Indigenous student voice: the astute witnesses of schooling

Camilla Highfield[1,2] · Melinda Webber[1] · Rachel Woods[1]

Abstract

This paper reports the views of Indigenous Māori students (aged 5–13 years) regarding the ways they encounter and experience teaching and learning within their schools. The ten schools that participated in the research are situated in a low socio-economic urban area of the North Island of New Zealand. While the research was being conducted, the teachers and leaders employed in the schools were engaged in a professional development program focussed on developing culturally relevant teaching and pedagogical practices to support increased student success and achievement. Māori students described the teaching and learning factors they perceived positively and negatively impacted their success and motivation to achieve. The findings highlighted the inconsistent levels of support felt by Māori students, their self-concept and perceptions of being 'average', and the impacts teacher practices can have on their academic self-efficacy.

Keywords Indigenous · Student voice · Motivation · Culturally responsive pedagogy

Introduction

Student perspectives of the factors which support their learning and achievement provide important insights into the teaching practices that help them succeed at school. Cook-Sather (2002) argued that students know more than anyone about 'what it means to be a student in the modern world and what it might mean to be an adult in the future' (2002, p. 12). She challenges educators to recognise student perspectives in the shaping of education practice and policy, which supports Hattie's (2009) argument for taking student perspectives seriously, because they 'sit in the classes, they know whether the teacher sees learning through their eyes, and they know the quality of the relationship' (p. 116).

✉ Camilla Highfield
   c.highfield@auckland.ac.nz

1   Faculty of Education and Social Work, University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand

2   Faculty of Education and Social Work, University of Auckland, Private Bag 92109, Epsom, Auckland 1023, New Zealand

This paper prioritises the voice and opinions of 923 primary and intermediate school students who self-identified as Indigenous Māori (hereby referred to as Māori). The study examined whether Māori students perceived teachers helped them to learn, the extent to which they felt motivated and enjoyed school, and who they believed supported them to be successful at school. This project contributes to what Friere (1997) describes as disalienation of students, particularly Māori students, and recognises their role in reclaiming their place within the dialogue of education.

Recent educational policy has focused on ensuring equitable educational outcomes for Māori learners as a key element in the ongoing evaluation of New Zealand schools (Education Review Office, 2022). Māori students, like other Indigenous students globally, have been underserved by schooling systems that have not appropriately recognised or incorporated Indigenous cultural knowledge, history, and language into everyday learning (Webber & O'Connor, 2019). New Zealand educators are encouraged to provide educational environments which are strengths-based, facilitate Māori student belonging and prioritise relationships with Māori students and their families (Ministry of Education, n.d.).

The research reported in this paper prioritises Māori student voice to identify the factors that impact their motivation and engagement at school. According to Cook-Sather (2014) 'inviting students to be participants and agents in research on educational practice challenges deep-seated social and cultural assumptions about the capacity of young people and children to discern and analyse affective approaches to teaching and learning' (p. 133). Given the historical tendency to pathologise, invisibilise and erase Indigenous voice in research (Smith, 2002), ensuring the voices of Māori students are prioritised, amplified and taken seriously in educational research is critical for understanding the changes required if our schooling systems are to better serve them. The New Zealand education system continues to uphold colonising educational frames of reference and negative misrepresentations of Māori student underachievement, which Jackson (2019) terms 'mythtakes'. These mythtakes are 'deliberately concocted falsehoods' (Jackson, 2019, p. 102) that blame Māori for their educational predicament and undermine the legitimacy of Māori voice, particularly as it relates to educational matters.

There has been an increasing move in education toward listening to the voices of students because school leaders and teachers have begun to understand the benefits of consulting with children and young people about the issues that affect them (Faircloth, et al., 2019; Robinson & Taylor, 2007). However, while some school leaders believe they are listening to the voices of young people, the generalisability of student voice in research can be questionable because the most articulate students, who are generally chosen to be 'consulted', carry what Bourdieu terms the 'cultural capital' of the dominant group (Bourdieu, 1977).

Student perspectives on effective learning and teaching

Attempts to capture student voice have become increasingly common in education, as schools and government agencies struggle to improve education for young people (Bragg, 2007; Thomson, 2011). Viewed from within a framework of participation

and democracy, 'student voice' can be seen as emancipatory, where students are empowered to work alongside their teachers, with the goal of directly impacting matters which affect them (Taylor & Robinson, 2009). Furthermore, the insights students provide may provide a valuable means by which to support the improvement of schooling outcomes which are less reliant on teaching audits and accountability measures, and instead include elements of student–teacher partnership (Keddie, 2015).

