

# “YOU’VE GOTTA SET A PRECEDENT”

---

## Māori and Pacific voices on student success in higher education

*David Tokiharu Mayeda\**

*Moeata Keil†*

*Hilary Dansey Dutton‡*

*I.-Futa-Helu ‘Ofamo‘oni§*

### Abstract

A substantial body of literature has examined the challenges that indigenous students face in higher education. Across Aotearoa New Zealand, the indigenous Māori population is under-represented at the university level, as are ethnically diverse Pacific students who trace their ancestries to neighbouring Pacific nations. This study relies on focus group interviews with high-achieving Māori and Pacific students ( $N = 90$ ) from a large New Zealand university. Using kaupapa Māori (theory and methodology grounded in a Māori world view) and Pacific research principles, the study identifies the social factors contributing to indigenous students’ educational success. Three broad themes emerged from discussions: family and university role modelling and support; indigenous teaching and learning practices; and resilient abilities to cope with everyday colonialism and racism. A positive indigenous ethnic identity ties these themes together, ultimately serving as the steady factor driving Māori and Pacific students’ achievement motivation.

\* Lecturer, Sociology, University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand. Email: d.mayeda@auckland.ac.nz

† MA student, Sociology, University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand.

‡ Honours student, Education, University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand.

§ MSW student, University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand.

## Keywords

Māori, Pacific, indigenous, higher education, achievement motivation, everyday colonialism

### Introduction

A small country with approximately 4.3 million residents, Aotearoa New Zealand (hereafter referred to as New Zealand) represents a locale where British colonialism functioned in traditional form before being replaced by contemporary neocolonial systems. Historically, British-based education in New Zealand supported the European settler population, producing surplus capital that enhanced greater participation in the global economy. These objectives also entailed assimilating the indigenous Māori population (Kidman, 1999). Utilizing imposed education to divorce indigenous peoples from traditional norms and methods of education is a colonial practice that was typical across the Pacific (Benham & Heck, 1998; White, 2003), Canada (Neeganagwedgin, 2011), Australia (Herbert, 2012) and the United States (Ellis, 1994; Good, 2006).

With respect to higher education, long-term ramifications of imposed colonial schooling are evident in the disproportionately low number of indigenous peoples who hold university qualifications, as seen recently in Canada (Oloo, 2007), Australia (Gray & Beresford, 2008), and New Zealand where Māori are more likely to register in post-secondary programmes that do not offer university-level degrees (Ministry of Education, 2008). Though not *tangata whenua* (people of the land) to New Zealand, diverse Pacific people are *ngā iwi o te moana nui a Kiwa* (people of the Pacific Ocean; Nakhid, 2011). “The six largest Pacific groups living in New Zealand are Samoan, Cook Islands, Tongan, Niuean, Fijian and Tokelauan” (Wilson et al., 2011, p. 701), who, despite having distinct cultural differences, share with each other and Māori histories of European imposition. Also like the Māori population, Pacific people in New

Zealand are under-represented in tertiary education institutions. In 2000, Pacific people made up 4.8 percent of all university students despite representing 7.5 percent of New Zealand’s population (Benseman, Coxon, Anderson, & Anae, 2006), though Pacific students are starting to attend universities in greater numbers, instead of polytechnic institutions (Anae, Anderson, Benseman, & Coxon, 2002).

In light of these general concerns relevant to indigenous students globally, this paper examines the social factors contributing to Māori and Pacific students’ academic success in higher education. Following critical race theory, this paper provides minority students with opportunities to challenge dominant narratives, engaging in what DeCuir and Dixon (2004) call “counter-storytelling”. Additionally, considering the ways indigenous people have been exploited through Western research (Smith, 2012), this paper directs extensive attention to its methodological underpinnings.

### Indigenous student success in higher education

Although indigenous students are under-represented in higher education, a burgeoning body of scholarship has investigated factors contributing to indigenous retention in university systems. Guillory and Wolverson (2008) explore the contrasting views of university management with Native American students from three locales in the United States to explain Native American students’ persistence in university institutions. While students discussed educational motivation tied to extended family, giving back to tribal communities and campus support from faculty and peers, management spoke to the importance of financial support

and academic programmes for Native American students—key factors also identified for Native American students in New Mexico (Belgarde & Lore, 2003). In accordance with students in Guillory and Wolverton's study, giving back to one's ethnic community was noted in Day and Nolde's (2009) longitudinal study with Aboriginal students in Australia. Day and Nolde found it was important for Aboriginal students to feel connected to the university through peer networks that prevented indigenous students from feeling culturally isolated. Participation in a university programme where indigenous undergraduates mentored indigenous high school students was reported to be particularly valuable in nurturing positive university bonds.

Scholarship has also addressed the issue of mentorship. Oloo's (2007) research in Canada with Aboriginal undergraduate students and faculty (some of whom were Aboriginal) found it was important for faculty to develop supportive, meaningful relationships with indigenous students that personalised large "anonymous" universities and disrupted racialized stereotypes that some faculty held of Aboriginal peoples. Oloo also highlighted the importance of faculty offering culturally relevant curricula that "fosters pride and a sense of identity for Aboriginal students" (p. 94). Likewise, indigenous postgraduate students in Australia have expressed appreciation for cooperative learning styles that tend to be more common in indigenous cultures (Barney, 2013).

