

## Education Disparity among Māori and Pasifika Students

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Inequity of scholastic outcome among certain ethnic and cultural groups is observed worldwide. In the United States, there is a significant difference of academic achievement and scholastic outcomes between the Whites and African Americans (Gamoran, 2001). Besides, Latino and African American students in the United States are less likely to attend college and perform well academically compared to Whites and Asian Americans (Turcios-Cotto & Milan, 2012). The same phenomenon is found in China, where ethnic minority students, on average, perform more poorly in schools and have less access to decent educational resources compared to the dominant Han race (Hannum, 2002). In Aotearoa New Zealand, it is reported that the Māori and Pasifika students have poorer educational outcomes compared to their Asian and European/Pakeha counterparts (Boereboom, 2017). Māori students also experience entrenched and institutionalised disparities when it comes to acquiring higher education in Aotearoa New Zealand (Mayeda, 2021).

The difference and disparity in scholastic outcomes are not independent factors that function irrelevant of other sociocultural factors and constructs; rather, they are interrelated to and influenced by a range of other factors including socioeconomic status, racism, sociocultural norms and customs, and the level of expectation among education professionals. The following parts of this essay explore and discuss how these aforementioned factors result in the difference of scholastic outcomes among Māori and Pacific peoples/Pasifika.

Racial discrimination is one of the most common forms of discrimination that Māori people experience in Aotearoa New Zealand (Cormach et al., 2019). Just like

the United States and Australia, Aotearoa New Zealand has historically been colonised by settlers from the European continent. Throughout the history, colonialisation involves cruel and inhuman treatment imposed on the indigenous and aboriginal people, in which they are deprived of basic human rights and forced to become labor force working for the benefit of colonisers. The prejudice and discrimination held by European settlers often do get passed down from one generation to the next. It was not until the arrival of Treaty of Waitangi that the racial hierarchy and slavery were overthrown, giving Māori the rights of British settlers. However, government policy has not been able to eliminate systemic racism in Aotearoa New Zealand.

According to the research, Pacific students also experience racial discrimination when pursuing higher education (Mayeda et al., 2014). It is no doubt that the racial discrimination experienced by Māori and Pacific population has a detrimental effect on their academic performance and achievement. Previous researches have proven that experiencing racial discrimination is positively associated with poorer academic outcome and decreased academic curiosity and persistence among minority students (Sanders, 1997). Thus, the speculation that racism negatively affects scholastic outcome among Māori and Pacific students is confirmed.

The second factor that can potentially result in poor scholastic outcome among Māori and Pacific students is socioeconomic status (SES). “Ethnicity and SES are often closely linked and in New Zealand, Māori and Pasifika people are more likely to have a lower SES...” (Burkett, 2014, p. 6). Socioeconomic status dictates to what

extent that parents expect their offspring to achieve high level of academic achievement and performance because Maslow's hierarchy of needs specify that humans need to achieve basic physical and safety needs before they start to think about higher level of social achievement, in this case, academic performance and achievement. Although Māori and Pacific population have been able to attain higher socioeconomic status in recent years on average, the rate of Māori and Pacific people living in poverty is much higher than that of people of European descent (Marriott & Sim, 2015). To put it into perspective, poverty forces children and adolescents to enter workforce earlier than those living in household above median income. Many Māori and Pacific children and adolescents have to take care of family chores, care for their siblings, and enter the workforce because their parents have to work multiple jobs and do not have enough time and income to support the family. Having to deal with familial responsibilities and school at the same time surely diverts Māori and Pacific students' attention from school to family, which oftentimes results in poor scholastic outcome. Furthermore, the lack of income among Māori and Pacific families prohibits Māori and Pacific high school graduates from pursuing higher education, which in turn, will reinforce low socioeconomic status among Māori and Pacific people because the only jobs they can get are blue-collar jobs and they are unable to mobilise upwards within the society with so little amount of income.