However, while student voice provides an opportunity for schooling improvement, student voice must be credible and 'consider matters of authenticity, inclusion and power' (Keddie, 2015, p. 242). Criticism of student voice, especially in neoliberal schooling systems, include a concern that the democratic ideals of student voice may become tokenistic (Taylor & Robinson, 2009; Thomson, 2011) or easily appropriated to reflect the views of the adults (Fielding, 2006). Thomson (2011) argues that for student voice to be truly democratic, it needs to do more than simply ask students if they are 'satisfied' (p. 25), and instead seek to promote real change in education that is transformative, dialogic and participatory (Fielding, 2006, 2011).

Educational research involving student voice has been criticised for promising student-led change while at the same time reinforcing the status quo (Taylor & Robinson, 2009; Thomson, 2011). Thomson (2011) has argued that student voice is 'inherently concerned with questions of power and knowledge, with how decisions are made, who is included and excluded and who is advantaged and disadvantaged' (p. 21). Furthermore, Donovan (2015, p. 615) has argued that 'most accounts of students' school lives are targeted towards mainstream cultural understandings'. The student voice most often recorded comes from those who may be viewed as most 'able' or those who are 'popular', when the voice of marginalised students could be more useful (Bragg, 2007; Thomson, 2011). This is particularly true for Indigenous students who are often the *subjects* of research rather than *experts*; a concept emphasised by an Indigenous student in Shay et al.'s (2019) research who stated emphatically 'we are not the problem, we are the solution' (n.p.).

Bishop and Berryman (2006) have contended that Indigenous students can 'clearly identify the main influences on their educational achievement (both positive and negative)' and 'tell us how their educational achievement could be improved' (p. 3). However, traditional schooling power structures, where teachers are seen as authority figures, may limit or disrupt the process and outcomes of student voice initiatives because students may only provide opinions on matters they feel comfortable to discuss, and in the case of reporting on teaching and learning, some students may view teacher's authority as unchallengeable (Keddie, 2015). Keddie's (2015) study highlights the need for a critical lens on student voice initiatives as 'student input is never unproblematically insightful and liberating, just as teachers' attempts to include or "empower" students are never unproblematic' (p. 241).

While there was a plethora of participatory student voice literature, the literature search for this study primarily focused on research which reported on student views of effective teaching and pedagogy as this was most closely aligned with the data collected. The reviewed literature predominately reported findings which emphasised the importance of student-centred teaching practices (Alansari et al., 2022; Attard, 2011; Byrd, 2016; Lewthwaite et al., 2017; Strikwerda-Brown et al., 2008;

Swaminathan, 2004), a recognition that student learning is interconnected with the lives of students (Alansari et al., 2022) and the importance of supportive student–teacher relationships (Bishop et al., 2003; Donovan, 2015; Lewthwaite et al., 2015) Additionally, the current literature describing the perspectives of Indigenous students highlights the importance of teachers valuing the cultural context of students, and using pedagogical approaches which affirm their cultural identities and unique perspectives (Alansari et al., 2022; Bishop et al., 2003; Donovan, 2015; Lewthwaite et al., 2015; Lowe & Weuffen, 2023; Shay et al., 2019). Shay et al. (2023) state that when given the opportunity to speak about their educational perspectives and experiences Indigenous students speak 'paradoxically to how Indigenous young people are represented in education policy, literature, and the media' (p. 338).

Student centred teaching and the importance of the student–teacher relationship

Indigenous students value teachers who adopt student-centred teaching practices which are responsive to their individual learning needs (Alansari et al., 2022; Lewthwaite et al., 2017). Students show a preference for teaching styles which include active or collaborative learning opportunities (Attard, 2011; Strikwerda-Brown et al., 2008), they appreciate having choice over their learning and note their increased engagement with learning tasks which have relevance for their daily lives (Attard, 2011; Byrd, 2016).

Culturally responsive student–teacher relationships are described as being built on warm interactions with teachers who take an active interest in students' lives (Donovan, 2015; Haig & Sexton, 2014; Lewthwaite et al., 2015). Warm interactions with teachers are often perceived as the basis of effective pedagogical relationships and Indigenous Australian students appreciate having a teacher who is interested in their life, and shares details of themselves with the class (Lewthwaite et al., 2015). Māori students value teachers who recognise that they are part of a wider family and community collective, and teachers who are respectful of the experiences they gain outside of the school gate (Alansari et al., 2022). The research consistently reveals that when teachers have a genuine interest and respect for Indigenous students it builds trust, makes students feel important and in doing so creates a welcoming atmosphere where they can thrive (Burgess & Berwick, 2009; Donovan, 2015; Haig & Sexton, 2014; Lewthwaite et al., 2015).

