



Commentary

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Disparities in educational outcomes for New Zealand students: the problem with the dominant focus on ethnicity

The troubling gaps in educational outcomes in New Zealand are well documented, and have persisted despite a long-term commitment by government and many others to address these disparities. For the individuals concerned there are significant consequences of lower educational achievement, including lower employment levels and lifetime earnings, and poorer health outcomes. The societal cost of educational underachievement is also enormous. According to the OECD, eliminating this underachievement would yield US\$238 billion additional income for the New Zealand economy over the working lives of these young people.¹

In New Zealand, the debate about educational outcomes is commonly expressed in terms of ethnicity, the dominant discourse typically being one of “Māori and Pasifika underachievement”. In the words of one commentator, “in New Zealand educational disadvantage is typically understood through the lens of ethnicity and [...] policy-makers appear blind to disadvantage that is related to socio-economic status.”² This focus on ethnicity is hardly surprising given that Māori and Pasifika students have, *on average*, poorer educational outcomes than European and Asian students. Yet, it is also the case that many Māori and Pasifika students do well, and the often-generalised picture of Māori and Pasifika students as disadvantaged fails to

acknowledge the variability of outcomes within these – and indeed, other – ethnic groups.

Ethnicity is often correlated with other factors that are known to affect educational achievement – for example socioeconomic status (SES) and geographical distribution (urban vs rural). So what are the root causes of educational disadvantage? Arguably, the way in which a problem is characterised determines the solutions that appear natural and appropriate. In this issue of *Commentary*, we look at the drivers of educational achievement in an attempt to better understand what is the most fitting framing of the problem of underachievement, and we ask whether the often dominant focus on ethnicity may have unintended consequences.

The role of ethnicity

In New Zealand, ethnicity is self-identified (or in the case of children, identified by parents), but it is not a simple characteristic. Many New Zealanders report multiple ethnicities. For example, in the 2013 census, 54% of people who identified first as Māori also claimed one or more other ethnic identities, while 37% of Pasifika, 13% of European/Pākehā and 10% of Asian people did likewise. The tendency to report multiple ethnicities has increased over time in New Zealand, especially among children and younger people, and is due in large part to high rates of inter-ethnic marriage/partnering. We also know that for some people ethnic identity is fluid, and may change over

time or in different environments.³ In some cases, these issues are dealt with in research by the use of prioritised ethnicity (preferentially assigning a particular ethnicity in cases of mixed ethnicity). However, this introduces distortions. Among other things, it misrepresents membership of all groups except the Māori ethnic group, which in New Zealand is accorded highest priority; camouflages multiple ethnicity within all ethnic groups; and hides heterogeneity within ethnic groups (e.g. the Pasifika ethnic group includes many different Pasifika ethnicities with outcomes that can vary markedly). Equally, the alternative use of the “total counts” method, which allows for multiple ethnicities, is not without problems (e.g. overlapping categories resulting from the fact that a person can be counted as part of more than one ethnic group).⁴ In other words, understanding the true impact of ethnicity is complicated by the fact that ethnic groups are not discrete.

That said, national data on educational achievement (using the total counts method) show significant differences between *the means of* ethnic groups. Māori and Pasifika children tend *on average* to have lower levels of educational achievement throughout the compulsory education sector (and thus into tertiary education) than do European/Pākehā or Asian children (Figure 1). For example, in 2016 only 18% of Māori and 21% of Pasifika school leavers achieved University Entrance (UE) compared to 46% of European/Pākehā students. The total number of Māori and Pasifika school

