Gifted Māori: Multiple identities, multiple pathways

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• The aim: Gifted Maori succeeding as Maori

• The problem: Academic/Maori identities and stereotype threat

• The buffer: Racial-ethnic identity

• The buffer: Social-connectedness

• The buffer: Resilience

• The solution: Multiple Identities, multiple pathways

Racial-ethnic identity matters for Gifted Māori students because a strong and positive link to their racial-ethnic group plays an important role in their resilience to contextual and educational adversity.
Data from my PhD Research (1 of 3 projects)

- Semi-structured interviews
- 8 high-achieving Maori students
- Year 9 (aged 13-14 years)
- From multiethnic secondary schools
- Auckland

Does being Maori matter to you? Why? Why not?
How does being Maori impact you at school?
How does being a high-achiever impact you at school?
In what ways do you experience peer pressure and how do you deal with it?
What home/community factors impact on your schooling and how do you deal with them?
What school/teacher factors impact on your schooling and how do you deal with them?
The aim: Maori succeeding ‘as Maori’

- The Ministry of Education (2011) have acknowledged that identity, language and culture are critical ingredients in the educational success of Māori

“The purpose of education is to facilitate the flow and experience of mana in the individual and in his/her community ... The outward expression of mana in the life of the individual is evidenced not only in their skills, attributes and talents – expertise and skill is widely celebrated – but in their ‘spiritual authority’, their intuitive and wisdom filled knowledge and insight of knowing what, when, how and why to do something”.

(Royal, 2009,p2)
Gifted and Maori

- Whangai
- Considered an accelerated learner
- Describes himself as a descendant of Tane-nui-a-rangi who climbed to the heavens to fetch the three baskets of knowledge for his people
- Literate in both Maori and English
- Is socially connected to te ao Maori
- Describes his community as his ‘backbone’
- Studies politics and philosophy at Yale
- Other students comment on how his giftedness motivates and encourages them
- States that ‘struggling is necessary because it forces you to persevere’ – to build resilience
- Articulates and demonstrates the importance of “being Maori”

Ngā Raūira Pumanawawhiti  
(Maori boy Genius)
The problem: Academic/Maori identities and stereotype threat

- **Stereotype threat** is the experience of anxiety or concern in a situation where a person has the potential to confirm a negative stereotype about their social group.

- Stereotype threat can influence academic performance.

- When students are aware of stereotypes they are more inclined to become that stereotype than they would if the stereotype did not exist. Studies have shown that the students that are the most vulnerable to the stereotype threat are actually the ones that care most about their academic performance.

- Stereotype threat is a potential contributing factor to long-standing ethnic and gender gaps in academic performance.

- Repeated experiences of stereotype threat can lead to a vicious circle of undermined confidence, poorer performance, and loss of interest in the relevant area of achievement.
• Du Bois (1989) describes it as a process of “double consciousness” which is a “sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (p. 3).

• When the expectations are of laziness, irresponsibility, low intelligence, and even violence, as they are for Māori (see Borrell, 2005; McIntosh, 2005), the outcomes can be toxic because they can impact psychosocial functioning and the ways we behave in the world.

• When the reflections are received in a number of mirrors - including the media, the classroom, and the street - the outcome can be devastating.

• Māori adolescents must develop a strong, positive racial-ethnic identity to protect themselves from the prejudice, racism, and discrimination they experience, either directly or indirectly, in their lives.
Research on stereotype threat shows that repeated experiences with racism, stereotyping and/or discrimination can have one of two effects:

- the students can withdraw from the context in which they feel stereotyped (for example, rejecting either their racial-ethnic identity or academic identity)

- the students can be resilient and persist and try to compensate for the stigma. One way of compensating is to work to disconfirm the stereotype. This strategy is illustrated in the following quote,

‘Nobody should be like judged just because of what they are...Yeah; it makes you want to just to be at the top of all this stuff...just to show them up’.
The buffer: Racial-ethnic identity

A positive sense of Māori identity is also important for Māori adolescents because it shapes the attitudes, feelings, aspirations and behaviours they associate with group membership.

Positive REI is comprised of components like –

- Commitment
- Exploration
- Connectedness
- Embedded Achievement
- Awareness of Racism

Positive REI is developed via –

- self-exploration
- Peer connectedness
- Family socialisation
- Supportive school contexts
The buffer: Social-connectedness

• The need for *social belonging*, for seeing oneself as socially connected, is a basic human motivation (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; MacDonald & Leary, 2005).

• As New Zealand schools become more multi-ethnic, racial-ethnic group membership and a sense of belonging within that group will become an increasingly important element of personal identity for adolescents.

• All of the high achieving students in my study demonstrated elements of “cultural flexibility” (Carter, 2010), that is, they had learnt to effectively manage their self-representations across a range of different social environments including their schools, communities, and neighbourhoods.

• Other resilience strategies that were mentioned by the students related to their involvement in a number of different school and/or extra-curricular activities as a means of, in the words of one Māori student, ‘being an all-rounder – being good at heaps of things’.

• It seems that the students’ involvement and success in a range of activities boosted their self-efficacy and enabled them to have ‘mates all over the place’.
The buffer: Resilience

• A positive sense of Māori identity, experienced as cultural competence, cultural efficacy and racial-ethnic group pride, may help to buffer or ameliorate the negative experiences of Māori students at school.

• Resilience is context dependent.

• Māori adolescents who experience themselves as resilient, and are seen by their communities as resilient, are those that successfully navigate their way through adversity, each in his or her own way, and according to the strengths and resources available to the adolescent themselves, his or her family, community and/or culture.
The solution: Multiple Identities, multiple pathways

• Students’ participation, and experiences of success, in a range of different domains enable them to build new friendships and talents within, and outside of, the school context. As such, they adopt multiple identities to represent themselves.

• Such students can strategically emphasise identities that are valued, and de-emphasise identities that are not, in any given social context.

• These ‘multiple identities’ appeared to protect their psychological well-being. One Māori student emphasised the benefits of multiple positive school identities when he talked about how he stops other students from distracting him in class. He stated,

‘I just tell them to shut up. I am their leader in the kapahaka and waka ama so they kind of respect me because of that. It’s like mana.’
Nga whakaaro whakamutunga...

- A positive sense of racial-ethnic identity can help Māori adolescents to be resilient at school.

- Resilience is not a condition of individuals alone. Resilient adolescents need resilient families and communities.

- The acquisition of cultural knowledge (to nurture Māori identity) alongside academic knowledge (to nurture academic identity) are equally important if students are to buffer stereotype threat.

- Many high-achieving Māori students adopt multiple identities to represent themselves at school and in their communities. They strategically manage the representation of these identities in school and other contexts to their advantage.