Teachers who believe in their ability to impact student outcomes create the foundation for an effective student–teacher relationship (Bishop et al., 2003, 2011; Lewthwaite et al., 2015; Wilson & Corbett, 2007). In New Zealand, the Te Kotahitanga research project, found that the student–teacher relationship was the most important factor for Māori student achievement (Bishop et al., 2003). These researchers partnered with Year 9–10 Māori students (aged 13–15 years), their parents, and teachers, to develop a profile of effective teaching. The profile encourages teachers to reject deficit theories about Māori student achievement and instead focus on developing a student–teacher relationship which is built on care, positions

students as culturally located, shifts classroom approaches to include more interactive models of teaching, and is premised on high expectations for student performance (Bishop et al., 2003, 2011).

Rubie-Davies (2015) describes high expectation teachers as those who allow students more autonomy by setting their own goals and making decisions about their own learning. High expectation teachers view students who aren't performing to their potential as lacking motivation, as opposed to ability. These teachers believe that providing stimulating, thought provoking activities intrinsically motivates students to learn and ensures they are engaged in the learning process (Rubie-Davies, 2015).

Developing a sense of belonging in culturally relevant classrooms

Teachers that connect learning to the cultural context of their students enable them to develop a sense of belonging to the learning environment, which in turn encourages them to engage with lessons and to see school as a valuable place to be (Bishop et al., 2003; Burgess & Berwick, 2009; Byrd, 2016; Swaminathan, 2004). Students require teachers to ensure their intelligence is recognised and that their cultural knowledge is regarded as an asset in their learning. This asset orientation inverts the deficit view that regards non-dominant families and communities as requiring rescuing by those that hold valuable knowledge and experiences that are perceived to better foster educational development. A justice-orientated strategy is to design curriculum that makes meaningful connection with ways of knowing in students' lives beyond school (Zipin, 2009). Furthermore, when the culture of the student is prioritised, the student is motivated by being able to use their existing knowledge as a base for new learning (Bishop et al., 2003). Schools that provide an educational context which values Indigenous culture and enables students to develop pride in their cultural identity, have been shown as vital for academic self-efficacy and future aspirations (Lowe & Weuffen, 2023; Macfarlane et al., 2014).

The literature suggests both the family and wider community provide important content and contexts for student learning. Teachers are encouraged to use the funds of knowledge and expertise of the school community in developing a curriculum which is both culturally relevant and grounded in the local context (Alansari et al., 2022; Bishop et al., 2003; Milgate & Giles-Browne, 2013). When schools purposefully establish structures that support the authentic involvement of families from traditionally excluded communities, provide flexible opportunities for participation and recognise the opportunities provided by partnerships for teachers to draw on funds of knowledge held by these communities, families who were previously excluded become increasingly involved, which in turn positively influences their children's learning (Diez, et al., 2011). Studies that focused on gathering the voice of Indigenous students show that they benefit from teachers who understand their particular cultural context and can integrate curriculum learning with their prior knowledge (Bishop et al., 2003; Byrd, 2016). Students rely on gaining considerable knowledge and opportunity to learn from teachers who are best placed to respond to those needs

when they know and understand their students, their communities, and adapt their teaching to suit.

Methodology

Context

The schools involved in the study are from one school community in the North Island of New Zealand and were members of a joint professional learning community (Ministry of Education, 2021). Māori made up the majority of the student population at eight of the 10 schools who agreed to participate in the research project. The schools were all located in low-income communities which offered free school lunches to students (Highfield & Webber, 2021a). The professional learning community had a collective goal focused on working together to develop educational environments where Māori cultural practices, knowledge and language were authentically embedded within the school curriculum. Five of the schools that participated in this project provided the option of both Māori or English medium instruction for students. Their school leaders and teachers had developed relationships with local iwi (tribal groups) and some had begun drawing on the knowledge and wisdom of iwi mātanga (tribal experts) to develop a localised curriculum with deep personal relevance for those Māori students with multi-generational ancestral connections to the region (Highfield & Webber, 2021b). The data was collected between mid 2019 and 2022, during the COVID-19 pandemic, which in the New Zealand context meant long interruptions to schooling due to lockdown conditions and the closure of the New Zealand border to non-nationals.

The results reported in this paper include quantitative and qualitative data collected from 923 primary and intermediate student participants who self-identified as Māori. Students completed the *Kia Tu Rangatira Ai Survey* (Webber, 2019) to share their perspectives about the factors that support their motivation and engagement toward learning. The research team ensured every student at all 10 participating primary and intermediate schools had an informed opportunity to complete a survey to record their perceptions about the extent to which their teachers and school environment supported their learning. The 'digital divide' (Terrell Hanna, 2021) created by poverty within this community, was navigated by providing students with either an online link to the survey and/or a paper-based option for completion.

