

Student voice and agency for Indigenous Māori students in higher education transitions

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This article reveals the complexities of Indigenous students navigating the neoliberal model of education through an examination of Māori transitions into higher education contexts in Aotearoa New Zealand. In a recently completed doctoral study, the lived transition experiences of Indigenous Māori higher education students were critically investigated from a student voice perspective. Data were collected and analysed through repeated semi-structured interviews, focus groups and visual stories in a semi-longitudinal study with 20 Māori students enrolled in a wānanga, a polytechnic and a university. Using a Bourdieuan theoretical framework for analysis, findings revealed that participants experienced their transition as a journey. Students perpetually evolved their identities and agency in relation to the tertiary education environments and social structures they encountered which supported or constrained transition experiences. Within wānanga, participants felt their Māori cultural identity was highly valued; within polytechnics, there was a sense that Māori culture is included but more could be done; within universities, a need for more inclusive practices to support Māori learner requirements was identified. This empirical research outlines learning for Māori

students in higher education, and is a timely addition to knowledge revealing the complexities of teaching in the neoliberal model of higher education with Indigenous people.

Keywords: *Indigenous, higher education, transitions, agency, student voice, social movement*

Introduction

This article reports on recently completed doctoral research that explored Indigenous Māori student voices around transitions to higher education contexts in Aotearoa New Zealand (Amundsen, 2019). Much research about student transition experiences into higher education discusses complexities of contemporary student experiences (see Baker, & Sirling, 2016; Coertjens, Taiga, Trautwein, Londblom-Ylanne, 2017; Frawley, Larkin, & Smith, 2017; Jackson, 2003; Leese, 2010; Scott, Hughes, Evans, Burke, Walter, & Watson, 2014). Most contemporary students are combining work and study; say that they need more support from academic staff, and report gaps between expectations and initial experiences. However, less is known about Indigenous Māori transitions into higher education environments. This research holds up to view the complexities of Indigenous students navigating the neoliberal (Gamble, 2019; Glenn, 2019) model of education.

Aotearoa New Zealand's insistence on progressing with neoliberal policies since 1984 (Ballard, 2012) has resulted in high levels of income inequality and poverty, and a reduction in fairness and social cohesion (Krugman, 2009). For instance, Aotearoa New Zealand has exceptionally high rates of child poverty, with significant and persistent inequity between Māori and Pacific child poverty compared to non-Māori (Duncanson, Oben, Wicken, Morris, McGee, & Simpson, 2017). Education inequities are another source of concern (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2018). Many commentaries in Aotearoa New Zealand since the 2000s discuss connections of higher education with neoliberal discourses in less than positive terms (Ballard, 2012; Findsen, 2016; Rowe-Williams, 2018; Zepke, 2009). Neoliberal approaches reflect governmental values of closely linking higher education efforts to outcomes of employment. In turn, this shapes a society that is driven

by economics, at the expense of addressing the social and cultural deficit (Amundsen, 2019; Kelsey, 1997) it leaves in its wake, notably for Indigenous Māori citizens.

Many Aotearoa New Zealand educators assume positive differences are made for Māori through initiating equity and diversity strategies to meet compliance requirements and introducing culturally responsive pedagogies in education arenas (Kidman, 2014). However, these may be comforting myths that problems such as racism and discrimination are being minimised (MacDonald, 2017; Troyna, 1994). If higher education strategies and policies are to be effective, they must consider the diverse social, political, economic and cultural realities within which contemporary Māori live.

Research points to strong silences around how Māori tertiary learners desire participation and involvement in the higher education contexts (Amundsen, 2019; Law, & Stalker, 2005; Wiseley, 2009). Failure to take into account Māori learners as key stakeholders results in denial of their voice. This research emphasised the inter-relatedness of interpersonal and sociocultural effects on Māori students' transition experiences. Interactions between individuals involved, the higher education environment characteristics and the wider socio-political context were relevant.

Both the capacity of an individual student (agency) and the social arrangements influencing or limiting choices and opportunities available for Indigenous Māori students (structure) are significant. Māori students require agency to articulate their own identity positions, values and beliefs through having a voice. However, the relationship between higher education and social class structure does not easily allow for voices of marginalised populations such as Indigenous Māori to be heard. For understanding barriers and enablers for Māori students who transition into higher education environments, the importance of agency and structure was key.

The agency and structure debate

There has long been sociological debate over the primacy of agency and structure for determining human behaviour (Arab, 2016). Inherently, this article engages in the debate concerning the capacity and potential for people to act as agents within and against environments of cultural and structural pressures. This research considered how agency and

structure influenced Indigenous Māori students' identity and transitions into higher education contexts in Aotearoa New Zealand. Māori students did not create their self (identity) independently from society; rather, individuals were continuously shaped throughout their lifespan through a dynamic interactive process with societal structure.

