori in education are deeply embedded in educational and social thought, because they have their origins in the first political interactions between Māori and Pākehā. These interactions were motivated by contradicting forces—Māori determination to participate in the changing economic and technological landscape, contrasted against British perceptions of their own cultural superiority and inherent right to rule indigenous populations. British superiority was enshrined in aggressive and racist laws that disenfranchised and dispossessed Māori of lands, resources, economies, and attempted to de-culturalise Māori. Laws were in turn translated to policy and practice that reinforced deep seeded myths that have negatively positioned Māori socially, politically and educationally. As Aotearoa New Zealand education progresses toward a commitment to teach our dual and difficult histories, it is necessary to also expose and analyse the ways negative positioning of Māori has been purposefully built into our education system. Understanding how political histories have influenced our education system may better equip education professionals to identify and question their own conscious and unconscious biases, and to challenge and change a system that has its origins racist philosophy, reinforced by policy. Education professionals who are able to deconstruct carefully fortified, damaging myth-making about Māori will be well positioned to lead authentic movement toward a shared future.

Keywords Māori education · History of New Zealand education · Teacher expectations

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Introduction

Western education for Māori has been marred by low teacher expectations, deficit theorising, stereotyping and continued failure by the system to improve education enjoyment and success for many Māori. Berryman and Eley (2017) highlight that the Ministry of Education's analysis across best evidences syntheses (Alton-Lee, 2003; Biddulph et al., 2003; Mitchell & Cubey, 2013; Timperley et al., 2006) illustrate the persistent inequitable performance of the education system for Māori. Long standing beliefs about Māori in education, such as those reported by St. George (1983) almost four decades ago, which found teachers believed Māori students lacked characteristics essential for academic success, continue to be reinforced by studies revealing relentless low teacher expectations and negative perceptions of Māori students (Alton-Lee, 2003; Bevan-Brown, 2000; Rubie-Davies et al., 2006a; Turner et al., 2015).

This article will critically engage with specific education laws and policies that have actively shaped and progressed discourses that position Māori negatively in education and have locked Māori into social and political power-less-ness. The key argument presented in this article is that negative perceptions of Māori in education (and in society more generally), and low teacher expectations of students based on their ethnicities, which continue to be evidenced in contemporary research, are not unfortunate accidents nor reflections of 'truth'. This article will illustrate that such perceptions and beliefs have been purposefully built into the education system, and that they are so tenacious and traumatic because they attempt to appear as natural, normal aspects of education in Aotearoa New Zealand (Milne, 2017). Analysing key education acts will expose how ideals of racial superiority have been enshrined in legislation, then passed off as common sense and 'fact' in order to maintain inequalities and oppression (Pihama, 1993).

Importantly, the process of entrenching negative Māori stereotypes, and consequently life outcomes, became especially successful throughout the 1900s with a oneness of political, social and educational philosophy (Mutch, 2013). In order to form a thorough analysis of the full impact that this oneness of philosophical thought has had on schooling and social success for Māori, consideration must be given to both the lived experiences of key political decisions (as discussed here), and to key education philosophies that have their roots in the past, but continue to underpin New Zealand education (author, 2020).

Tenacious Myths: Current Teacher Perceptions and Expectations

A comprehensive study by Turner et al. (2015) found that teacher perceptions and expectations of students had a profound impact on actual student achievement. Another study found that teacher expectations for Māori achievement were lower than for all other ethnicities included in the study (Rubie-Davies et al., 2006b). Negative teacher beliefs attributed the poor education success of Māori students

to three key factors: uneducated families, personal dispositions, and student capabilities (Turner et al., 2015). Stereotypical views of uneducated, uninterested and irresponsible Māori and Pasifika parents being to blame for poor attainment of western schooling by Māori and Pacific students is, unfortunately, a common feature revealed by inquiry into teacher expectations (Bishop, 2003; Rubie-Davies et al., 2006b; St. George, 1983). These stereotypical perspectives illustrate continued use of deficit theorising in New Zealand education by placing blame for poor educational achievement squarely on the shoulders of students and their families.