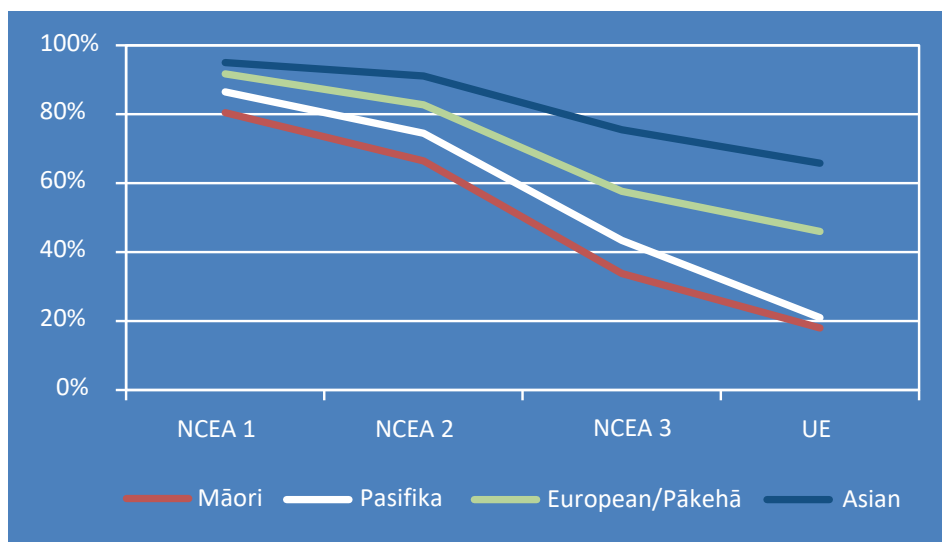


Figure 1: NCEA / University Entrance attainment by ethnicity (2016)⁵

leavers achieving UE nationally was only 3,950. Had they achieved at the same rate as the European/Pākehā cohort, another 5,590 of those students would have gained UE. This situation has shown little improvement in recent years. For example, between 2009 and 2016, the proportions of Māori students achieving UE in low decile schools only increased from 8.4 % to 10.1%, while for Pasifika the increase was from 14.6% to 16.7%.

There are several ways in which culture/ethnicity is hypothesised to impact on educational outcomes, some of which might be relevant to the apparent underachievement of Māori and Pasifika students.

The educational aspirations, attitudes and motivation of parents and students influence education outcomes, but this does not seem to explain educational disparity. Māori and Pasifika parents have been found to have high educational aspirations for their children.⁶ In fact, gaining access to better education as a means of social mobility has been central to many Pasifika peoples' decision to migrate to New Zealand. Some parents may lack the practical knowledge to effectively support their children throughout their schooling (e.g. homework, subject choices, plans for the future), but that does not change the fact that they hope to see their children succeed.⁷

The evidence is more mixed with respect to students' aspirations. Some studies suggest that Māori and Pasifika students have high aspirations while others have found some evidence of dwindling motivation and negative attitudes to

achievement, particularly among Māori and Pasifika students in low decile schools at the transition to secondary school.⁸

Another explanation for the underachievement of ethnic minority children centres on the disadvantage that these students face in education systems that reflect the values and norms of the dominant culture.⁹ In practice, this means that ethnic minority students may experience a culturally biased education with content, standards and achievement favouring white, middle-class values.¹⁰ Evidence from New Zealand corroborates the international evidence on the negative impact of such misalignment between home and school culture. Māori and Pasifika students perform better when they feel their culture is valued, and when culturally appropriate assessments, achievement standards and curricula are in place.¹¹ As Prudence Carter from Harvard has pointed out in the US context, "both school officials' and minority students' failure to reconcile their differences – dominant cultural expectations for achievement with non-dominant students' cultural styles, tastes and displeasure in what school curricula provide them – facilitates, in part, the students' limited attachment to school and their academic disengagement".¹² However, this does not explain the higher levels of achievement of Asian students, who are also part of an ethnic minority.

At the extreme, ethnic minorities are subjected not just to a culturally biased education system, but to downright racism. Not long ago in historical terms, Māori children would be punished for speaking te reo Māori at school, and

racism is still evident on both a personal and structural level in education today.¹³

Low teacher expectations and discrimination are also factors that have been found to contribute to lower achievement for indigenous and ethnic minority students.¹⁴ There is evidence from New Zealand of teachers having lower achievement expectations (irrespective of actual achievement) of Māori in particular, but also of Pasifika students.¹⁵ This kind of racial discrimination, or 'stereotype threat' has, not surprisingly, been found to have detrimental impacts on the ability of minority students to perform at school because of lowered self-esteem and other psychological responses emanating from an early-age awareness of being a member of a stigmatised group.¹⁶

The role of socioeconomic status

The ethnic/cultural variables discussed above would seem not sufficient to account for the large differences in educational achievement between Māori and Pasifika students and those of other ethnic groups. A substantial part of the answer may instead be found in socioeconomic factors. There is no shortage of evidence on the impact of socioeconomic factors on students' educational performance. A great number of socioeconomic factors are thought to play a role, including income, parental educational attainment, family structure, neighbourhood conditions and school quality.