Concepts of agency involve an individual's capacity to act independently of their own free will to make autonomous choices (Barker, 2005). Some theorists (Blumer, 1969; Hurrelmann, 2009) emphasise the capacity of an individual to construct their worlds. Seen from this perspective, when a Māori student enrolls in a higher education programme, their individual capacity and interactions with others to construct (or reconstruct) their world could be more influential on their transition experience than influences of the wider social structure. If taking the agency view of this debate, social structure is a consequence of the actions and dynamics of interacting individuals; agency is significant.

However, a tension exists here in that agency is not applied in isolation of historical and social contexts and inter-relations (Tomlinson, Baird, Berg, & Cooper, 2018). In sharp contrast to the views of humans acting independently on one's own free will, Bourdieu (1979; 1984; 1986) offers another perspective of this debate of humans as constrained actors negotiating social fields. Bourdieu's theory of agency—an unsteady property of actors that emerges through shifting interactions of field, capital and habitus—was observed in this research as concrete actions or behaviours that Māori students used to navigate and negotiate their space of legitimacy within higher education. Bourdieu's theory offers insights for consideration of an active role for individuals as agents in reducing inequalities within existing structures.

In the context of this research, structure referred to recurrent patterned arrangements which influenced or limited available choices and opportunities (Barker, 2005) in relation to aspects of material (economic) and cultural (norms, customs, ideologies) systems. Debates of agency versus structure centre on issues of autonomy versus socialisation in influencing whether individuals behave as a free agent or in manners dictated by social structures. Karl Marx believed that social structure acts for the disadvantage of the majority of individuals in society (Alessandro, 2008). Seen from this perspective, when a Māori student enrolls in a higher education programme, the wider

socio-political and educational policy context could have a far greater influence on their transition experience than their individual capacity to make an effective transition.

Influential theorists in this debate are Anthony Giddens (1976; 1979; 1984) and Pierre Bourdieu (1977; 1984; 1986). Giddens was interested in reconciling both agency and structure and became known for his structuration theory (1984) where social practices are a result of overlapping intersections of structures and agents. Giddens defined reflexivity as the ability of an agent to consciously recognise and change their place in the social structure (Giddens, 1984). Therefore social knowledge as self-knowledge is potentially emancipatory. (A similar perspective is found in popular education (Crowther, Galloway, & Martin, 2005; GATT-Fly, 1983) although popular educators regard empowerment and 'transformation' as a collective process that leads to collective action for emancipatory social change).

Bourdieu's influence

Pierre Bourdieu widely discussed the dichotomy and relationship between agency and structure; his concepts formed the theoretical framework of this study. Bourdieu (1977; 1984) depicted society as comprising a number of multi-dimensional spaces and sub-spaces (fields). Bourdieu's (1988) description of the university field was relevant for this study: 'the university field, is like any other field; the locus of struggle is to determine the conditions and the criteria of legitimate membership and legitimate hierarchy, that is, to determine which properties are pertinent, effective, and liable to function as capital' (p. 14). Examples of fields in this study included social institutions such as the education system itself, each of the university, polytechnic and wānanga within the education system, and even social groups such as class Facebook pages. Each field has its own set of doxa, or dominant beliefs and 'rules'. When a Māori student transitions into a higher education context, codes, rules and dominant beliefs (doxa) must be understood about how that institution or system of education operates in order to have a more effective transition experience. For instance, in each of the three higher education institutions in this research, there were specific enrolment application processes, relevance of prior education credentials, course assessment criteria, (in)appropriate ways to relate to staff and other students, and how to 'be' a university student to name some.

Bourdieu believed that when an individual enters a field, they always have with them, their habitus, a combination of the amount and type of economic, social or cultural capital that an individual has (Bourdieu, 1984; 1986). Cultural capital as a non-economic social asset (such as education, which promotes social mobility beyond economic means) was central to Bourdieu's argument that education is the transference of culture from one generation to the next: 'cultural capital is added to cultural capital' (Bourdieu, 1979, p. 79). If an individual's cultural capital volume is low in a given field, it is likely they will occupy a lower social status. In other words, when a Māori student enters into a higher education context, their cultural capital is highly relevant having to do with knowing the right codes of what works in various higher education contexts (fields). Yet it is not just the volume of capital that is important. Bourdieu emphasised how different forms of capital are valued differently in different fields. For instance, though an Indigenous Māori student may have a lot of capital that is valued within Māori cultural contexts (fields) that same capital may not be valued highly at all within westernised university contexts (different fields). In sum, the volume of an individual student's capital has not changed, but its valuation has within a different field (Bourdieu, 1984; 1986). Built out of an individual's history and experience, everyone's habitus provides capital, but different stocks of capital are assigned different values by powerful institutions such as higher education organisations.