Turner et al. (2015) also found, somewhat unsurprisingly, that lower teacher expectations, deficit beliefs and an unwillingness by some teachers to take responsibility for students' learning intensified poor teacher-student relationships. For any educator interested in equitable and just education, these studies make for frustrating reading. For many Māori, I suspect the findings of such research confirms many of the anecdotes about the western schooling experience for generations of Māori. These anecdotes are versions of a similar story—western schooling does not value my family or our experiences and expertise, western schooling believes I am naughty, western education sees me as incapable of achieving.

Mahuika et al. (2011) confirm that deficit theorising of Māori lived experiences creates negative and problematic student-teacher relationships, lowers teacher expectations of Māori students' abilities, and causes teachers to depreciate their own agentic power in enabling changed education outcomes for Māori students. In order to debunk and remove disempowering stereotypes and deficit theorising of Māori students in education, it is important to trace these ideas back to their roots. Understanding the origins of stereotypical beliefs about Māori in education and preferred pedagogy for Māori, may assist education professionals to better identify when they are operating from a deficit model, which places responsibility for education underachievement with Māori (and Pacific) students and families (Bishop et al., 2003). It may also enable students and education professionals to see that stereotypes and negative perceptions of Māori in education are not evidenced based, but are in fact myths invented in an era when it served Pākehā to objectify, subordinate and attempt to de-culturalise Māori through education. The establishment of many myths about Māori learners in education was a by-product of colonisation, so was therefore, in the New Zealand context, swift and intense.

The speed and intensity of Māori colonisation has in many ways amplified the myths, by not allowing professionals the space to engage in critical thinking or reflective thought, or to consider whether there is any credible evidence to support the myths. A challenge in attempting to disrupt negative perceptions of Māori in education and the limiting pedagogies they engender, is that they appear to be truth because they are entrenched not only in the education system, but deep within the silent biases, attitudes and beliefs of teachers. There is a cyclic element at play that confirms these "truths", whereby deficit theorising and negative perceptions of Māori students may result in negative self-fulfilling prophecy for students, causing low achievement in (standardised) testing, which therefore appears to confirm teacher beliefs about Māori, and other minority students (Rubie-Davies et al., 2006b).

Breaking this cycle is also particularly challenging as our education system has nurtured unawareness through an unwavering reliance on Pākehā culture as the standard education culture. As Mahuika et al. (2011) explain “...Pākehā has long been accepted as the mainstream or norm in New Zealand, many teachers are unaware of the influence it has either on them or the education system” (p. 185). Education professionals are often encouraged to critically reflect on their practice, but they are rarely, if ever, encouraged to critically reflect on the education system (Hetaraka, 2020). Uncritical acceptance of a system gives rise to the potential for uncritical acceptance of perceptions and attitudes built into that system. While many teachers may be unaware of their biases, Rubie-Davies et al. (2006b) points out that young children have an innate ability for picking up on stereotypes. The implications of this is that even when teachers think their biases are hidden, or when teachers themselves are unaware of their deficit positioning of students, children are fine tuned to it, they feel it, they respond accordingly, and they potentially believe it.

Current Māori education and economic disadvantage is situated within New Zealand’s historical context (Rubie-Davies & Peterson, 2016) it is therefore imperative to evoke and untangle the layers of New Zealand educational history in order to begin understanding the origins of deficit theorising and stereotypes of Māori learners. This article will argue that long standing, prevalent stereotypes in modern education have largely derived from non-Māori perceptions of traditional Māori pedagogies, myths of racial and cultural superiority, and ingrained racist education policies designed to restrict and control Māori life chances and prosperity (Simon, 1998). In doing so, the article will challenge educationalists to critically assess historical accounts of New Zealand education, not for their historical or chronological accuracy, but for the impact events and decisions have had on the lived realities of generations of Māori students.

This article aims to clearly define the role education has had in colonising and disrupting Māori society, to expose biases, stereotypes and deficit modelling that have been built into the very foundations of the New Zealand education system. A key argument presented here is that the seeding of racist and negative perspectives about Māori in foundational education policy has over time made them appear neutral, natural and correct (Milne, 2017). Their apparent neutrality makes them silent and insidious; therefore, educators must be highly conscious in order to become aware of their presence, to expose them for critique and to make visible the often-subtle negative framing of Māori that may otherwise be accepted as ‘truth’.