Māori and Pasifika tend to more commonly live in communities of lower socioeconomic status, and so the explanation for their relative poorer educational performance may perhaps be found in differences in socioeconomic factors.¹⁷

Socioeconomic status, like ethnicity, is difficult to define. In a New Zealand educational context the most common proxy for SES is the school decile, but decile is a somewhat crude measure of socioeconomic status for individual students, potentially masking quite large differences in the range of communities from which a school draws its students.¹⁸ Nonetheless, there is ample evidence of a strong relationship between family socioeconomic characteristics and students' achievement. In fact, this relationship has been found to be stronger in New Zealand

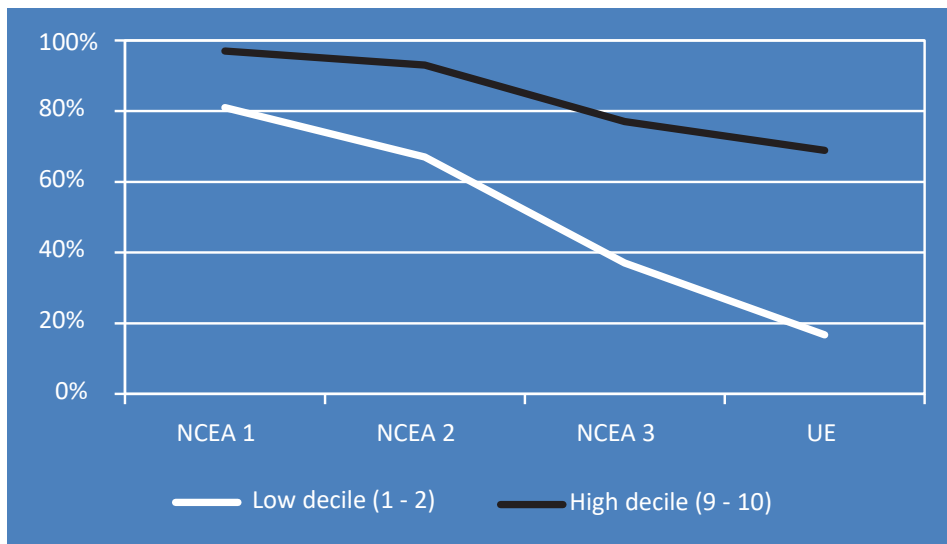


Figure 2: NCEA / University Entrance attainment by school decile (2016)²⁰

than in most other OECD countries.¹⁹

The impact of SES (or at least the school decile proxy) can be seen in Figure 2. In 2016 only 17% of school leavers in decile 1-2 schools achieved UE as opposed to 69% in decile 9-10 schools. An additional 3,819 school leavers in the decile 1-2 schools would have achieved UE had they experienced the same rates of success as their high decile peers.

Interactions between ethnicity and socioeconomic status

There is no question that ethnicity and SES factors interact to influence educational outcomes, but these interactions are not yet fully understood. A large study by Sean Reardon and his colleagues at Stanford University looked at the relationship between academic achievement and SES in “White”, “Hispanic” and “Black” students across the US. They found that there was a strong overall relationship between average student achievement and SES, and the ethnic disparities in academic performance were large.²¹ Much, but not all, of the disparity between the three ethnic groups could be accounted for by disparity in the socioeconomic status of their school districts, which in the US are highly segregated. The authors noted that some ethnic differences in academic performance persisted even amongst students of the same socioeconomic background and suggested this may be explained by “educators in these schools [...] subliminally – or consciously in some cases – track[ing] white students into gifted courses while assigning black and Hispanic students to less rigorous courses.”²²