Substantial research has been conducted in New Zealand on Māori and Pacific tertiary educational success. Presence of indigenous staff who serve as role models and mentors and provide a comfort zone within the university has been identified as a key factor in driving Māori (Gallhofer, Haslam, Kim, & Mariu, 1999) and Pacific (Benseman et al., 2006) retention. Bennett (2003) found that Māori students holding a strong cultural identity were more likely to cope with emerging problems in ways that prevented significant disruption of their

university studies, though Gavala and Flett (2005) did not identify cultural identity as an influential variable for Māori psychology students when examining university-related stress and enjoyment.

A number of ethnically based support services in New Zealand have also been evaluated. Curtis, Townsend, and Airini's (2012) evaluation of an ethnically enriched programme for Māori and Pacific students preparing for degree-level study in the medical and health sciences found that providing pastoral care (for example, mentors taking time to provide support and nurture independent learning), culturally relevant course content and opportunities for cohort bonding were instrumental in helping indigenous students feel connected to the university; similar findings were made by Hunt, Morgan, and Teddy (2001) amongst Māori psychology students. Wilson and colleagues' (2011) evaluation of the Āwhina programme at Victoria University of Wellington further stresses the value of peer support systems integrating culturally grounded principles. Māori and Pacific students engaged in the Āwhina programme were more likely to attend tutorials, approach teaching staff and earn better grades than those not involved. Furthermore, the Āwhina programme's benefits were not limited to students; involved teaching staff also increased their cultural knowledge.

The literature on indigenous success in higher education presents a number of trends. It appears to be beneficial when university staff actively support indigenous students and are indigenous themselves, serving as role models and providing comfortable spaces for indigenous students who feel culturally isolated. The other major trend present in the literature focuses on culturally based supplementary programming for indigenous students that buttresses cultural mores through academic tutoring and by ensuring that students' sense of indigeneity is compatible with academic success. The present study adds to this body of literature by discussing how role modelling,

teaching and learning practices, and resistance to colonial ideologies are important for Māori and Pacific university students, specifically as they relate to ethnic identities.

## Methodology

In January 2013, 986 Māori and Pacific students were randomly selected at a large university in New Zealand who earned a “B-” or higher grade point average (GPA) during the previous semester. The “B-” threshold was arbitrarily determined as a marker of academic success, recognizing that multiple forms of scholarly success exist (for example, higher/lower GPA, university admission, qualification completion; Oloo, 2007). Participants from this sample were contacted individually via e-mail, requesting participation in a one-time focus group addressing factors that have influenced their academic success. During an initial 2-week recruitment period, two focus groups were held, composed of Māori and Pacific students known to the research team who met study criteria. Additionally, throughout the study, a small number of students known to the research team were asked to participate—a research strategy that will be explained subsequently. In all, 17 focus groups were conducted with 90 participants (see Table 1).

### *Culturally based theoretical scope*

During and after the study’s data collection phase, the project followed a community-based participatory research (CBPR) approach, which seeks to include research participants in every research phase. CBPR is employed to balance power inequalities between researchers and participants, respecting participants as having different—though equally important—knowledge that researchers lack. Involving participants in this manner better assures that researchers do not use participants, and that mutually beneficial, respectful relationships

yielding transformative change emanate (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2003).

The project also relied on kaupapa Māori (Māori ideology) research principles (Smith, 2012) that stress research with (not “on”) indigenous peoples, utilize indigenous literature, provide culturally safe spaces for participants, privilege indigenous voices, place the onus of change on Eurocentric institutions and demonstrate long-term commitment to indigenous leadership. Finally, Pacific methodologies, generalizable enough to apply to diverse Pacific cultures, were incorporated. From Talanoa methodology (free ranging conversation in Fijian, Tongan, Samoan and other Western Polynesian languages), inclusive space for expression was created (Vaiotei, 2006). This involved encouraging participants to push conversations where they wished and inviting their analyses of content. Research participants were given opportunities to review manuscript drafts, provide feedback, and state which ethnicity(ies) they identified with the most if they were multi-ethnic.

Since completion of data collection, research team members and participants have worked together on multiple projects emanating from the study. Participants and researchers have presented study results collaboratively in activist-based forums, talks to Māori and Pacific high school students, and trainings for academic staff. Participants have also collaborated with research team members in writing opinion pieces published in international news sites and are currently working with the lead author on new, but related research projects. These ongoing efforts that exemplify reciprocity (Pidgeon & Cox, 2002) and support indigenous leadership reflect the CBPR and kaupapa Māori research principles driving this study.

### *Culturally safe research environment*

It is important to discuss the complexity of indigeneity as it applies to this study. Māori are the indigenous tangata whenua of New Zealand.