Establishing Myths: Church and State-Sponsored Schooling and Law-Making

What has almost consistently become thought of in contemporary times as ‘education’, or more specifically, ‘Māori education’ is more accurately defined by Jones and Jenkins (2011) as ‘schooling’, because Māori had a well-established, highly refined, and differentiated education system that was foundational to Māori society since the establishment of the culture. This was the education programme functioning before, and for some time following the introduction of the missionary schooling

programme in 1816. However, the deep-seeded negative stereotypes and perceptions still seen in current research began with Māori schooling conducted by missionaries.

Western schooling for Māori in Aotearoa New Zealand has seen several iterations since the early 1800s. The initial missionary intent of western education was to convert Māori to Christianity, therefore the aim was to enable Māori to access print literacy in order to be able to read the bible (Jenkins, 1993). The first mission schools, such as that at Rangihoua, were day schools, designed for Māori to attend during the day whilst living within traditional whānau and hapū structures. In their establishment of the first western schools in Aotearoa, missionaries were reluctant to have their own children educated alongside Māori who were, according to them, in a state of degradation (Beaglehole, 1970). However, despite this perceived state of degradation, missionaries were focussed on Christianising Māori, not colonising, so continuing to live as Māori always had, was initially deemed permissible by missionaries.

The programme of the early 1800s had taught, to varying degrees, the lesson of British superiority and Māori inferiority through not only the skill of literacy, but through the meanings transmitted in the printed word (Jenkins, 1993). It was not long before the inability of missionaries to distinguish between the tenets of Christianity, and the conventions of Georgian England saw Thomas Kendall (the first missionary teacher in New Zealand), and other missionaries, purposefully interfere with Māori social structures (Binney, 2005). According to western schooling at this time, to be Christian was to be English, to be civilised was to be English, to be literate was to be English, and so the work of the missionaries inevitably became a task in preparing Aotearoa for colonisation (Binney, 2005; Jenkins, 1993; Stephenson, 2009). The underlying motivation of education at this time was to "...destroy their [Māori] culture, considered merely indicative of the degradation of its creators" (Binney, 1968, p. 13). Similar sentiments would later infiltrate education laws and policies of future New Zealand governments, and would also colour popular beliefs about Māori in general, and specifically in education.

The *Education Ordinance Act, 1847*, signals the first official involvement of the Crown into Māori schooling, which had until this point been the sole domain of the missionaries. The ordinance was also the first iteration of British law defining the shape of western education for Māori. This act signalled a marked change in Crown-Māori interactions. The existence of this act, and all others of the time, illustrates the belief the Crown had in their right to govern and law-make for Māori. There would be no more careful treading through the sovereign nation of Aotearoa, this was now a colony of the Empire. Using the decree of *The Treaty of Waitangi, 1840*, the Crown would now apply their law to remove rangatiratanga from Māori. The *Education Ordinance Act* provides the first example of how the Crown, and later New Zealand governments, would treat education for Māori. Without consultation the Crown would use Pākehā law to control Māori, they would define Māori education, and they would use education as the favoured tool in advancing the full-blown colonisation of Māori.

Under the *Education Ordinance Act*, Māori church boarding schools were funded on the premise that they provide religious and industrial training to Māori through English instruction (Lee, 2008). Māori had by this time become disillusioned with missionary schooling due to the lack of instruction in English, which

Māori believed would enable iwi to be economically competitive with non-Māori (Henare, 2010). By 1845, Governor George Grey (1812–1898), the representative of the Queen in New Zealand and the author of the act, also held the view that Māori needed to be fluent in English, not to be able to compete on equal terms with Pākehā for economic growth, but rather for the purpose of becoming Europeanised (Barrington & Beaglehole, 1974). Grey believed that in order for Māori to become more like Europeans we needed to be educated in isolation from our villages, which he saw as a demoralising influence on Māori children (Barrington, 1970).