The picture in New Zealand largely mirrors that of the US. Figure 3, which examines UE attainment by ethnicity and decile, shows that Māori and Pasifika students are most likely to be found in low decile schools where educational achievement is lowest, while the reverse is true for European/Pākehā and Asian students. But even within the same school decile, Māori and Pasifika students have lower average levels of achievement than do their European/Pākehā and Asian classmates. The only exception is in decile 1-2 schools where the attainment of European students is almost on par with that of Pasifika students, who in turn outperform Māori. The reasons for this disparity are unclear. A recent study by the New Zealand Productivity Commission into ethnic disparities in educational outcomes (degree-level participation,

retention and completion) found that the ethnic gaps in participation for Māori and Pasifika were almost entirely explained by three factors – socioeconomic status, prior school achievement and parents’ educational attainment.²³ Other reasons might include that Māori and Pasifika students in high decile schools are more likely to be from lower SES homes, and/or that Māori and Pasifika students face a dominantly European milieu in higher decile schools. Teaching could also be less responsive to their cultural needs.

Why is the ethnicity-focused discourse potentially problematic?

The focus on ethnicity (“Māori and Pasifika underachievement”) in the way that disparities in educational outcomes are commonly framed in New Zealand may be problematic for several reasons.

First, it may not accurately describe or explain the problem. While Māori and Pasifika do have lower average levels of achievement, they are also concentrated in low decile schools and communities, where educational achievement of all students tends to be low. As Carter and Reardon have noted in the US context, “Some popular narratives frame the black-white academic achievement gap and racial and economic inequality as “natural” facts that result from inherent group differences, rather than viewing them as socially constructed patterns produced by generations of unequal opportunities.”²⁵

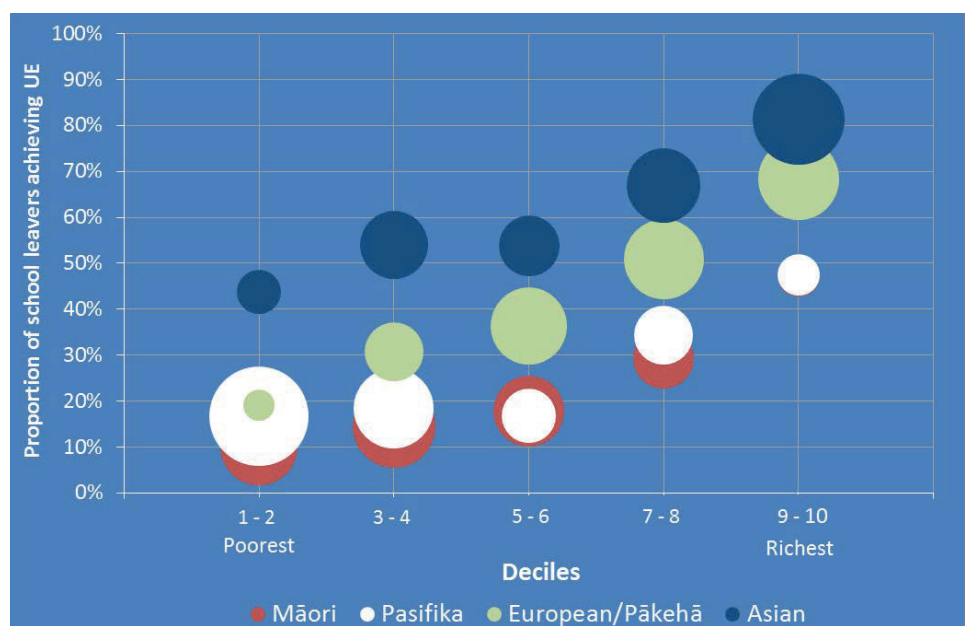


Figure 3: Proportion of school leavers achieving UE by ethnicity and decile of school (2016) (bubble size indicates the proportion of school leavers of a particular ethnicity that are in a school of a particular decile). At deciles 9-10 the data points for Māori and Pasifika overlap.²⁴