A low socioeconomic status also dictates the physical and social environment that Māori and Pacific children and adolescents live in. Māori and Pacific population with low socioeconomic status oftentimes live in unstable and drafty housing where

harmful bacteria and chemical like escherichia coli and lead are found common in the house. Bacteria and harmful chemical in the house can negatively affect people's health, endangering the physical development of children and adults. Hunger and malnourishment, two of the accompanying factors of poverty, can also be harmful to the physical development of children as they are unable to attain the necessary macro- and micro-nutrients for their physical development. Without proper nutrients, it becomes hard for Māori and Pacific students to achieve positive scholastic outcome because academic performance is linked to cognitive abilities including attention, memory, abstract thinking, processing speed, mathematical thinking, and language skill, and malnourished children and adolescents tend to possess a lower level of these cognitive abilities enabling them to acquire necessary skills and knowledge in school (Asmare et al., 2018). Another important thing to be noted is that income disparity and poverty are associated with higher probability of committing crime and using illegal substance (Imran et al., 2018). Living in a poor neighborhood exposes Māori and Pacific children to criminals and gangs, which can cause Māori and Pacific children to perform poorly in school.

The third factor influencing scholastic outcome among Māori and Pacific students is sociocultural norms and customs. Studies have found that Pasfika parents tend to have lower expectation on their children's academic performance (Kim et al., 2020). Besides, Maori who grow up in a predominantly Maori culture are less willing and accepting of 'Western' education system (Graham et al., 2010). Both Maori and Pacific population value collectivism over individualism, and some of the Maori and

Pacific parents may think that their children's underperformance and underachievement in Eurocentric education system are acceptable, thus not giving any academic requirement and incentive for Maori and Pacific Students to succeed at school. In Maori culture, at least when Europeans first set their foot onto New Zealand, children are not expected to learn multidisciplinary knowledge whatsoever, meaning that they have a high level of freedom and leisure time. The traditional tribal culture of Maori people never involved formal education before the British settlers came to New Zealand and established a number of Eurocentric schools across the nation, so the idea of sending children to school and expecting them to excel in school was not a common cultural and social value among Maori people when they made contact with Europeans. In essence, the underachievement and underperformance among Maori and Pasifika students are correlated with their parents' value and belief, which are the results of sociocultural norm of Maori and Pasifika population.

The fourth factor contributing to the poor scholastic outcome among Māori and Pacific students is the low expectation that teachers have on Maori and Pacific students. Previous researches have shown that teachers have the tendency to perceive the behaviour and academic performance of students from lower socioeconomic background more negatively than students from higher socioeconomic background, and students from lower socioeconomic background are likely to receive less attention and reinforcement for academic achievement (Duchesne & McMaugh, 2022). As mentioned before, the rate of Maori and Pacific students living in poverty is greater compared to other ethnicities in New Zealand, it is likely that teachers in the

Eurocentric education system expect less from Maori and Pacific students because of their low socioeconomic status. Although the New Zealand Ministry of Education has put in effort to alter teachers' expectations of Maori and Pacific students, the variance in teacher expectation is still attributed to student ethnicity; specifically, teachers expect less from Maori and Pacific students than from European and Asian students (Rubie-Davies et al., 2012). There is also evidence indicating that teachers accept the stereotype that Maori and Pacific students are not interested in education compared to other ethnic groups (Rubie-Davies et al., 2012) .

Lower expectation from teachers can potentially result in teachers teaching fewer concepts to Maori and Pacific students, and the overall pace of the class, which is made up of mostly Maori and Pacific students, can be slower compared to class involving mostly European or Asian students. Also, expectation entails mutuality. If Maori and Pacific students recognize that their teachers have low expectation for them, they would not be encouraged to learn and put in effort required for them to succeed academically.