Grey wanted Māori to be assimilated into British culture in order to hasten New Zealand's colonisation (Barrington, 1970). Walker (2016) argues that Grey was faced with a particular problem, the existence of “dispossessed owners of the soil” (p. 23) who continued to hamper the hasty colonisation of New Zealand. Grey believed that if Māori became Pākehā, Māori opposition to the dispossession of lands and rangatiratanga would be eliminated. History tells us that Grey sorely misunderstood Māori relationships and connections to place in this regard. Grey did, however, essentially use British law to attempt to turn Māori into what our tupuna Kawiti refers to as poai Pākehā (Pākehā boys), with education being the vehicle. The *Education Ordinance Act* legally ratified Grey's racist assimilationist ideas, providing a restrictive education to Māori in boarding schools, which removed Māori children from the influences, protection, knowledges and structures of their communities. The act initialised a systematic, and legal attempt to dismantle Māori social structures and language through education. It sought to isolate children from their whānau and therefore their cultural structures, which, as time has proven, is a successful device capable of destabilising and fracturing cultural reproduction and knowledge.

The Crown's goals to assimilate Māori happened to coincide with Māori goals to attain western education. Māori wanted the skills needed for iwi to flourish in the modern world. Schooling was still viewed by rangatira as a way for Māori to engage with settler society (Tuhiwai-Smith, 2016). The outcomes of education desired by Māori and the Crown were substantively different, where Māori were committed to obtaining western education to compliment existing knowledge bases, the Crown was committed to establishing a colony and assimilating Māori into their society through education. These particular conditions allowed the Crown to initiate the rule making process over Māori schooling through British law, despite the fact that rangatira had agreed in *Te Tiriti o Waitangi, 1840*, to allow the British Crown to make laws for British subjects in Aotearoa, and that rangatira would continue to maintain sovereignty over Māori people and resources.

One of the attractions for Europeans to the new colony of New Zealand in the nineteenth century was that it was to be an egalitarian, classless society. However, the enactment of the *Education Ordinance Act* made it clear that the Crown intended to use education to prepare Māori for specific roles in the new society they sought to establish. The Crown specified that they would subsidise religious education along with industrial training in English in church boarding schools. Ironically, the dream of a society free of stifling class restrictions was being sold to prospective colonialists at the same time as Māori were being prepared for futures as English-speaking,

Christian labourers – a brown, disenfranchised, labouring under class (Walker, 2016).

The mission schools system officially dissolved in the 1860s (Simon & Tuhiwai-Smith, 2001), and was replaced entirely in 1867 by the refreshed Native schools system. While missionaries had lost their hold of schooling for Māori by the 1860s it is important to note that mission schools for Māori were continued in the form of Māori church schools (Lee, 2008) operating outside of the state system. A number of independent schools, run by Māori using English as the language of instruction, also operated outside of the system, in many cases experiencing more success for both Māori students and teachers than State controlled education (Lee, 2008).

Entrenching and Confirming Myths Through Foundational Education Legislation

The Native schools system was initially established in 1858 with the *Native Schools Act, 1858*, which formally brought education for Māori under the control of the settler government. However, the re-modelled *Native Schools Act, 1867* would have a lasting impact on education for Māori, and on the myths generated about Māori in education, as the legislation clearly indicated that education would be the means by which the government would carry out its agenda for the assimilation of Māori (Tuhiwai-Smith, 2016). The act has played a major role in both the physical colonisation of Māori, and the colonisation of Māori minds. It has achieved this by first removing land from within every community and village throughout the country, then by providing a specific, limited curriculum, and removing te reo Māori from education. These aspects are linked to each other and culminate in an embodiment of the aggressive policy to disenfranchise and de-culturalise Māori through education and in the name of public good.

The reports of the Inspector of Native Schools Henry Taylor (Taylor, 1863b), shed a great deal of light on tensions between Māori and western education institutions in the mid-1800s. His recommendations to the government through his reports impacted on the decisions made in the re-modelling of the *Native Schools Act, 1867*. Most prominent in Taylor's report (Taylor, 1863b) is his regret that the Native Schools system (which followed the church boarding system requirement that children be educated outside of their communities) was in demise and that "...no marked success has attended the efforts made by Government to promote education among the Natives" (p. 1). This is followed very closely by his great concern for the future of the many acres of land under use by each school, taken from Māori communities for education purposes.

Taylor pointed to two key external reasons for the lack of success in the boarding schools, both reinforced specific negative positioning of Māori. One factor was the hopeless endeavour the government faced in attempting to "...lead, by friendly counsel, men who dispute our authority to dictate in matters of importance paramount to Education" (Taylor, 1863b, p. 1). This excerpt clearly indicates Māori continued to operate under the tikanga and protection of rangatira, rather than Pākehā law. Taylor's choice of words here could also be read as beseeching the government

to abandon the ‘friendly’ approach and instead take ‘control’ of the educational space for Māori.