The survey was strengths-based, comprising a total of 49 questions eliciting responses to Likert scale statements, multiple choice and open-ended questions. AKaupapa Māori approach was taken in both the design and administration of the survey (Smith, 1997, 2002), ensuring data was gathered in culturally appropriate and respectful ways. The Kaupapa Māori approach included a bicultural partnership between two lead researchers, one of whom is Māori with genealogical links to the region where the study was undertaken. Furthermore, relationships with, and leadership by, school leaders were prioritised throughout the project, four of whom had genealogical links to the local Māori tribe where the research was conducted (Highfield & Webber, 2021a). As a Kaupapa Māori research project,

teachers and school leaders acted as research-partners, experts and advisors in gathering, analysing and interpreting school-level data. This project was also strengths-based in suggesting ways teachers might better serve Māori students by accentuating what works for them, according to them—changing the standard Māori student narrative from one of problems, deficit and underachievement, to accounts of reclamation, resilience and wisdom.

The student survey data utilised in this study were collected between February 2020 and September 2020, and gathered in three primary schools, one intermediate school, and six contributing schools from one community. School leaders facilitated the completion of surveys by participants using a mix of electronic and hard-copy format and they were submitted to the researchers anonymously (Table 1).

In this study an unwavering focus on student voice was honoured by prioritising students' qualitative feedback responses first—rather than statistically analysing the quantitative data and having those results influence our interpretation of the qualitative data. We focused solely on student voice as a means of esteeming their capacity to discern the most effective approaches to teaching and learning for them.

Thematic analysis was undertaken of the data gathered for two of the qualitative survey questions:

1. Tell me about a time when you felt really successful at school. What happened?
2. What is the best thing a teacher has done to help you be successful at school?

Qualitative data was coded using an inductive approach to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012) including coding the specific differences in student comments for each survey question. Student comments were placed into multiple codes if their response to a survey question included more than one theme. Once coding was complete, they were merged into overarching themes in discussion with the wider research collective. The quantitative data was drawn from survey

Table 1 Māori student participants

Year grouping	Year	Participants	Participant number by year grouping
	Year 1 (age 5–6)	35	
Years 1–3	Year 2 (age 6–7)	52	205
	Year 3 (age 7–8)	118	
	Year 4 (age 8–9)	153	
Years 4–6	Year 5 (age 9–10)	187	534
	Year 6 (age 10–11)	194	
	Year 7 (age 11–12)	88	
Years 7–8	Year 8 (age 12–13)	96	184
	Total	923	

items related to how well students perceived they were achieving at school, their motivation and enjoyment of school, who students perceived most supported their success at school and the attributes of their 'favourite' teacher.

Quantitative data was drawn directly from the survey tool and sorted using Excel. Data was banded into year groupings in order to compare if student motivation changed over time. Percentages were calculated for the student responses to the single-item multiple-choice questions and responses to both open-ended questions were coded, counted, and analysed, to examine differences.

Ethical approval was received under the University of Auckland Code for Human Ethics (UAHPEC Approval Number: 024166) and included aspects of informed consent, participant confidentiality and anonymity. The Te Ara Tika guidelines for Māori research were adhered to, ensuring the research was conducted within a Māori ethical framework (Hudson et al., 2010). Self-determination was considered in the co-design of the project with school leaders and iwi members. The project design included reciprocity in the form of returning anonymised data back to the schools for their own use and reporting, and detailed verbal and written reports of school level data following the administration of the survey. Furthermore, Māori values, concepts and protocols were actively practised throughout the project by the research team (Highfield & Webber, 2021a).

Results

The quantitative and qualitative results illustrate the ways Māori students encounter and perceive teaching and learning within their schools. The research aimed to understand how these students describe success at school, who they identify as helping them to achieve success and how they describe the qualities of their favourite teachers.

The survey asked students (Years 1–8) how well they believed they were doing in their schoolwork. The most common response by students was 'average' with very few Māori students believing they were achieving 'below average' or 'way below average'. The year-grouping bands showed that older students were less likely to rate themselves as 'excellent' when compared to younger students. Nevertheless, at least 40% of Māori students in all year groups rated themselves as either 'excellent' or 'above average' in their school work. The results for this question are illustrated in Fig. 1.

Questions designed to elicit student attitudes and motivations toward school found that approximately 78% of Māori students said that it was 'very true' or 'mostly true' that they enjoy learning new things while at school, while 75% indicated they find school fun. A further question asked Māori students to comment on their work ethic while at school and found that 74% of the students responded that they try hard to do well in school either 'most' or 'all of the time'.