Bourdieu (1984; 1986) proposed that social strata are distinguished based on possession of resources; not just economic resources, but significantly, cultural and social resources. When all these resources are combined, they determine social status. Division of society in social strata has relevance for Māori in education because typically Māori occupy a lower social class in Aotearoa resulting in an over-representation in crime, poverty and low-paying jobs and an under-representation in higher qualification holders (Durie, 2011; MacDonald, 2017; Marriott & Sim, 2014; MoE, 2014). Bourdieu (1984) argued that social positions are passed on from parents to children, and in a largely hidden process are linked to transmission of cultural capital, thus the socially stratified nature of society is reproduced (Bourdieu, 1973). That is, cultural reproduction.

Cultural reproduction

Key to the process of cultural reproduction are family and education (Cincinnati, De Wever, Van Keer, & Valcke, 2016). Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) explicitly examined the impact of a student's cultural capital on their educational success surmising that embodied cultural capital determines education practices and is determined by social background (parent's educational level). A benefit of Bourdieu's theory was that it reinterpreted inequalities in educational achievement as the outcome of socially determined differences in cultural capital (Cincinnati *et al.*, 2016).

DiMaggio (1982) challenged Bourdieu's theories with a cultural mobility hypothesis. DiMaggio (1982) did not discount the relevance of cultural capital influencing opportunities, however, he disagreed with the proposition that cultural capital is solely imposed by social background. Rather, he said, cultural capital is partially determined by social background, however, investments in cultural capital result from individual agency. That said, alignment exists between DiMaggio and Bourdieu's perspective when considering a Māori students' decision to participate in TE for educational attainment, reflecting that cultural capital is a malleable resource. DiMaggio's (1982) argument reflects that a person's volume of cultural capital (e.g. educational qualifications) can be increased in order to achieve upward mobility of social class. Bourdieu (1977) believed that people can move within the field if they gain or acquire the necessary capital to enable them to do this, illustrating that agency can be viewed as an emergent phenomenon of agent–situation transaction.

Bourdieu (1973) suggested that education perpetuates the dominant culture in society, advantaging students from the dominant class and disadvantaging students from lower classes because of the acquired (insufficient) cultural capital from their family. Students from the dominant class acquire educational qualifications more often leading to higher earning jobs in a disguised, supposedly neutral, process. The present research analysed both structure and agency with equal emphasis to understand the creation and reproduction of social and education systems. Both micro and macro-focussed analyses were carried out through looking at the characteristics of Māori students, as well as the characteristics of the higher education environment in order to understand barriers and enablers for effective transition experiences.

Social movements and popular education

Intersecting the agency–structure debate can be found social movements—groupings of individuals or organisations acting on specific social, political or cultural issues to bring about social change. (Trans) nationally, social movements provide ways for change to occur ‘from the ground up’, empowering oppressed populations to resist or overthrow more powerful structures which advantage the privileged (Pearce, 2013). Within the last century, some social movements have grown up in resistance to western colonisation, one of which is the Kaupapa Māori movement (Pihama, 2016; Smith, 2000). This research drew upon the principles of the Kaupapa Māori movement from its inception and throughout the research process.

It could be said that the Kaupapa Māori movement, as for other social movements, has been enabled through education of the people (Smith, 2000), and is part of a popular and global expression of Indigenous opposition to colonisation. Graham Smith (1997) draws from Freire’s (1970; 1985) use of the term ‘praxis’ to describe the juncture between action and analysis, intentionally co-opting Freire’s words into the movement. Kaupapa Māori theories offered perspectives on the possibilities for conscious transformation of society, i.e., the hope for a future better than the past, which has a mobilising-action effect from the ground up.

The Kaupapa Māori social movement has links to popular education. According to Linda Smith (1999; 2005; 2012) and Graham Smith (1997; 2000; 2012), notions of critique, power and knowledge provides these links. Popular education itself is a concept grounded in ‘the people’ or the popular classes, which, by definition, excludes upper and upper middle classes in the social fabric. Through ideas of class, political struggle and social transformation, popular education has become its own unique form in a context of social injustice based on the premise that education itself is never politically neutral and must side with either the oppressors (who maintain existing power structures in society) or the oppressed (the poorer, marginalised population groups).

As part of the Kaupapa Māori movement, Te Kōhanga Reo (language nests or Māori medium early childhood learning centres) saved the impending death of Te Reo Māori (Māori language), and in conjunction

with government policy, developed across all education sectors (Bishop, 1998; Irwin, 1990; Pihama *et al.*, 2004; Rameka, 2017). Growth inspired, or perhaps was inspired by, a wider undertaking by Māori to influence Māori destiny, question westernised philosophies of knowledge, culture and research, and rights to determine education for Māori, by Māori. The Māori political and cultural movement gained momentum in mainstream society and was backed with academic clout through respected Māori academics (for instance, Sir Ranginui Walker, Sir Hirini Moko Mead, Graham and Linda Smith, Sir Mason Durie). Significantly, momentum grew within the higher education arena. Three contemporary wānanga were established as publicly owned higher education institutions resembling universities to provide education in a Māori cultural context. Contemporary wānanga, although reflecting Māori knowledge and traditions, are framed in a Western traditions of delivery, qualification structures, funding measures and so on. Like other social movements, the characteristics of the Kaupapa Māori movement has a collective social goal to change societal structures and values.