Taylor (1863b) describes the second factor contributing to the closure of so many Māori boarding schools as “...the one grand cause which has already frustrated the many benevolent intentions of His Excellency to promote the real welfare of the Natives...” (p. 1). Taylor is referring to the impact the Land Wars and movements such as the Kīngitanga were having on Māori schooling. This is evidenced by his specific mention in a subsequent report of “...(a) The Taranaki War, (b) The King movement, (c) The demand for children’s labour” (Taylor, 1863a, p. 35) as three external factors impacting negatively on the government’s attempt at “...civilizing the Native Race” (Taylor, 1863a, p. 34) through schooling.

Taylor’s language throughout his reports illustrates a patronising, paternal attitude that viewed the Land Wars as an outcome of Māori disobedience, implying expected subordination and, instead of opposing Pākehā authority, Māori should appreciate the favours of a government who wished the best for them. This positioning of Māori as orchestrators of unrest, offenders and beneficiaries, and the government as patient, benevolent, benefactors is so rife in early laws and Parliamentary papers that it ultimately became the status quo perception across New Zealand society in relation to the ‘Māori’ Wars (as they were still referred to until recently), to any action resisting the further removal of lands, rights and language, and to Māori people in general. These attitudes were enshrined in many New Zealand laws, legitimising specific negative perceptions of Māori that have proved so tenacious that they continue to appear in education research where teachers describe Māori learners as disrespectful, naughty and arrogant, and primarily associate criminal behaviour with Māori over any other ethnicity (Turner et al., 2015).

Māori have long been agentic in their engagement with western education. This is evidenced through several of the internal failures of the mission and State boarding schools systems, including Māori dissatisfaction with the low level of education provided to Māori students, and the treatment of children in the system (May, 2003; Simon, 1998; Simon et al., 1994). Simon (1998) refers to missionaries and school inspectors noting strong opposition from Māori parents toward the practice in early western schooling of spending very little time on studies, with much of the day spent on industrial training, which actually translated to hard labour on the land. Many Māori parents objected to their children being treated like slaves (Simon, 1998) in an institution they believed should be providing them with quality western education, not preparing them to form the labouring class in a Pākehā society. Māori voiced objection to the harsh treatment of their children by exiting, en masse, the boarding schools system. Whilst no decisions-makers at the time, nor for a long time after, sought to identify or understand Māori perspectives on the failure of the boarding schools system, the lived experience for many Māori whānau was a refusal to subject their children to harsh treatment and low level academic offerings. They would rather the alternative, exit the State controlled (and funded) system and educate their children within their own communities and according to their own curriculum. This agency was reflected in the 1980s and 1990s when Māori once again chose to exit the system and develop Kura Kaupapa Māori with no government support or resource (Tocker, 2015).

Māori expectations of good quality western education began with the mission schools, the expectation continued to be applied to the State school system, and remains an expectation of many Māori whānau, hapū and iwi today. The expectations of Māori in education that have existed for as long, but have been more widespread and damaging, are the myths generated by Taylor in his 1863 advice to the government that he did not:

...advocate for the Natives under present circumstances a refined education or high mental culture; it would be inconsistent, if we take into account the position they are likely to hold for many years to come in the social scale, and inappropriate if we remember that they are better calculated by nature to get their living by manual rather than by mental labour (Taylor, 1863a, p. 38)

We need not look any further than Taylor's vision for Māori education to find the origins of the stereotype that Māori are kinaesthetic learners. Reinforcing this stereotype served only the interests of a colonial government in need of a labouring class trained to serve. The myth that Māori are kinaesthetic by nature and incapable of high order abstract thought stubbornly continues to dominate both Māori and non-Māori perspectives of Māori learners. This particular myth was strengthened by the *Native Schools Act*, the *Native Schools Code*, and by the restrictive Native schools curriculum, which was designed to offer only the most rudimentary western education with the intention to prepare Māori to take up a State-determined place in New Zealand society. The consistent messages and images of Māori subordination that saturated New Zealand legislation, policy and practice proved to be an effective way to entrench negative perspectives about Māori. This coordinated approach served the purpose of making racist beliefs appear well established and sound, nurturing a perception that these views were logical, common sense, true, therefore endearing society to unquestioningly take them for granted (Tuihawai-Smith, 2012).