When British settlers first set their foot on Aotearoa New Zealand, they positioned Europeans at the pinnacle of civilisation, and a common value among them is that Europeans are more biologically evolved than other races. Social Darwinism and Eugenics movement were able to promote and reinforce this stratification of humans across the globe, in which certain ethnicities are deemed as deficient in terms of intelligence and mental ability. Maori and Pacific students' performance and ability are assessed using methods developed in European culture, which negates the value

and effectiveness of traditional methods of assessment among Maori and Pacific culture. Thus, one of the solutions to inequitable education outcomes experienced by Maori and Pacific students is to make adjustments on current Eurocentric way of assessment used in schools, that is, offer a well-rounded assessment that values the distinct ways of viewing the society and culture and learning and applying knowledge in daily life among Maori and Pacific students.

“Achieving equity in educational attainment for Māori and Pasifika tertiary students is stated as a key objective in nearly all of the universities’ mission statements or charter...” (Nakhid, 2011, p.10). However, Māori and Pasifika students are still underachieving compared to European and Asian students. The solution to inequitable scholastic experience among Māori and Pasifika students relies on the ability of policymakers and educational entities to create and implement culturally responsive policy and practice.

Ka Hikitia is one of the most outstanding education strategies and policies adopted in New Zealand in order to ameliorate the education disparity experienced by Maori students. The aim of Ka Hikitia is to ensure more Maori students can enjoy and achieve academic success as Maori. There are mixed results showing the effectiveness of Ka Hikitia. Despite the best intention from policymakers and educators, Ka Hikitia is not able to change the continuous patterns of traditional pedagogy that perpetuated Maori student academic outcome (Berryman et al., 2015). However, report from New Zealand government shows that Ka Hikitia has contributed to increased commitment to improve Maori students’ success in education and teaching practices that recognise



Maori identity, language, and culture. Considering that Ka Hikitia was introduced about two decades ago and reauthorized two times, it is best to carry out further assessment on its success and failure in the years to come.

Ka Hikitia, along with other policies designed to reduce education disparity of Maori and Pacific students, is not enough to make a systematic change on a national level because it only provides principles and guidelines to educators, and it remains unclear to educators that how and to what extent they should modify their pedagogy according to the principles and guidelines. Thus, teachers should not only adopt the values and principles involved in policies like Ka Hikitia but also adopt culturally responsive pedagogy to meet the demand of Maori and Pacific students. In essence, culturally responsive teaching/pedagogy revolves around providing child-centred learning, involving whanau into the learning process, utilising the past experience and knowledge learned by students to adjust learning material, and creating a benign learning environment for all students, regardless of their ethnicity (Tutbury, 2020).

To incorporate culturally responsive pedagogy is to affirm students' own unique cultural and ethnic background and help them to acquire critical thinking skills that challenge social inequity. For example, literacy and numeracy may not be deemed as the most valuable skill by Maori and Pacific students, so teachers should refrain from using standardized tests of literacy and numeracy as the only way to assess Maori and Pacific students. Besides, teachers should realize that Maori or Pacific populations are not homogeneous, they as well have sub-groups like Europeans, and different sub-groups within Maori and Pasifika populations have different sociocultural norms

and customs. Instead of identifying Maori students as one group, teachers could take a further step to learn the difference among different Maori tribes so that they can build a relationship and connect with Maori students on a personal level. Also, incorporating Maori or Pasifika language can enable students to have a sense of belonging, which in turn can propel them to pursue better education outcome.

Aside from all the solutions mentioned above, schools can also offer curricula on Maori and Pacific culture and history for all the students. It is possible that Maori and Pacific students will be able to learn and appreciate their own heritage through the curricula. Besides, curricula on Maori and Pacific culture and history can serve as a way to raise awareness on racism and discrimination among students of other ethnic group

In conclusion, education disparity is observed in Maori and Pacific students. The main factors contributing to this education disparity include socioeconomic status, racism, sociocultural norms and customs, and the level of expectation among education professionals. There has been effort made to reduce disparity but education disparity will always remain as long as the the issues of socioeconomic status, racism, sociocultural norm (the view that certain culture is deficient in nature), and low expectation of teachers are not solved.

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