Research methodology and methods

This qualitative research was a cross-cultural study. I was a white-skinned, female New Zealand Pākehā (Amundsen, 2018; Newton, 2009) researcher invited to research with communities of Indigenous Maori students because of my professional situation. Participants were enrolled as first year students in higher education programmes across three different institutions. These institutions were a university, a polytechnic and a wānanga (a Māori teaching and research institution like a university) located in the Bay of Plenty region of Aotearoa New Zealand. Each of the three participating institutions has responsibility for delivering various and differing types of higher education to students across the region, and together form the Bay of Plenty Tertiary Education Partnership (BOPTEP) comprising: The University of Waikato, Toi Ohomai Institute of Technology and, Te Whare Wānanga o Awanuiārangi. In three groups, one for each organisation, 20 students' transition experiences were tracked through repeated interviews, focus groups and visual stories for a period of five semesters (approximately three years).

A longitudinal approach was selected because it related to the notion of transition as a process and spoke to the importance of developing

trusting and reciprocal relationships. I was a non-Māori researching across Māori spaces; insider–outsider and cross-cultural dynamics and ethics were fully considered and addressed in the research process (Amundsen, 2019). I openly established my subjective researcher position, declaring the critical and emancipatory aims of the research. Broadly, the research centred on Māori adult learners and their transition experiences into higher education contexts capturing a student voice (Cook-Sathers, 2014; Kidman, 2014) perspective.

Research aim

This study was intentionally framed positively rather than in a deficit research design. In order to focus on educational success for Māori students, and consistent with the theoretical framework, one overarching research question drove the research:

How do Māori students deploy capital in different ways to navigate transitions into higher education contexts?

With that purpose in mind, the investigations sought to find out what were the transition experiences, barriers and enablers for Māori students as they encountered higher education organisations. Furthermore, the research questioned what were the differences, if any, in their transition experiences into a university, or a polytechnic or a wānanga. During the data collection and analysis phase, participants were grouped according to which type of institution they were enrolled in – a university, or a polytechnic or a wānanga. Lastly, two of the six subsidiary research questions asked how Māori students themselves would define an effective transition into tertiary study; and, what does educational success in higher education contexts mean to Māori students themselves?

Culturally responsive methodology

In order to ensure that the research outcomes represented students' voices and reflected Indigenous Māori ways of knowing, doing and understanding in valid and relevant ways, it was vital to draw upon Kaupapa Māori principles to guide the research process. However, the research was not considered as 'Kaupapa Māori' research as I (the researcher) do not whakapapa (have a bloodline connection) to any Māori ancestry. Cram (2001) believes it is essential for Kaupapa Māori researchers to write about

their communities from the perspective of an insider; it was therefore inappropriate for me to use a Kaupapa Māori methodology.

Instead, a Culturally Responsive Methodology (CRM) provided a methodological framework that, ‘challenges all forms of traditional research paradigms that devalue or dehumanise research participants’ (Berryman, SooHoo, & Nevin, 2013). CRM was an appropriate methodology that also enabled the incorporation of key principles of Kaupapa Māori theory in the application of the research process. There are three key dimensions of CRM. The first is establishing respectful relationships with participants within dialogic encounters (Bishop, Berryman, Cavanagh, & Teddy, 2009). CRM’s main objective is maintaining the integrity of both the participants and the researcher(s) and their respective cultures to co-construct something new (Berryman *et al.*, 2013). The second dimension of CRM draws from the work of Césaire (2000) and Freire (1970) and involves the deconstruction of Western colonial traditions of research (Berryman *et al.*, 2013). The third dimension is cultural and epistemological pluralism, drawing from the work of Biermann (2011). Each of these three dimensions (respectful relationships, deconstruction of colonial research traditions and cultural and epistemological pluralism) provided useful and valid ways to collect and analyse the data.

Participants

The doctoral research received ethics approval from the University of Waikato, Faculty of Education. Participant selection was carried out using a purposeful snowball strategy or what Grootveld (2013) has dubbed ‘kumara-vine sampling’. Although practical for this specific research context, inability to make inferences about ‘all’ Māori higher education students based on these participants is a limitation of this participant selection method. Bias due to oversampling of participants from a certain programme could exist. No participants enrolled in fully online programmes were included; all students were enrolled in face-to-face or blended courses.

Criteria for participation was that each student identify as Māori and be currently enrolled in any of the participating BOPTEP education institutions. Within these three participating institutions, 20 students were recruited from a range of programmes. There were eight males

and 12 females; ages ranged from 16 to 54, though only two were under 20 years old. Not all participants remained in the study. Permission was given by the five exiting participants to include information already shared. Students participated in repeated interviews and focus groups and were repeatedly given their interview transcriptions to review, adapt and change, if necessary. All participants were offered the opportunity to select their own pseudonym in order to maintain their confidentiality, although 12 participants elected to use their own names as they wanted to 'stand behind' the research.