Race-Based Education Policies

The revised *Native Schools Act, 1867* was a policy developed on the strength of the advice, and ideals of the Inspector of Native Schools, Henry Taylor. As illustrated above, Taylor held a particularly limited view of Māori academic capacity, based not on evidence, but on his own biased opinions. The *Native Schools Act* was decisive legislative action giving the newly established New Zealand government power to enforce the direction of education for Māori following the end of the Land Wars. The intention of the act was to use education as the preferred tool for assimilation, and “to make Schools necessary in the work of civilising the Native race...” (Taylor, 1863a, p. 34). This era of education had Māori prove their commitment to education through the provision of land, labour and resources, and also by relinquishing language and traditional ways of knowing in exchange for a restricted western education. The subsequent *Native Schools Code* provided the means through which policy became practice. Barrington (2008) describes the code as “...an expression of beliefs about assimilation and progress towards civilisation held at the time” (p. 44). Unfortunately for generations of Māori, those limiting thoughts and beliefs persisted

for nearly a century in education, eventually being replaced by the deficit theories of the 1960s.

The *Education Act 1877* centralised education in New Zealand and established the State primary school education system, which subsequently became the compulsory education sector. The *Education Act*, in conjunction with the *Native Schools Act*, enabled two separate education systems in New Zealand – one for Pākehā settler children, the other for Māori. Many New Zealand teachers and student teachers are likely to be conversant with the *Education Act, 1877* as this act signifies the foundation of modern compulsory education in New Zealand. The *Education Act* is regarded by many an educationalist as an exemplar of egalitarian legislation, promoting fairness and inclusivity in education from an early point in western New Zealand history. It is arguably a legislative symbol of many of the western democratic ideals that have defined New Zealand as a nation state, a piece of legislation valued for its forward thinking focus on equity. However, what is not widely advocated or taught is that the *Education Act* was not intended to specifically provide equality of education between Māori and Pākehā, it was intended to provide educational equality between poor and wealthy settler children. The motivation was to progress egalitarian ideas and ideals, for Pākehā, not between Māori and Pākehā.

Education for Māori was provided for under the *Native Schools Act* and as such would remain a separate entity from the State primary school system for another 90 years (Barrington, 2008). The separate education systems illustrate the government's dual, and conflicting purposes for education – a free, secular education for all settler children to progress an egalitarian society, and ironically, a restrictive education to 'civilise' Māori children into becoming the underclass of that egalitarian society. The fact that two, race-based education systems were in existence in New Zealand for nearly 100 years would undoubtedly serve the purpose of silently reinforcing the myth that one race was not naturally inclined to mental labour, whilst the other was, and therefore had the right to dominate and decision-make.

Conclusion

That researchers continue to find that many teachers cling to the enduring, tenacious, negative myths about Māori in education is incredibly frustrating for anybody committed to social justice. By analysing the origins of the policies that established western schooling, and the perceptions of their writers, it becomes clear that the New Zealand education system, in which teachers carry out their work, has been purposefully designed to frame Māori in particular ways. As a nation we have made many gains in terms of building understandings between cultures and seeking social justice, however, the evidence presented here confirms the findings of the New Zealand Human Rights Commission, that racism, and the "...drivers for racism are broad and deeply embedded within institutions, society, and individuals" (New Zealand Human Rights Commission, 2021, p. 9).

This article has argued that within education, racism has been embedded in policy and practice from the outset, and while many efforts have been made by students, parents, grandparents, academics, teachers and researchers over many years

to interrupt the narrative, it remains. One reason for this is that the pattern of successive New Zealand governments to project a sameness in philosophical thought and application politically, socially and educationally (Mutch, 2013). Saturating all aspects of New Zealand society, since the beginning of western governance in New Zealand, with the same, narrow ideologies has enabled racist perspectives to flourish, and discourages critical reflection of systems, policies and individuals' practice. Removing racism from within education institutions and thought requires substantial work by individuals to become highly conscious of their own, and others' assumptions. It will also require continued work to rigorously critique and transform systems, and institutions.

Funding Open Access funding enabled and organized by CAUL and its Member Institutions.

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