TABLE 1 Descriptive statistics

<b>Ethnicity A</b>	<b>Ethnicity B</b>	<b>Ethnicity C</b>	<b>Ethnicity D</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Total</b>
Māori				4	10	14
Māori	Cook Island			0	2	2
Māori	Native American	Pākehā	Cook Island	1	0	1
Māori	New Caledonian	Indian	Pākehā	0	1	1
Māori	Niuean	Tongan		0	1	1
Māori	Pākehā			4	9	13
Māori	Samoaan			1	2	3
Māori	Tongan	Pākehā		1	0	1
Cook Island				2	4	6
Cook Island	Pākehā			0	1	1
Fijian				0	2	2
Fiji-Indian				0	3	3
Niuean	Pākehā			0	1	1
Niuean	Samoaan			1	0	1
Pākehā	Cook Island			1	0	1
Pākehā	Māori			1	2	3
Pākehā	Samoaan			1	0	1
Samoaan				5	8	13
Samoaan	Canadian			0	1	1
Samoaan	Chinese			0	1	1
Samoaan	Māori			1	0	1
Samoaan	Māori	Pākehā	Tokelauan	1	0	1
Samoaan	Niuean			1	1	2
Samoaan	Pākehā			1	0	1
Samoaan	Tongan	Pākehā		0	1	1
Samoaan	Tokelauan	Fijian	Pākehā	0	1	1
Samoaan	Tongan			1	0	1
Tongan				3	6	9
Tongan	Pākehā			0	3	3
<b>Level of Study</b>						
Undergraduate				23	51	74
Postgraduate				7	9	16
<b>Faculty Major</b>						
Arts				10	13	23
Education				5	9	14
Business				6	3	9
Medical and Health Sciences				1	7	8
Creative Arts and Industries				0	7	7
Law				1	5	6
Engineering				2	2	4
Science				2	1	3
Double major across faculties				3	13	16
<b>TOTAL</b>				<b>30</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>90</b>

N.B. Quotes are attributed to the Māori or Pacific ethnicity each participant defined as most central to his or her ethnic identity.

Pacific people living, though not indigenous to New Zealand, can trace their indigenous ancestries to broader Pacific regions, namely Polynesia and Melanesia. Most countries in these regions have comparable colonial histories to that of New Zealand. It is also important to signal that “the government of *Aotearoa* has had administrative responsibility for the Cook Islands, Niue, Tokelau and Samoa” (Kēpa & Manu’atu, 2011, p. 622). Adding to this complexity, specific indigenous groups have never been homogenous (Kukutai, 2004). What draws indigenous people “together is a common experience with colonization and racialization” (St. Denis, 2007, p. 1087). Coombes (2013) elaborates, “Indigenous identities form in opposition to colonial norms of citizenship” (p. 74). It is in this spirit that Māori and Pacific participants are grouped collectively in this study, without forgetting the unique status of Māori in New Zealand.

Focus groups consisted of two or three team facilitators and participants. The number of participants in each group ranged from three to eight. Steps were taken to ensure participants offered input without feeling threatened or demeaned. Chairs were arranged in a circle, with participants and facilitators interspersed so no clear markers of authority appeared spatially. Along with constituting simple hospitality, light food and drinks were provided to cultivate social bonds and represent the sharing of *aroha/’ofa/aloha/aloha* (love, affection) in Māori and Pacific cultures. Because spirituality is often experienced by Māori and Pacific people as intrinsic to being in the world, focus groups began with a facilitator asking if participants wanted to start with a prayer; in most sessions, a participant volunteered to do so.

Māori and Pacific peoples tend to view the world in terms of socio-spatial constellations, with social relativity established as a fundamental prerequisite to interaction. For example, Māori use *mihimihi* (introductions) in formal occasions to identify and emphasize links, while Tongans, on meeting one another, will similarly

explore possible kin, kin-like or geographic links to establish the context and quality of relationships (Ka’ili, 2005; Vaioleti, 2006). Consequently, facilitators and participants introduced themselves one by one, telling their name, area of study, and ethnic background(s).

A lead facilitator then explained the study’s background and purpose. Other key points were made to minimize power inequalities. Participants were informed they may ask researchers questions and collaborate with the research team to disseminate findings and engage in efforts that foster institutional improvement. All participants agreed to sessions being audio-recorded. Finally, a humorous icebreaker transpired, acting as a *whakawhanaungatanga* (relationship-building) exercise amongst the collectivity of facilitators and participants, further establishing a relaxed, trusting rapport. At this point, focus groups began, lasting roughly 60 minutes. Discussions revolved around broad factors that impacted students’ educational success—family, teaching and learning techniques, role models, individual talents and motivation, and material resources. Participants also raised topics not generated by the research team, including racism.

With respect to data analyses, audio-recordings were transcribed verbatim, predominantly by the second and third authors. The fourth author then cleaned a majority of the focus groups by listening to each audio-recording and reading the corresponding transcription while making corrections. The first author also contributed moderately to focus group transcription and cleaning. Because all four research team members contributed to focus group facilitation and analyses, the entire team partook in an extensive content analysis, engaging in discussion and debate to identify the most salient themes emergent from participants’ voices on their educational success (Berg, 1998; Bryant & Charmaz, 2007; Huberman & Miles, 2002). These themes have been identified as follows: (1) family support and role modelling; (2) indigenous teaching and learning practices;

and (3) resistance to everyday colonialism.