Data collection and analysis

Data collection and analysis were intertwined as a simultaneous undertaking during 2016 to 2018 (Merriam, 1998). In this research, a combination of literal, interpretive and reflexive aspects in thematic analysis was used. The researcher embarked on a collaborative journey with participants individually and collectively to co-construct meaning of their transition experiences. In all, data were collected and analysed a process of conducting repeated semi-structured interviews, focus groups, e-mail conversations, research notes, school tracking forms and visual stories. All added to the pool of data for analysis.

A thematic analysis approach showed the closest alignment to the research question and was used to explore participants' world of beliefs, constructs and emotional transition to tertiary education experiences. Participant approval was fundamental to the validity of the content of the data; a collaborative process helped decide what data should be included and what could be left out. This extended to gaining participant approval of the transition experience accounts exactly as written in the doctoral thesis (Amundsen, 2019) though snippets are provided in this article for the sake of brevity.

Indigenous Māori transitions experiences

Māori cultural identity

In this study, Māori cultural identity was key; all participants self-identified as Māori. As the research unfolded, it became apparent that their Māori cultural identity was a central part of the overall theme of identity. In the literature, research on cultural identity has tended to

be separated from personal identity. However, Schwartz, Zamboanga, Weisskirch and Wang (2010) propose that defining oneself culturally contributes to consolidating a personal identity. In turn, this leads to a positive sense of well-being. From this perspective, cultural identity comes about as a result of how individuals define themselves in relation to culture(s) to which they belong—an interaction between self and society.

In coming to understand notions of Māori identity from my perspective as a Pākehā (Amundsen, 2018), I needed to gain an understanding of relevant interpretive systems. While it was not possible for me to know what it feels like to ‘be Māori’, by understanding relevant interpretive systems such as Culturally Responsive Methodologies (Berryman *et al.*, 2013), Kaupapa Māori theory (Pihama, 2016; Smith, 2000), IK mātauranga (Smith, Maxwell, Puke, & Temara, 2016), and whakapapa (Durie, 2001; Mead, 2003), I developed an understanding about Māori ways of knowing and being.

The subject of Māori identity is complex and diverse, encompassing both historical and contemporary elements. Rameka (2012) explains that historically, Māori identity clearly involved whakapapa, spirituality, family, tribal and land affiliations and Māori language. However, contemporary Māori identities are impacted upon by complex factors including colonisation, urbanisation, Māori renaissance, dealing with the primordial/situational dichotomy of ethnicity (May, 2003), being bicultural and developing an inclusive supra-Māori identity (Maaka, & Fleras, 2005). Furthermore, emphasis on reclaiming and reframing Māori identities within contemporary education contexts can be linked to reconciliation of spiritual connections of ‘being Māori’ (Rameka, 2012).

Historical and contemporary definitions of Māori identity are not exclusive of each other; together they weave a web of influences concerning Māori identity. Complexity of historical, contemporary and reclamation of Māori identity could be seen in 36-year old Watene Moon’s case. Watene’s transition experiences helped him explore his personal identity in relation to others, and to understand his identity as being Māori. Throughout the course of this research, he perpetually re-constructed his sense of Māori identity, first discussing his father’s description of it ‘not being cool’ to have Māori blood in him, then moving towards seeing himself as ‘bi-cultural’ rather than ‘half-caste’. A later interview illustrated his emerging pride in identifying as Māori.

Interview 1, Early 2016: Interviewer: ‘So, are both your parents Māori?’
Watene: ‘My Mum is, but my Dad wasn’t brought up as a Māori, but he has Māori blood in him. It’s interesting, his generation. He’s said once or twice about when he was growing up, it wasn’t cool to have Māori blood in you.’

(Later in the interview) Watene: ‘Yeah, I found it really interesting how I came across to the South Islanders, especially when it came to, well most of the girls I dated down there were blonde haired, blue-eyed girls from Southland. [Laughs.] They don’t have many Māori down that way. I found that really interesting. You get more of a perception of yourself through other people, right?’

Interview 2, Mid 2016: Watene: ‘Like I said, I come from both worlds. Te Ao Māori and Te Ao Pākehā.’

Interview 3, Late 2016: Watene: ‘Because it all relates back to identity and my sense of self. University is very much a Pākehā institution. I’m not saying it’s a bad thing, it’s not, but it’s a culture as well, right? So if you go there ... well you’d know this as a teacher, Māori students feel like they leave their identity, leave their culture, at the door. So, I think if you have that stronger sense of yourself and why you are doing it, you won’t think about that kind of thing when you come into university, right?’

Interview 6, Late 2017: Watene: ‘When I was growing up, the term was ‘half-caste’, but now, since I have been at university, and this is what I mean about being strong in myself, you know, my new thing is, “I identify as ...” [pauses] ... you know, half-caste can be kind of derogatory in a sense.’

Interviewer: ‘It has a stigma to it, mmmm, so what do you identify as?’