When students were asked questions designed to understand their motivations towards learning, 76% of Māori students answered that it was 'very true' or 'mostly true' that they went to school because they like learning new things while 83% of Māori students indicated that they go to school because they want to get a good job
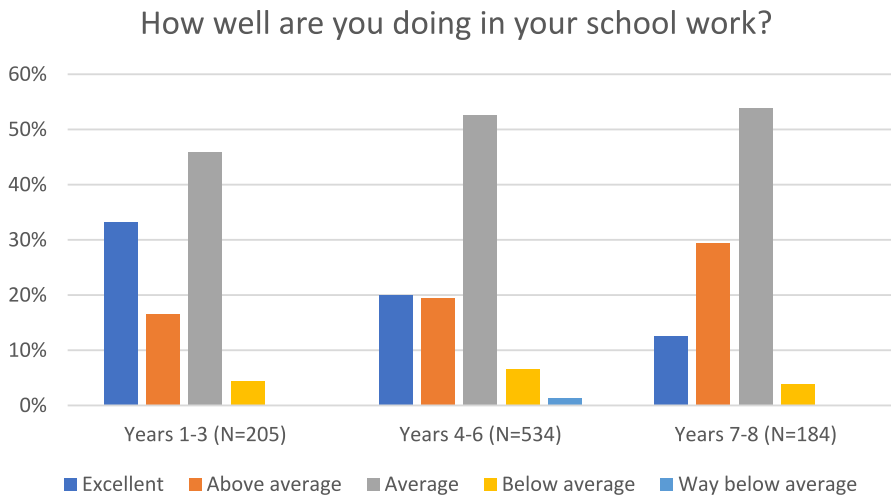
How well are you doing in your school work?

Fig. 1 Māori student perceptions of their ability at school—by year-group bands

when they are older. Furthermore, 81% of all Māori students indicated it was 'very true' or 'mostly true' that they go to school to make their family proud.

The survey contained open-ended questions to gather student perceptions about the factors that support their learning and achievement while at school. The survey asked students to recount a time they felt successful while at school. Many students gave more than one answer to the question meaning their response was coded into more than one theme. A total of 1108 responses were coded as outlined in Table 2 below.

Table 2 Student perceptions of feeling success at school

Tell me about a time when you felt really successful at school. What happened?	% of total comments
Curriculum areas (literacy, math, science, art, Māori culture etc.)	24
Working hard, finishing work or achieving learning goals	9
Teacher and whānau recognition of my work	5
Coming first or receiving high grades	8
Receiving awards or certificates	11
Social aspects (friendships or helping others)	8
Leadership opportunities or representing the school	5
Extra-curricular—Sporting and cultural groups	13
Making good choices	1
Feels successful but didn't explain why	4
Doesn't feel successful	2
Student answered "I don't know" or left blank	10

The qualitative data shows that 24% of Māori student comments related to students feeling successful while learning subjects within the curriculum, with most of the comments relating to learning in literacy and/or mathematics. Students provided comments such as 'Writing. I wrote a great story' (Year 3) or 'Maths. I can add sums' (Year 3). Furthermore, 9% of comments from Māori students related to feeling successful when they put effort into a difficult task, completed their work in a timely manner or achieved their learning goals. Responses were coded into this category when students made comments such as 'I felt successful because I did a good job and finished my work' (Year 7). The results show that 5% of comments referred to feeling successful when they received teacher or whānau recognition for their work. Students said things like 'I did really well in writing and I got a 100%' (Year 5). Approximately 12% of comments related to feeling successful when teachers recognised excellent work with rewards or certificates.

A further question asked students, *who* had supported them to be successful at school. Of the 923 respondents, 189 students indicated more than one option, revealing 23% of the sample drew on multiple networks of support to help them succeed. Whānau and caregivers were perceived as most supportive for all year group bands. Student responses for this question are illustrated in Fig. 2 below.

Students were also asked to comment on the things that their teachers do best to support their success at school. A large proportion of the students (88%) answered the question, some providing more than one response, meaning 952 comments were analysed. Students were most likely to comment on the help and support their teachers provided to support their learning. The comments were coded into seven themes and can be viewed in Table 3 below.
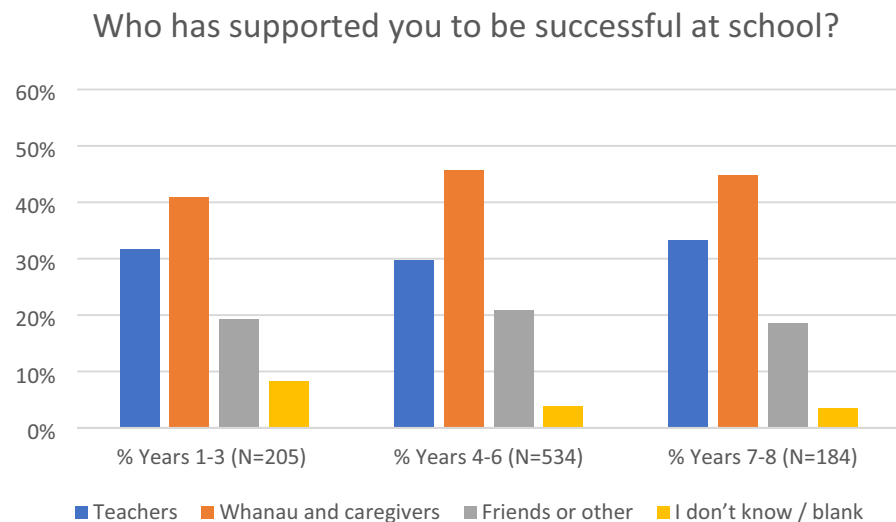