The focus group cleaning stage was followed by a final coding procedure, in which the second and third authors coded each transcription independently, re-reading each transcription and attributing every quote to at least one of the three major themes, or an "other" category. From there, the second and third authors compared their respective coding attributions and provided a final coding designation to every quote while importing the data into the qualitative software program NVivo (Bazeley, 2007). After discussion, the second and third authors reached 100 percent agreement with respect to inter-coder reliability.

### ***Participant–researcher cultural dynamics***

Despite being collectively young, the research team carries important cultural capital. The lead author is a junior-level Sociology lecturer, half Japanese, half white, from the continental United States, but with family ties in Hawai'i where he spent 15 years conducting research with Hawaiian and Samoan communities. The second author is Samoan, pursuing her MA degree in Sociology. She was born in Samoa and has resided in New Zealand the past 10 years. The third author was an undergraduate student in Education, of Māori and Pākehā (New Zealand European) descent, now pursuing her postgraduate degree. The fourth author is a Socio-cultural Anthropology graduate of Tongan and New Zealand Pākehā heritage, pursuing his master's degree in Social Work. The third and fourth authors were born and raised in New Zealand and are deeply familiar with the local context and urban Māori and Pacific vernacular English.

These background characteristics were instrumental in shaping a safe research environment that yielded rich, valid data. That all student researchers fit the study criteria and could be seen as peers is highly significant. Moreover, it was crucial that all researchers

were culturally competent. Following appropriate communication conventions, including the use of humour and ethnic dialects, created a more comfortable space for participants to express themselves according to their diverse ethnic and class identities.

As noted previously, a number of participants (21 out of the 90) were known to the research team prior to the study through university equity service networks and recruited independent of the random sample. While this researcher–participant relationship may contribute to bias from a Eurocentric standpoint, indigenous cultures stress the importance of committed, trusting relationships and experience working with their communities (Kaomea, 2011), and this research technique has been used in prior research with Pacific youth in New Zealand (Nakhid, 2011). No discernable differences were evident in input provided by participants from the two recruitment pools. All research procedures were approved by the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee.

In the ensuing section, data are presented to privilege indigenous voices, remembering that scholarship on education within colonial settings must "seek the student voices and respect Aboriginal oral tradition as a valid way of knowledge" (Oloo, 2007, p. 98). Furthermore, like Barney's (2013) work with Aboriginal university students in Australia, this project centres "the problems and needs of the students themselves as its starting point" (p. 518), rather than favouring university staff or managerial perspectives.

## **Results**

### ***Family and university support and role modelling***

When asked what factors contributed to their scholarly success, participants spoke of family support in every focus group, frequently as the

first discussion point. Participants valued the everyday ways that family members made space for university commitments. Assistance ranged from paying for transport into university, to constructing quiet study spaces at home, to exempting participants from household responsibilities. These family gestures eased academic workloads and conveyed a sense of care. A multi-ethnic Samoan male participant studying law said his father would “drive me into uni and pick me up in my first year ... he’d also give me money ... He just knew that I was doing a lot of stuff at uni.” A multi-ethnic Māori female in Arts mentioned that

around assignment time, my step-dad, he’s just like “Nah, you don’t do your chores this week ... I’ll do the dishes for the rest of semester. No, you’re not cooking tonight”, that sort of thing.

Some participants, however, explained that attaining family support could take extensive time. Since most participants were first-generation university students, their families were often unfamiliar with the rigours of tertiary studies. A Cook Island male participant studying Arts stated:

How long a degree takes, how many papers you have to do, what grades mean, how long assignments take ... parents think that you have class at this time so you should be finished then and come straight home, you know? They don’t really know the extra work, and if you just call it homework to them they would be like, homework doesn’t take that long.

These comments are strikingly similar to those provided by indigenous postgraduate students in Australia (Barney, 2013). Benseman and colleagues (2006) add that because Pacific communities show disproportionately low representation in tertiary education, “there is less ‘cultural capital’ in these families in terms of accumulated experience and knowledge from which the students can draw to help them build

appropriate academic habits” (p. 154). These concerns notwithstanding, participants stated they “worked out a balance” with their families over time.

Participants also praised university faculty who invested in their academic development. Effective things faculty did to support Māori and Pacific students included setting high expectations, offering extra mentoring time, and providing participants with paid opportunities to contribute to research. Additionally, participants expressed appreciation for faculty who were sympathetic to rough patches in their lives. As a Tongan undergraduate female studying Arts said, “It’s not just the education part that they care about. They actually give a crap about what’s going on at home ... They accept that part of you.”