Watene: ‘Well, that’s it, I’m Māori! Else I wouldn’t be here doing this research!’ [Laughs]

For Watene, identifying as bicultural and as Māori gradually became an identity of which he was proud. Watene's experience reflected the complexity of historical, contemporary and reclamation of Māori identity and was an example of the interaction between self and society, as social times changed. Other participants experienced personal growth and identity discovery; their experiences illustrated that their 'self' was being constantly re-constructed. Although participants spoke of summer holidays, or semester breaks as a 'pause' or a chance to 'rest' or 'take a breath and reflect', change and re-working of the self, did not stop during these periods. Constructing and re-constructing their identity was a perpetual process of permanent flux.

Watene's comment about Māori students leaving their identity, their culture, 'at the door' linked to another key theme which emerged in this study. Bourdieu (1986) proposed that within a university context, members of minority groups must take on a secondary habitus, that of the university, which closely aligns with the habitus of the dominant group. This group must adapt to the practices, habits and dispositions of 'distinction' in the university context. In Bourdieu's (1977) theory of practice, it is the practices of élitism that build a certain kind of capital.

According to all participants, developing a sense of belonging and 'a right to be in this place' was paramount to enabling more effective transitions. Equally, racial discrimination was a burdensome part of their transition to institutional education experiences and shaping their Māori identity—a factor that seemingly heightened their need for a sense of belonging and being 'allowed' to be there. Participants discussed racism issues relating directly to the failure of the education system to be fully inclusive of their culture which affected their Māori identity. Other researchers have found similar stories of cultural dislocation (Bishop, Berryman, Tiakiwai, & Richardson, 2003; Bishop & Glynn, 1999; Macfarlane, 2004). Māori identity was a key aspect of an overall theme of dynamic identity found in this research.

Emere's story

One participant (Emere) stood out from the rest—an outlier. Her transition involved moving from a total immersion Māori high school into English-speaking mainstream education environments. She attended 12 years of schooling from early childhood to primary to

secondary in Māori immersion environments. In this system, she was a high achieving student and had a high level of self-esteem about her identity as a student. During her last year of secondary school, Year 13, she attended a mainstream English-speaking school. This was a complete shock to her whole world. Although she managed to complete the year, she ‘dropped out’ of English.

Emere had experienced almost all of her early childhood, primary and secondary schooling in an immersion Māori setting, yet she chose to undertake her teacher education qualification at the University of Waikato, in an English medium. She intended to teach in an immersion Māori primary schooling setting. Her reasons were wanting the experience studying in a ‘western’ system, wanting to improve her English and, believing qualifications from a university (versus from the wānanga) were the ‘proper’ teaching qualification.

During her studies, options to submit assessments in the Māori language medium were made known to her, but again, she decided to submit them in English, despite her skills in English being less than in Māori. Emere’s first semester was ‘soooo tough’; she failed two papers. She described her year as a sense of ‘drowning’ as depicted in her visual story of her transition experience (see Figure 1). Her visual story shows her hand above the water and also depicts Tangaroa (the god of the sea in Māori mythology) referring to the traditional Māori thought of the ocean and the land as opposing realms. When humans travel or fish in the sea, they are effectively entering into the realm of Tāne’s (god of the forest and bird) enemy. Emere struggled with her transition into university, resulting in being unable to pass all of her first year requirements. This outcome necessitated her to re-sit certain papers and travel 1.5 hours to another city twice weekly, with significant impacts on herself and her relationship with her family.



Figure 1: Emere's transition experience (visual story)

Overall, participants perceived the university as most different to the other institutions because of its academic, and very western environment. Emere (as with other participants) believed that qualifications from a university gave credibility in the workplace. However, a disadvantage of studying at a university for Māori students was the lack of inclusive Māori content, lack of Māori role models, lack of engagement with wider Māori family and community and the rigidity of the system and staff. Why would Emere not have chosen to undertake her Bachelor of Teaching degree at a wānanga instead?

Part of the answer may lie in Bourdieu's (1977) key concepts introduced earlier related to cultural reproduction: habitus, field, practice and cultural capital. Emere's behaviour may be explained by Bourdieu's theory that power is culturally and symbolically created, continuously re-validated through the interplay of agency and structure. This happens through socialised norms, tendencies which guide an individual's behaviour and thinking, or what Bourdieu calls 'habitus'. Bourdieu (1984) showed how, 'the social order is progressively inscribed in people's minds' (p. 471) through everyday systems and activities such as education, 'cultural products', language, judgements and so on. In

part, there was also an objective reality to Emere's decision as wānanga qualifications may not be as readily accepted in the teaching profession. Emere's story illustrates how 'social order is progressively inscribed', because, in her belief, a teaching credential from a wānanga would not be as valuable for her as one from a university. Her story also illustrates Bourdieu's theory of different forms of capital being valued differently in different fields. Despite Emere's Māori language and cultural knowledge having high value within the field of Māori immersion education, it was less valued in the field of a westernised university system.