Who has supported you to be successful at school?

Fig. 2 Student perceptions of the people who have supported them to be successful at school—by year group bands

Table 3 Student perceptions of how teachers support them to be successful at school

What is the best thing a teacher has done to help you be successful at school?	% of total comments
Help and support learning and teaching (general)	60
Supportive teaching approaches e.g. encouragement, listening, explaining things clearly and setting work at the right level	17
Having a genuine interest and care. Being kind	3
Providing pastoral support, advice and goal setting	5
Provide sporting opportunities	1
Other	1
Nothing	1
Student answered "I don't know" or left blank	12

Of the 952 comments, 60% of all comments related to the general help and support teachers provide with learning. Students commented 'They have helped me with my work when I needed help the most' (Year 8).

Comments also provided detail about the specific teaching approaches which students find help them to be successful at school (17%). The most common comment in this category related to encouragement and praise by the teacher. Students wrote comments like '[they] encourage me to keep going when I am struggling' (Year 4). The remaining comments associated with this theme were split between providing challenging work, explaining things clearly, making learning fun, providing feedback, listening and providing homework. Responses revealed that students appreciated teachers with deep content knowledge with the ability to communicate their knowledge well. There were also a small number of comments related to providing work at the right level of difficulty. While these students noted specific teacher actions, many more students simply stated they want teachers to provide them with help and support when needed.

Just 5% of student comments related to teachers providing pastoral support, advice and goal setting. Students commented on their teachers helping them develop skills such as confidence, emotional control, friendships skills and social values. Fewer than 2% of comments in this category related to teachers helping students to achieve their goals.

Finally, students were provided space in the survey to describe their favourite teacher in five words. Many students named a particular teacher which were subsequently deleted from the data before being entered into the word cloud generator. Figure 3 highlights the most common attributes found in student responses. The most common word to appear was *kind* ($n=534$), followed by *funny* ($n=485$), *smart* ($n=325$), *fun* ($n=311$), *caring* ($n=245$) and *pretty* ($n=85$).

Many students were effusive about the attributes of their favourite teacher, for example one student wrote 'kind, good listener, respectful, sometimes annoying, BEST TEACHER EVER!!!!' (Year 8). Other students wrote attributes which could be interpreted as negative, for example 'growly' was written by 13 students as an attribute of their favourite teacher and when they wrote a negative attribute it was

Fig. 3 Student descriptions of their favourite teacher

always accompanied by many positive attributes. In addition, some students used the space to describe their favourite teacher's physical appearance and personality, for example one student wrote that their teacher was 'lovely, friendly, pretty, trendy, colourful' (Year 4).

Discussion

The research reported in this paper draws from a significant recent data set of Māori students (aged 5–13 years old) who are living in a concentrated urban area of New Zealand. A larger sample of student responses to the *Kia tū Rangatira Ai* study from throughout New Zealand are published in the report *Conceptualising Māori and Pasifika Aspirations and Striving for Success: COMPASS* (Alansari et al., 2022) and therefore this report provides useful comparative evidence that is referenced within this section.

Students' perceptions of their own academic success

Māori students' answers to the self-reported achievement question show that most believe that they are only achieving at an 'average' level. However, it is possible that students who participated in this study may have struggled to understand how they could measure their own success without tangible evidence from their teachers and therefore defaulted to a neutral description of 'average'. Self Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2017) contends that an individual's experience of autonomy,