Role modelling was also identified as a form of support, instrumental in participants’ academic progression. Despite having disproportionately low numbers, Māori and Pacific staff and postgraduate students stood out as role models. Especially when Māori and Pacific instructors drew positively from their cultures during lectures, a cultural pride emanated that helped offset feelings of isolation. As stated by a Māori female participant in Arts, “You feel like you identify with them and like you have something in common with them straight off ... that you don’t have with others.” A Tongan male participant studying Business added the following with respect to postgraduate student tutors:

When we see other Pacific Islanders doing it, we tend to follow the same pathway ... Seeing somebody else who has done it, that’s a pretty big thing. It’s helped, coming to uni, first year, seeing other Tongans who have succeeded in the same field. It’s just given you that extra push, to work that little bit harder.

Participants also highlighted extended family members as important role models who sacrificed so that their children and grandchildren



had opportunities to attain a tertiary degree. As a multi-ethnic Samoan student in Arts said of her family:

I’m the fruits of their labour from the ’50s and ’60s ... coming from Samoa and Niue and going through all this racial segregation ... you realize there’s a history behind you being at university. You want to do your family proud.

A Tongan student pursuing a Science degree added with respect to her mother:

My mum is one of those people who has always fought, she never wanted to be discriminated [against] ... She didn’t even have money to buy her sandals. I’m a second generation of that ... I’ve never had to fight for those things ... my parents already fought that fight. If my mum can do her master’s, I can do my master’s.

Participants were aware of familial sacrifices made in the context of racial disparity and discrimination, adding an important layer of motivation to succeed at the university level.

Finally, numerous participants expressed how important it was for them to serve as role models within their families and ethnic communities. Participants spoke of family members who encouraged them to set positive examples for younger family, as expressed by a Māori female participant in Arts:

I’m the oldest recognized, so to an extent I have to represent my whānau [family]. My koro [grandfather] was always like, “If you’re not gonna do it for yourself then do it for your cousins.”

A Māori female Law student spoke of her obligation to set a high educational standard for her children:

You’ve gotta set a precedent, aye. Like my son’s 19 and then my baby’s 12, and you’ve gotta set that precedent. Okay, I started in

’99; I didn’t finish. I didn’t want my kids to go, “Well mum started and never finished.” It went back to your comment about role models. I want them to look at me as a role model and go, “Yay mum finished, I’m gonna do exactly the same.”

Many participants also spoke of personal desires to become future leaders in their ethnic communities; for instance, raising Pacific families’ financial literacy skills, improving Māori youths’ education levels and decreasing diabetes in Māori communities.

A consistent theme amongst participants was their awareness of support received from family and university staff. However, support was not viewed generically; it was viewed contextually, generating an identity in participants that connected their sense of indigeneity or “Pacific-ness” with university success. Family sacrifices, support from university staff, and role modelling were acknowledged as part of larger indigenous or Pacific struggles. In turn, participants conceptualized their university successes as broader pushes towards community well-being.

### Indigenous teaching and learning practices

Considerable discussion addressed university learning experiences; participants candidly described how their academic success was promoted and obstructed by teaching staff. Without prompting, participants spoke favourably of ethnic-specific equity programmes reserved for Māori and Pacific students, noting the supportive relationships they developed with mentors and peers in environments that were culturally relevant and less aggressive than mainstream university spaces. Participants described such spaces as “comfortable”, where they could relate lecture material to their respective cultures and discuss content without feeling intimidated by Pākehā students, who frequently entered

the university with more educational capital. A Māori female Law student complimented such programming: “Everyone just felt comfortable even amongst each other, sometimes in mainstream tutorials there was awkward silence ... but in [programme name], everyone is encouraging others’ ideas and ... [students] are not afraid to ask questions ... the dynamics are quite different.”

Safe spaces for ethnic minorities within predominantly white institutions have been termed “counter spaces”. Solorzano, Allen, and Carroll (2002) stress the importance of academic counter spaces in universities, where students can provide one another with emotional and cultural support. As a Māori female participant in Creative Arts stated, “The university is seen as a white place.” In contrast, culturally protected spaces allowed Māori and Pacific students to learn in ways that drew from their cultural backgrounds without feeling judged by Pākehā peers or teaching assistants unfamiliar with their cultural backgrounds.

Furthermore, because these academic counter spaces were culturally driven, participants saw them as university efforts that valued their Māori and Pacific cultures. This was accomplished through teaching methods that emphasized collective learning over individualistic, competitive pedagogy. As a Samoan male participant in Law stated, “I think the university should push for that kind of collective learning rather than individual learning. Because I think that’s how we flourish, and I think that’s how our ancestors have worked, and the way our culture is structured.” Unsurprisingly, participants also articulated an appreciation for ethnically diverse lecturers who made efforts to relate their teaching material to Māori and Pacific students, as noted by a Samoan female participant in Education:

Teaching [what] actually is relevant to the student who’s Pasifika or Māori ... engaging your student with understanding their prior knowledge, valuing what they bring into the

classroom, and then writing that in your lessons. I think that’s what makes a good teacher.