Agency

In this research, participants viewed their transition experience as a journey of personal and identity growth—transition as a process. The process allowing people to change their self is at the heart of agency. Part of agency is to make changes, and in the process of doing so, make changes to or be changed by, the environment (Sharar, 2016). A goal within this research was to recognise the phenomenon of agency as it arose in the findings and how it was achieved in the individual lives and identities of the participants.

Agency had an influence on which goals participants considered desirable or reasonable. Glaesser and Cooper (2014) suggest that a course of action is not merely chosen by how likely it is to lead to some outcome, but also by the subjective estimation of the likelihood of success. Students who participated in Māori content-focussed programmes (e.g. Te Toi Tangata and Te Ara Reo Māori Certificates offered at the wānanga) had clear expectations that they wanted to access and improve their understanding of Māori language and practices. They sought to study alongside other Māori students; they wanted validation of their habitus and cultural capital. In this context, educational success meant to succeed academically, and to succeed as Māori—a notion at the heart of educational success for Māori (Durie, 2003).

Cultural values influenced student motivation for participation (Phinney, Dennis, & Orsorio, 2006). Indigenous Māori culture is a collectivist culture; traditional Māori values align education with communal rather than individual good (Durie, 2003; Pihama, 2016). Educational success was education that benefitted the collective unit (e.g. family, sub-tribe and tribe). Ten participants spoke about

undertaking their education to support their whānau or wider Māori community. Linked to these aspirations was an insistence that support from within their family and teaching staff were two very critical enablers to achieving successful transitions.

Participants who chose to transition into a polytechnic or a university spoke about ability to succeed because of sometimes disconnecting themselves from Te Ao Māori (the Māori world and a Māori worldview), making short term sacrifices for long-term goals of completing their studies. Whereas the wānanga and polytechnic contexts were found to be family and child friendly contexts, the university context was less so. Similarly, the university environment seemed less flexible around students being absent for tangihanga (3-day funeral ceremony) and other marae-centred customs. Power structures were constantly re-legitimised through an interplay of agency and structure through socialised norms and dispositions shaped over time that guided behaviour and thoughts (Bourdieu, 1984).

Agency is part of an overall key theme in connection with Māori identity that emerged in this research. Barker (2005) suggests that by connecting agency to an agent–situation interaction (agency as something people ‘do’ together, rather than agency as something that a person ‘has’) the locus of agency is shifted. Instead of agency existing within individuals, agency is shifted to the capacity of the context for action as shaped by the interaction of those individuals in that context. By viewing the notion of agency as connected to an agent–situation interaction rather than something that an individual ‘has’, it is possible to recognise potential for increased agency for Māori students for effective transition experiences.

Student voice and racism

This study was carried out in the expectation that, informed by a ‘student voice’ perspective, institutions and staff may be better equipped to support Māori students in their transition to tertiary education. At the level of policy making in higher education contexts in Aotearoa New Zealand, Indigenous voice has often been marginalised, or grouped in with other minorities as one voice. This research, although primarily conducted by a non-Indigenous researcher, actively recognised the struggle by Māori to gain access to representation at policy-making level and was grounded in Māori student voice.

Perspectives from Māori tertiary students themselves continue to be under-represented in research (Cook-Sathers, 2014; Kidman, 2014). In education policy and research, Māori have almost exclusively been framed in ways that suggest their ‘ethnicised representations of selfhood are somehow disconnected from the wider economic and social forces that surround them and their communities’ (Kidman, 2014, p. 208). If we fail to engage with students about their transition experiences, we are left in the dark as to how their interaction with the tertiary organisation led to their positively or negatively experienced outcomes.

Accounts given below in the participants’ own words are particularly pertinent as they speak to the discrimination and ‘everyday racism’ (Ford & Airhihenbuwa, 2010) encountered by almost all participants in this study. Racism was experienced in the form of attitudes expressed verbally or in writing and/or actions that resulted in the participant feeling emotional anxiety, fear or weariness.

- [Int 2, 2016]. Participant: ‘... there’s been a bit of a, ummm, [pause], I’m not sure how to explain it. A little bit of a divide in the group, based around some racist comments that were said and posted online in a private Facebook page that was formed, a very exclusive group.’
- Interviewer: ‘Was this racism from Pākehā towards Māori?’
- Participant: ‘Yes and it didn’t subside over the semester break ...’
- [Int 4, 2016]. Participant: ‘I sort of felt offended personally on behalf of all Māori students here on campus ... and then I began to question whether this was a place that I should be. And that wasn’t good. I went up to Auckland this weekend just passed ... and spoke to my Dad ... so, he said don’t allow those prejudices to dictate your future. I’ve just come back here a little bit ... um, still believing this is what I want to do, but yeah, just a bit broken last week ...’
- [Int 6, 2017] Participant: [Weary tone] ‘... [experiencing racism] has been normalised for so long and

we walk amongst it every day. We experience it every day. I don't know how we stop it. By not doing anything ... doesn't mean that we condone it, sometimes you get tired of fighting it, or having to feel that you need to justify everything you do constantly. Yeah, I honestly don't know that it will ever change. I'd love to think that it will, but I don't know. I don't think so.'