Second, positioning Māori and Pasifika children as if they were all part of a uniform group requiring intervention implies that there is something that certain ethnic groups are getting right, while others are getting 'it' wrong.²⁶ The current framing may feed into racial stereotypes that have the potential to exacerbate problems of discrimination and low teacher expectations. That is, it has the potential to stigmatise Māori and Pasifika students, which may ultimately lead to these students being further disadvantaged, even in high decile schools. Ethnicity in itself does not explain educational underachievement. However, it is clear that children who are both from disadvantaged backgrounds and from certain ethnic minority groups face a double risk of poor educational outcomes.

Finally, the dominant focus on ethnicity may inadvertently constrain the way in which we think about solutions. Defining the issue in terms of ethnicity leads to

solutions that are ethnicity-based and more narrowly conceived (mainly in-school factors e.g. improving teaching and accountability, ensuring more culturally appropriate delivery) whereas defining it more in socioeconomic terms may lead to other solutions. It is at least worth considering whether a different framing of the problem and its optimum solutions might lead to a greater rate of progress in addressing educational disparity than has been possible to date.

Conclusion

The odds for educational success are stacked against students from low income backgrounds and minority backgrounds. If you happen to be both, then you face particularly poor odds for educational success. This is reflected in the fact that each year in New Zealand, 3,800 fewer students from low socioeconomic backgrounds and nearly 5,600 fewer students of Māori and Pasifika ethnicity achieve UE than their respective

high socioeconomic and European/Pākehā peers. Clearly this represents a tremendous national loss of human potential. In order for us to make some real progress as a nation in addressing these educational disparities, we must better understand the complex interactions of ethnicity, socioeconomic status and the education system, so that we can deliver programmes that more effectively and appropriately support those most in need. In addition, we must recognise and continue to challenge the barriers to their achievement, including systemic racism and discrimination.

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⁹Sotiropoulou, P. (2014) 'Educational achievement of ethnic minorities', in P. Cunningham & N. Fretwell (eds.) *Innovative Practice and Research Trends in Identity, Citizenship and Education*. London: CiCe, pp. 327 - 334.

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¹¹Carter, P. & Warikoo, N. (2009). Cultural explanations for racial and ethnic stratification in academic achievement: a call for a new and improved theory. *Review of Educational Research*, 79(1), pp.366-394. Biddulph et al., (2003). op. cit.

¹²Carter, P. L. (2005, p.viii). *Keepin' it real: school success beyond black and white*. Oxford University Press.

¹³Good, T. & Nichols, S. (2001). Expectancy Effects in the Classroom: A Special Focus on Improving the Reading Performance of Minority Students in First-Grade Classrooms. *Educational Psychologist*, 36(2), 113-126. Rubie-Davies, C., Hattie, J., & Hamilton, R. (2006). Expecting the best for students: Teacher expectations and academic outcomes. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 76(3), 429-444. Archer, L. & Francis, B. (2007). op. cit.

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¹⁹Biddulph et al., (2003). op. cit.. OECD (2013). *PISA 2012 Results: Excellence through equity: giving every student the chance to succeed (Volume II)*. OECD Publishing. Available: <https://www.oecd.org/pisa/keyfindings/pisa-2012-results-volume-ii.htm>

²⁰Refer endnote 5.

²¹Reardon, S. F. (2016). *School District Socioeconomic Status, Race and Academic Achievement*. Preliminary draft for discussion. Available: <https://cepa.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/reardon%20district%20ses%20and%20achievement%20discussion%20draft%20april2016.pdf>

²²Sean Reardon quoted in: *New York Times* (2016). *Money, Race and Success: How Your School District Compares*. Available: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/04/29/upshot/money-race-and-success-how-your-school-district-compares.html>

²³Meehan, L., Pacheco, G. & Pushon, Z. (2017). op. cit.

²⁴Refer endnote 5.

²⁵Carter, P. L. & Reardon, S. F. (2014, p.2). *Inequality matters*. A William T. Grant Foundation Inequality Paper. Available: <https://ed.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/inequalitymatters.pdf>

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