Prior research with Māori and Pacific communities has found that enthusiastic teachers who set high expectations for their students (Hawk, Cowley, Hill, & Sutherland, 2002) and integrate culture into curricula (Wilson et al., 2011) increase the likelihood of student achievement. The present study adds that mutually supportive group learning embedding cultural content fosters ethnic identities compatible with university success. Describing the university’s ethnic-specific equity programme, a Māori female participant in Arts stated, “When you walk into the room it’s like you have that instant feeling of belonging ... I do have a purpose here, I can achieve what I want to achieve.” In addition to preventing feelings of campus alienation, these programmes assist indigenous and Pacific students in feeling connected with the university and invested in their education.

### ***Resistance to “everyday colonialism” and racism***

Many participants viewed the university as principally a “white place” not only due to the predominance of Eurocentric curricula, but also because of on-campus racism. Essed (1991) coined the term “everyday racism” to describe the subtle, but incessant ways that ethnic minorities experience racism in contemporary society. Frequently, majority group members enact everyday racism unconsciously without intent. Acts of everyday racism include assumptions of incompetence and/or criminality. Without trivializing historical dimensions of colonialism, this paper terms such occurrences as they apply to Māori students “everyday colonialism”, considering the neocolonial context in which vestiges of colonialism persist. For Pacific students, these experiences are aligned with Essed’s concept of everyday racism. It is noteworthy that the research team decided not to ask about experiences with racism in focus

groups in order to keep discussions focused on positive experiences. However, participants raised the topic autonomously when explaining factors that motivated their academic success. Thus, it was not until the 11th focus group that the research team initiated discussion on discrimination, though the topic emerged in every group.

Part of the everyday colonialism and racism that participants expressed centred on dominant Eurocentric curricula. Furthermore, if culturally relevant content was included, some lecturers perpetuated a deficit model (DePouw, 2012), framing racialized disparities through victim-blaming. A Samoan male participant in Arts stated, "We talk about disasters reduction in the Pacific region and most lecturers draw on stuff like how people are lazy and they just lounge around." As noted previously, those lecturers who incorporated such content with greater sensitivity offset these forms of discrimination to some degree.

However, it was more common for participants to speak of everyday colonialism and racism coming from peers. Participants were especially frustrated with Pākehā peers making assumptions that Māori or Pacific students gained university entrance through preferential treatment, implying a lack of talent and effort. Participants from numerous ethnic backgrounds and disciplinary areas spoke to this concern.

A lot of people just say, "Oh they only got into med school because they're Māori or Pacific." But no, they worked their butt off to get in there! You have to have a really good GPA to get into med school whatever race you are. So I guess there is racism in that sense of competitiveness at university. (Multi-ethnic Tongan female, Medical and Health Sciences)

The ramifications of such assumptions by majority-group students were serious. Participants explained, "What mainstream students require is that we forsake our identity that we've been brought up with ... so we can fit into

their idea of how we should be" (Māori female, Law), and that repeated discrimination "can be quite demoralizing for Pacific students ... they don't speak out, they have low confidence, they try not to draw attention to themselves" (Fijian female, Law).

Ethnic counter spaces were helpful in shielding participants from such actions, but what furthered participants' academic success was forging ethnic identities resistant to everyday colonialism and racism. Numerous participants discussed desires to prove authority figures and peers wrong who assumed they would not succeed academically. A Māori male Arts student said, "It was teachers telling me I couldn't [make it] which made me just push harder", and a Niuean male in Education said, "Especially with people in authority, they run around with all these stereotypes, Pacific Islanders shouldn't be in school, Māoris shouldn't be getting an education ... it motivates you to do better." Finally, a participant in nursing explained that after her classmates learned she was Māori, they suggested she was less deserving of being in the programme, "and so I wanted to work harder to prove them all wrong."

Holding minority students responsible to cope with discrimination is unfair. Rather, perpetrators of discrimination must change their attitudes and behaviours. Still, participants in this study demonstrate how ethnic identities grounded in defiance to colonial and racist ideologies can propel scholarly success. Therefore, while addressing discrimination by majority group members, university management teams should also work with Māori and Pacific students to warn them of possible discrimination and encourage them to consider constructive ways of re-channelling negative emotions that inevitably accompany encounters with everyday colonialism and racism.

## Discussion

Housee (2011) writes that “identities are made and remade within a social environment”, and that for students of colour, universities can “shape how people experience being, belonging and participation” (p. 76). This study illustrates how high-achieving Māori and Pacific students establish a sense of belonging and participate successfully in a Eurocentric university setting. While three broad themes emerged that contributed to participants’ success (family and university support and role modelling; indigenous teaching and learning practices; and resistance to everyday colonialism and racism), what bound these themes together was participants’ achievement motivations that were grounded in proud ethnic identities.

Much like Latino university students identified by Rivas-Drake (2008) who were highly critical of racialized social disparities and viewed tertiary studies as a means of “moving up to give back” (p. 126) to their ethnic communities, participants in this study learned to establish their place in the university within a context of indigenous and Pacific pride and social responsibility. Numerous participants were keenly aware of neocolonial disparities existing in years past and present that had adverse impacts on their families; this translated to achievement motivations grounded in appreciation for familial sacrifices made through times of racial discrimination, or paving the way for younger family members who lacked adequate support.