Remarks made by these participants and others indicates how insidious and difficult to articulate institutional racism can be. Often hidden, institutional racism impacted on support and clearly underpinned the academic experience for the Māori students in this study. Higher education organisations would benefit from listening to their students' perspectives to better understand students' needs in this regard. Educators and policymakers must continue seeking understanding of students' transition experiences. As the term 'student voice' suggests, Indigenous students have legitimate perspectives and opinions, and need to have opportunities for an active role in educational policy development and to practice decision-making.

More research and evaluation of students' perspectives regarding what helps them stay engaged and succeed would benefit students and organisations; a deeper understanding of disengagement signals and of appropriate interventions may become clearer. As Wiseley (2009) proposed, 'we must continue to seek understanding of students' experiences from their perspective, and conduct further research to achieve greater understanding of student transition and transformation as they move through the educational landscape' (p. 190). This may mean some adaptation of research practices in order not to squash participants' voice during data collection and analysis stages in pursuit of patterns, but being open to a range of perspectives. Voices that emerged from this research are a powerful reminder of the importance of engaging with Māori communities in partnerships. This is an area of future research to be conducted by higher education organisations.

Conclusion

The aim of this article was to illustrate how Indigenous Māori students deployed capital in different ways to navigate transitions into higher

education contexts. Within this study lay considerations of the ability and potential for Māori students to act as agents within and against the context of cultural and structural pressures. Turning to Bourdieu's concepts of agency, structure, habitus and capital enabled a lens through which to view student's personal history, biography, actions, struggles and successes in navigating the higher education field. The findings illustrated that Māori students can be agentic in their educational trajectories; they can work through and navigate 'structure' rather than being determined by it. Equally, when accounting for the broader and deeper structural context that shapes Indigenous Māori students' experiences (such as racism, discrimination and cultural biases), Bourdieu's theory of practice offered a historicised, flexible lens for the study of structure in complex and powerful higher education fields.

Findings suggest that transitions to higher education for Māori students involve a reciprocal interplay of identity, agency and structure which support or constrain transition experiences. Within wānanga, participants felt their Māori cultural identity was highly valued. An overriding advantage offered by the wānanga was the Māori environment being a comfortable place for Māori to transition into formal learning. Within polytechnics, there was a sense that Māori culture is included but more could be done; within universities, a need for more inclusive practices to support Māori learner requirements was identified.

This work has important implications for practice in adult education and learning. In polytechnics and universities, more professional development and resources are required to strengthen teaching staff knowledge and teaching practices related to supporting Indigenous student success. In an Aotearoa context, professional development for teaching staff (alongside adequate resourcing to facilitate time for this) should centre on effective teaching strategies and known 'good practices' (Bishop *et al.*, 2003), as well as developing knowledge of Māori language and cultural practices (Hall, Rata, & Adds, 2013). This is notably so for universities in order to further develop into sites of social inclusion embodying adult learning practices.

The socio-political context as a whole could not be ignored when considering the transition experiences of Māori students in this research. In a neoliberal context, the purpose of education has become closely entwined with prioritisation of economic outcomes (Giroux,

1981; 2005). Yet, Aotearoa New Zealand is experiencing unparalleled levels of income and poverty gaps which have major impacts for Māori and other disadvantaged population groups. This echoes Giroux and Giroux's (2008) point that neoliberalism benefits few, and harms many. Neoliberalism impacts more than just policy. It becomes an ideology and a specific style of rule—a style of rule that views higher education as a tool to achieve socio-economic class control. Complexities for Indigenous Māori students navigating the neoliberal model of education in order to achieve education success in this study, were significant. Neoliberal changes accentuate a higher education model which benefits few and potentially harms many through its interest of money and maintaining the status quo of power and knowledge in society.

The most overwhelming barrier faced by students was experiencing racism. This research uncovered how dominant attitudes and stereotypes existing in Aotearoa influence the social status of Māori in contemporary society, which in turn, influences education transition experiences and opportunities. Dominant attitudes and stereotyping have resulted in education interventions traditionally focussed on deficit-oriented teaching and learning strategies. Such interventions dodge the structural dimensions of racism and perpetuate ineffectual outcomes for adult Māori learners.

As Indigenous achievement in higher education contexts continues to be a focus for institutions nationally, effective transitions for Indigenous adult learners are an issue of great concern. This article addresses research gaps concerning Indigenous student voice and transitions into higher education environments as adult learners. Understanding 'lived experiences' and listening to the voices of marginalised adult learners has potential for adult educators to respond to the unique ways in which these students participate in adult learning and education. Such work may support us moving past the notion of 'structuration' (reproduction of structure as we know it) and towards reformation over time. This research adds to understandings of the power of knowledge for social change in the current age.

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