competence, and relatedness to others can foster student motivation, engagement, and academic self-efficacy. The qualitative data from this study showed that Māori students believed they worked hard, finished work to a high standard and achieved their learning goals (autonomy), were accoladed for their achievements (competence), and felt supported by their teachers and family for their successes (relatedness). Therefore Māori students' propensity to describe their success as 'average' at such a young age is perplexing. However, what teachers do in the classroom can have a significant effect on how students perceive their success academically and socially and research by Alansari et al., (2022) suggests that Māori students' self-reported achievement can increase when they are encouraged to develop strong and positive motivational beliefs about learning, and are engaged in learning experiences that are culturally embracing, aspirational, and future-oriented. This is supported by the international research of Marcoulides et al. (2005) conducted in secondary schools. Their multi country study shows individual student attitudes were described as the strongest predictors of outcomes. These authors explain that students' perceptions of what teachers do in the classroom and the extent to which they contextualise learning within real-life problems and hold students to account in completing their work; positively relates to students' achievement in mathematics over time. These authors theorise that there is an 'interaction effect' between teachers' classroom practices and its impact on attitudes and resulting student achievement (Marcoulides et al., 2005). These conclusions support the overwhelming evidence from Māori students in this study that teachers who consistently enact teaching pedagogies that foster competence, autonomy and relatedness can increase intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2017), increasing opportunities to understand how they can increase their academic self-efficacy, achieve their goals, foster their inner drive to learn, and connect more meaningfully to learning content.

Who supports Māori students to be successful?

The degree to which Māori students believe parents, teachers and/or peers support them in their learning is an important consideration in relation to the discussion of these findings, but research about the adults that students believe are responsible for supporting them with their learning is limited (Peterson et al., 2011). In this study, between 41 and 46% of students nominated a family member as a person who supports their learning and 31–33% of student nominated teachers. Previous research using Māori student voice has reiterated the view that support from parents and teachers is critical to their success and achievements (Duckworth, et al., 2021), and more attention to the family, cultural, and societal contexts that support Māori student success at school is needed (Webber et al., 2021). Families play an integral role in helping students achieve success at school through actions such as helping with homework, teaching through everyday activities, providing advice, or being involved in community groups such as church or sports teams (Alansari et al., 2022; Bourke & Loveridge, 2018).

Māori whānau have high expectations for their children's schooling success (Highfield, et al., 2023; Macfarlane, et al., 2014). Research which investigated

the learning characteristics of high-achieving Māori students found that students' motivation to achieve was often in recognition of the consistent support they receive from whānau who push them to succeed at school (Macfarlane, et al., 2014). Students believed school success would enable them to reciprocate whānau support by enabling them to provide for their family in the future, become role models, or to make their family proud (Macfarlane, et al., 2014). Given the importance of family to Māori student motivation, along with the finding that Māori students report more support from their family compared to their teachers, the findings of this study emphasise how critical home-school partnerships are to student learning. This finding highlights the imperative that school leaders and teachers continually find opportunities to partner with parents. Zipin (2009) argues that the social basis of instruction between teachers, children and their parents must support deep reciprocal trust created by dialogic learner-centred relationships. The challenge, as Zipin (2009) describes it, is that parents from historically deprived communities are extremely 'school-shy' and find it difficult to connect with teachers due perhaps to the wounds they have suffered in their own schooling experience.

In line with the widely accepted understanding that teachers can positively influence student learning over and above other factors (Donohoo & Katz, 2017), 31–33% of the Māori student respondents in this project reported that their teachers supported them to be successful. In the research undertaken by Alansari et al. (2022) the results show a similar pattern with 29% of Māori students identifying teachers as key to their school success. There is an international body of evidence which demonstrates that students who experience quality student–teacher relationships, especially early in their school life, experience long term positive achievement and behavioural outcomes (Gietz & McIntosh, 2014). Students who report positive relationships with their teachers score higher on tests of mathematics and reading (Konishi, et al., 2010). In a review of personal attributes a teacher needs to engage Indigenous students effectively, Bishop and Durksen (2020) describe students' academic engagement and achievement as being influenced both by teachers' academic content knowledge but also their personal attributes and core beliefs such as reflexivity and cultural sensitivity (Bishop & Durksen, 2020).

There is considerable research that provides evidence of the impact of effective teachers' practice on student outcomes (Hattie, 2009), but this study investigates the extent to which students state they 'feel this effect'. In student focus groups reported in a New Zealand study by Peterson et al., (2011) students recognised they had a role to play in their own learning outcomes but the first thing they mentioned when they were asked about who supported them was 'teachers' (Peterson et al., 2011). Students in Peterson's study explained that teacher knowledge and positive student–teacher relationships were critical to their success at school and they were motivated to work for a teacher they liked (Peterson et al., 2011). The descriptions of teachers by students who participated in the study reported in this paper, provide additional insight into the combinations of teacher personal and professional qualities that appeal to students, emphasising the importance of their teacher's personality and student perceptions of their competence in the job they are employed to do.