Participants were also aware of the different ways that everyday colonialism and racism influenced them habitually, within and beyond university settings. For many participants, achievement motivation revolved around proving discriminatory figures wrong and combating neocolonial attitudes that disparaged Māori and Pacific successes. Finally, participants were aware of teaching strategies employed by faculty role models and within ethnic-specific equity programmes that reflected Māori and

Pacific values. For these students, achievement motivation emerged through forms of pedagogical appreciation and cultural immersion. In most cases, participants expressed achievement motivations combining a number of the above examples.

These findings have important implications for universities serving indigenous students and students whose ancestries are closely tied to indigenous groups. It is critical that teaching staff adjust curricula in ways that encourage indigenous and related minority students to discover their ethnic identities. “Having students explore ethnic identity formation in themselves and others is an effective way of helping them learn about cultural diversity” (Phinney, 1996, p. 149). The present study demonstrates, within a neocolonial context, minority students must be supported in forging positive ethnic identities. However, because ethnic identity development is fluid, teaching staff must be alerted to the unique sources by which indigenous and other minority students can construct positive ethnic identities. From there, university educators can work strategically with such students to nurture achievement motivations grounded in a proud sense of ethnicity. As a Māori female participant in Arts said, “It wasn’t until I came to university that I saw how important it was to succeed as a Māori student.” Indigenous and related minority students should not have to attain this level of consciousness on their own.

## Study limitations

Although this study’s overall emphasis unifies Māori and diverse Pacific students, there are distinct differences between and within those groups that can be identified with respect to educational success. Additionally, while the research team attempted to identify gender influences on academic success, participants did not express strong opinions on this. Despite these limitations, this study offers an important snapshot into Māori and Pacific students from

a positive perspective, highlighting factors that contribute to academic excellence. The study counters a “culture as deficit” model, privileging Māori and Pacific voices and placing the onus of change on university institutions. Only when university management and teaching staff truly commit to inclusive pedagogy will more Māori and Pacific students succeed, like these 90 participants.

**Glossary**

aroha/‘ofa/alofa/aloha	love, expressed in Māori, Tongan, Samoan and Hawaiian languages respectively
kaupapa Māori	theory and methodology grounded in a Māori world view
koro	elderly man or grandfather
mihimihi	introductions
ngā iwi o te moana nui a Kiwa	people of the Pacific Ocean
Pākehā	New Zealand European
tangata whenua	the term referring to Māori as “the people of the land” in New Zealand
whakawhanaungatanga	relationship-building in Māori culture
whānau	family

**References**

Anae, M., Anderson, H., Benseman, J., & Coxon, E. (2002). *Pacific peoples and tertiary education: Issues of participation: Final report*. Wellington, New Zealand: Ministry of Education.

Barney, K. (2013). “Taking your mob with you”: Giving voice to the experiences of Indigenous Australian postgraduate students. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 32(4), 515–528.

Bazeley, P. (2007). *Qualitative data analysis with NVivo*. London, England: Sage.

Belgarde, M. J., & Lore, R. K. (2003). The retention/intervention study of Native American undergraduates at the University of New Mexico. *The Journal of College Student Retention*, 5(2), 175–203.

Benham, K. P., & Heck, R. H. (1998). *Culture and educational policy in Hawai‘i: The silencing of native voices*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Bennett, S. (2003). Cultural identity and academic achievement among Māori undergraduate university students. In L. W. Nikora, M. Levy, B. Masters, W. Waitoki, N. Te Awakotuku, & R. J. M. Etheredge (Eds.), *Proceedings of the National Māori Graduates of Psychology Symposium 2002: Making a difference* (pp. 57–63). Hamilton, New Zealand: University of Waikato.

Benseman, J., Coxon, E., Anderson, H., & Anae, M. (2006). Retaining non-traditional students: Lessons learnt from Pasifika students in New Zealand. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 25(2), 147–162.

Berg, B. L. (1998). *Qualitative research methods in the social sciences*. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Bryant, A., & Charmaz, K. (2007). *The Sage handbook of grounded theory*. London, England: Sage.

Coombes, B. (2013). Indigenism, public intellectuals, and the forever oppressed—or, the making of a “hori academic.” In D. M. Mertens, F. Cram, & B. Chilisa (Eds.) *Indigenous pathways into social research: Voices of a new generation* (pp. 71–88). Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.

Curtis, E., Townsend, S., & Airini. (2012). Improving indigenous and ethnic minority student success in foundation health study. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 17(5), 589–602.

Day, D., & Nolde, R. (2009). Arresting the decline in Australian indigenous representation at university: Student experience as a guide. *Equal Opportunities International*, 28(2), 135–161.

- DeCuir, J. T., & Dixon, A. D. (2004). "So when it comes out, they aren't that surprised that it is there": Using critical race theory as a tool of analysis of race and racism in education. *Educational Researcher*, 33(5), 26–31.
- DePouw, C. (2012). When culture implies deficit: Placing race at the center of Hmong education. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 15(2), 223–239.
- Ellis, C. (1994). "A remedy for barbarism": Indian schools, the civilizing program, and the Kiowa-Comanche-Apache Reservation, 1871–1915. *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*, 18(3), 85–119.
- Essed, P. (1991). *Understanding everyday racism: An interdisciplinary theory*. New York, NY: Sage.
- Gallhofer, S., Haslam, J., Kim, S. N., & Mariu, S. (1999). Attracting and retaining Maori students in accounting: Issues, experiences and ways forward. *Critical Perspective on Accounting*, 10, 773–807.
- Gavala, J. R., & Flett, R. (2005). Influential factors moderating academic enjoyment/motivation and psychological well-being for Maori university students at Massey University. *New Zealand Journal of Psychology*, 34(1), 52–57.
- Good, A. G. (2006). "Unconscionable violence": The federal role in American Indian education, 1890–1915. *Studies in the Humanities*, 33(2), 283–302.
- Gray, J., & Beresford, Q. (2008). A "formidable challenge": Australia's quest for equity in indigenous education. *Australian Journal of Education*, 52(2), 197–233.
- Guillory, R. M., & Wolverton, M. (2008). It's about family: Native American student persistence in higher education. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 79(1), 58–87.
- Hawk, K., Cowley, E. T., Hill, J., & Sutherland, S. (2002). The importance of the teacher/student relationship for Māori and Pasifika students. *Research Information for Teachers*, 28(3), 44–49.
- Herbert, J. (2012). "Ceaselessly circling the centre": Historical contextualization of indigenous education within Australia. *History of Education Review*, 41(2), 91–103.
- Housee, S. (2011). What difference does "difference" make?: A discussion with ethnic minority students about their learning experience in higher education. *Learning and Teaching*, 4(1), 70–91.
- Huberman, A. M., & Miles, M. B. (2002). *The qualitative researcher's companion*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Hunt, H., Morgan, N., & Teddy, L. (2001). *Barriers to and supports for success for Maori students in the Psychology Department at the University of Waikato*. Hamilton, New Zealand: University of Waikato.
- Ka'ili, T. (2005). Tauhi va: Nurturing Tongan sociospatial ties in Maui and beyond. *The Contemporary Pacific*, 17(1), 83–114.
- Kaomea, J. (2011). Dilemmas of an indigenous academic: A Native Hawaiian story. In K. Mutua & B. B. Swandener (Eds.), *Decolonizing research in cross-cultural contexts: Critical personal narratives* (pp. 27–44). New York, NY: Statue University of New York Press.
- Kēpa, M., & Manu'atu, L. (2011). An indigenous and migrant critique of principles and innovation in education in Aotearoa/New Zealand. *International Review of Education*, 57, 617–630.
- Kidman, J. (1999). A people torn and twain: Colonial and indigenous contexts of university education in New Zealand. *Interchange*, 30(1), 73–91.
- Kukutai, T. (2004). The problem of defining an ethnic group for public policy: Who is Māori and why does it matter? *Social Policy Journal of New Zealand*, 23, 86–108.
- Ministry of Education. (2008). *Ngā Haeata Mātauranga—The annual report on Māori education, 2006/07*. Wellington, New Zealand: Ministry of Education.
- Minkler, M., & Wallerstein, N. (2003). *Community-based participatory research for health*. San Francisco, CA: Josey-Bass.
- Nakhid, C. (2011). Equity for Māori and Pasifika students: The objectives and characteristics of equity committees in a New Zealand university. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 44(4), 532–550.
- Neeganagwedgin, E. (2011). A critical review of Aboriginal education in Canada: Eurocentric dominance impact and everyday denial. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 17(1), 15–31.
- Oloo, A. J. (2007). Aboriginal university success in British Columbia, Canada: Time for action. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 36, 88–100.
- Phinney, J. S. (1996). Understanding ethnic diversity: The role of ethnic identity. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 40(2), 143–152.
- Pidgeon, M., & Cox, D. G. H. (2002). Researching with Aboriginal peoples: Practices and principles. *Canadian Journal of Native Education*, 26(2), 96–106.
- Rivas-Drake, D. (2008). Perceived opportunity, ethnic identity, and achievement motivation among

- Latinos at a selective public university. *Journal of Latinos and Education*, 7(2), 113–128.
- Smith, L. T. (2012). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Zed Books Ltd.
- Solorzano, D., Allen, W. R., & Carroll, G. (2002). Keeping race in place: Racial microaggressions and campus racial climate at the University of California, Berkeley. *Chicano Law Review*, 15, 15–112.
- St. Denis, V. (2007). Aboriginal education and anti-racist education: Building alliances across cultural and racial identity. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 30(4), 1068–1092.
- Vaioleti, T. M. (2006). Talanoa research methodology: A developing position on Pacific research. *Waikato Journal of Education*, 12, 21–34.
- White, C. M. (2003). Historicizing educational disparity: Colonial policy and Fijian educational attainment. *History of Education*, 32(4), 345–365.
- Wilson, M., Hunt, M., Richardson, L., Phillips, H., Richardson, K., & Challies, D. (2011). Āwhina: A programme for Māori and Pacific tertiary science graduate and postgraduate success. *Higher Education*, 62, 699–719.