Students' descriptions of the qualities of their favourite teachers

When describing their favourite teacher in five words Māori students included words which described physical and personality attributes. The characteristics described by students as *funny* ($n=485$) and *kind* ($n=534$) are supported by the literature which reveals students want their teachers to be compassionate (Alansari et al., 2022), listen to them, have a sense of humour and ensure learning is enjoyable (Strikwerda-Brown et al., 2008).

In addition, student descriptors related to teachers' expressions of culturally responsive pedagogy are *caring* (245), *understanding* (20) and *good listener* (3). Bishop and Durksen (2020) describe the personal attributes a teacher needs to engage Indigenous students effectively in the learning process. They propose teachers should develop critical self-awareness and an understanding of their cultural selves and their students so that they can strive to build meaningful student–teacher relationships (Bishop & Durksen, 2020). They also discuss the positive impact of teachers being a 'warm demander' which aligns with the high expectations research described in the work of Rubie-Davies (2015). Māori students in the current study often described teachers in combinations of descriptors that indicated a teacher who was warm and caring but expected good behaviour and a focus on learning. One student described their teacher as 'kind, respectful, funny, hugful, growly' (Year 5) indicating that a combination of capabilities in teaching and having clear boundaries in managing a group of children was appreciated.

Māori students notice and appreciate teachers who have high expectations, are fair and who encourage discussion in the classroom (Bishop et al., 2003). Students also want teachers to manage the classroom well so that there are less disruptions due to the behaviour of other students (Attard, 2011; Strikwerda-Brown et al., 2008). Wilson and Corbett (2007) interviewed African-American and Hispanic students of five urban schools in America about their perspectives of good teaching. Underlining the teacher actions discussed by students was a student–teacher relationship which students described as caring. Students recognised that when teachers pushed them to finish work, helped them with extra tutoring and used discipline when necessary, they are demonstrating that they care for and respect them (Wilson & Corbett, 2007). The students who participated in the study, expressed the notion that 'no excuses' equalled caring, which led to increased self-confidence in doing schoolwork (Wilson & Corbett, 2007, p. 295). In the Peterson et al. (2016) study, students in the focus groups commented on how student–teacher relationships impacted their motivation and ultimately their success as they were motivated to work for a teacher they liked (Peterson et al., 2011, p. 6).

Conclusion

Over the last 20 years there has been an increasing focus on students who succeed educationally against the odds and have been labelled 'academically resilient' (Erberber et al., 2015). The student voice collected in this project supports existing theories about the importance of teachers building culturally responsive

relationships with Māori students which support their motivation and resilience at school, but also highlights how inconsistently students experience the effective pedagogies described in the literature and the impact it can have on their academic self-efficacy. Ideally all primary school aged students would state both their teacher and parents as being part of their support network to achieve at school. A proportion of Māori students in this study (23%) described drawing on multiple networks of support to help them succeed but the evidence suggests the teacher/parent relationship is critical and educators should aspire for a far greater proportion of students to consistently feel this level of collective support. International studies reveal that high educational aspirations and intrinsic motivation appear to be the strongest predictor of academic resilience in students, focusing their efforts on the achievement of long-term goals (Erberber et al., 2015). The collective efficacy of teachers must be harnessed to ensure their instructional practices are consistently improved and experienced by students so that they have clarity about how they are performing relative to their peers. Teachers and leaders must pursue forms of leadership that listen to and attend to the voices of the most informed, and astute witnesses of schooling, young people themselves (Smyth, 2006). Through the use of effective student voice feedback, school leaders and teachers can continue to work with families to centre their teaching around Māori student motivation and sense of belonging at a time when inclusion and empowerment are critical for development and success.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

Ethical statement Ethical approval for the study was granted by the University of Auckland Human Ethics Committee (UAHPEC Approval Number: 024166) and included voluntary informed consent. Participant confidentiality and anonymity were preserved in the collection, analysis and storage of data.

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Camilla Highfield is Deputy Dean at the Faculty of Education and Social Work, University of Auckland. Camilla's teaching, research and professional interests are in the arts and creativity, teacher professional development, school change and culturally responsive teaching and leadership. She works on projects with a focus on equity and social justice.

Melinda Webber (Ngāti WhakaueNgāpuhiNgāti HauNgāti Kahu) is *Te Tumu*—Deputy Dean at the Faculty of Education and Social Work at the University of Auckland. She is a *Professor* in Te Puna Wānanga/School of Māori and Indigenous Education and *Rutherford Discovery Fellow, MRSNZ. Melinda is the Co-Director of the University of Auckland*– Atlantic Fellows for Social Equity, *Associate Director*—Woolf Fisher Research Centre and *Co-Editor*—MAI: The New Zealand Journal of Indigenous Scholarship.

Rachel Woods is a research assistant at the Faculty of Education and Social Work, University of Auckland and has worked on numerous research projects. She has a BA in education and history from the University of Auckland.