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LESSONS FROM TE TAI TOKERAU TAIOHI FOR TEACHERS WHO WANT TO SEE AND CHANGE THEIR RACIAL BIASES

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Abstract

In this article, four taiohi Māori of Te Tai Tokerau provide critical insights into their experiences of racism and their perspectives of school, teaching and education systems in Aotearoa New Zealand. Participants in this project all positively identified as Māori but have very different ways of conceptualising that identity. Western schooling in Aotearoa has, since its introduction, been a site of cultural contestation. Schools are also highly visible locations where Indigenous and Western epistemological differences play out with real-life impacts and consequences. Many education professionals are aware of the potential positive identity has in education settings for students, but there are few opportunities for teachers to stand in their students' shoes or to sit in the discomfort many students experience on a daily basis. This article provides unique and honest glimpses of high school racial biases as experienced by taiohi Māori of Te Tai Tokerau.

Keywords

education, Indigenous youth, mātauranga Māori, racial bias, racism

Introduction

There is ample evidence of students experiencing racial bias in Aotearoa New Zealand's education system (Alansari et al., 2020; Blank et al., 2016; Children's Commissioner, 2018; New Zealand Human Rights Commission, 2021). Bias is known to harm students' self-esteem, engagement and academic success, especially the success of taiohi Māori as tāngata whenua (Allen & Webber, 2019; Turner et al., 2015; Webber et al., 2013).

A report by the New Zealand Human Rights Commission (2021) points to the prevalence of racism in our communities, noting, "The impacts of racism are extensive and span across all aspects of wellbeing … The drivers for racism are broad and deeply embedded within institutions, society, and individuals" (p. 9). Inquiry into racial bias and racism in education continues to concern many academics and researchers in Aotearoa.

Turner et al. (2015) revealed strong correlations

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between teacher expectations, ethnicity and the long-standing achievement gap that persists for Māori learners. Bishop and Berryman's (2006) study exposed substantive gaps in teacher relationships with Māori students and their whānau, which led to a long-running culturally responsive, effective teaching professional development programme (Bishop & Berryman, 2009).

MacDonald (2018) subsequently examined ways the racial discourse of silencing marginalises and denies violent colonial histories in education. MacDonald (2018) also interrogates the state narrative of biculturalism that supports the idea of harmonious race relations while privileging settler-colonial priorities. Many researchers in Aotearoa who seek to better understand impacts of racial bias and racism in education first acknowledge they exist, then centre the experiences and narratives of Māori students, teachers and whānau to find solutions.

Teachers are increasingly tasked with acknowledging their racial biases and the resulting impacts on their students' learning and wellbeing. A key motivation for teachers to confront their racial biases is the extensive evidence of the significant role biases play in perpetuating disadvantage for some groups, simultaneously affecting educational performance and opportunities (Blank et al., 2016). However, anti-bias trainings are typically generalised, passive-learning experiences which have little effect (Bezrukova et al., 2016; Paluck, 2016; Reiter & Davis, 2011). Evidence also suggests that implicit biases are a cognitive reflection of systemic racism (Payne & Hannay, 2021), yet opportunities for education professionals to address the link between racial bias and systemic racism continue to be largely non-existent.

Through wānanga with taiohi Māori of Te Tai Tokerau, the project reported in this article identified incidents of racism and shone a light on taiohi Māori experiences of racism in Tai Tokerau schools. It is intended that the power of taiohi voices and perspectives will support teachers and schools to surface and transform deep-seated racism. As illustrated by taiohi Māori in this project, racism is engrained in education settings in Te Tai Tokerau. Through their engagement with educational processes and programmes, taiohi Māori experience both implicit and explicit racism, from both students and teachers.

Research design

Indigenous and anti-racist methodology

The key research question posed in this project was:

> In what ways do taiohi Māori experience racism in Aotearoa schools?

To explore this question in culturally safe ways, this project engaged methodologies that can be described as decolonising. Kaupapa Māori and anti-racist theories provide frameworks of decolonisation, self-determination and social justice (Smith, 2012) with which to explore and address historical injustices that continue to impact on education in Aotearoa. These methodologies are counter-hegemonic and privilege Indigenous knowledges, voices, experiences and forms of analysis, besides acknowledging that research is always a moral and political undertaking (Denzin et al., 2008; Smith, 2005).

Denzin et al. (2008) also describe Critical Indigenous Pedagogy (CIP) as a theoretical framework that challenges taken-for-granted Western research practices. CIP is an amalgamation of critical and Indigenous methodologies that seek to redress social injustices faced by Indigenous groups. It does this by employing research practices that are informed by Indigenous ways of knowing. Indigenous knowledge systems, and specifically Māori ways of engaging with power relationships, continue to affect everyday interactions in Aotearoa and refine Kaupapa Māori theory.

As Pihama (2015) points out, critical theory has its origins in Western notions that were conceived to deal with and explain Western problems, whereas Kaupapa Māori theory derives from te reo, tikanga and mātauranga Māori. In this way, CIP aligns with Kaupapa Māori theory in that the latter presents localised and specific theoretical foundations to engage with, and seek solutions to, issues that are real and relevant to Māori. Denzin et al. (2008) also argue that research guided by CIP principles must be dedicated to the goals of equity and justice. Our chosen methodological frameworks enable this research to interrogate wider social, political and cultural spaces that foster or shut down racial biases. They also validate the spotlighting of taiohi Māori experiences of racial bias in schooling in order to improve education experiences for Māori.

Dei (2005) explains that anti-racist research assumes that institutional racism is inherent in dominant social science research because Western methodologies, concepts and topics have been privileged. This privileging has validated, reproduced and disseminated very specific knowledges. Education is but one site dominated by institutional racism, the effects of which can be seen

in the types of knowledge that are validated and reproduced by the education system. The effects are also illustrated by the types of narratives that dominate education thought, and whose stories get to be told.

Whanaungatanga

The project described here was conducted by Māori and guided at every point by various members of the local Māori community and the wider Māori research community. Central to this research are taiohi Māori, their knowledge and their unique perspectives of the world. All knowledge generated in this project was produced by and alongside taiohi Māori. This strengthens our te ao Māori conceptual research framework by centring the experiences of Māori and taking for granted Māori knowledge (Hetaraka, 2020). Taiohi Māori took part in group wānanga, with follow-up consultation taking place throughout the duration of the project. All participants were known to each other through whanaungatanga connections and were also associated with the research team through various whanaungatanga links.

Indigenous- and Māori-centric research approaches challenge the false notions of value-free research and the pretence of mitigating researcher bias; therefore, these whanaungatanga connections deepen our research practices and findings (Smith, 2012). Whanaungatanga is at the heart of wellbeing for taiohi Māori, who place a high value on a plethora of whanaungatanga connections, especially as they navigate contexts of distress, social hardship and colonisation (Hamley et al., 2023). Prior to engaging in the project, participants already had trusting whanaungatanga relationships with each other and the research team.

Whanaungatanga created a space in which participants felt safe to share their truths, and from which to speak their realties. Hamley et al. (2023) describe this space as he wā pai, a place and time in which contexts influence meaningful connections. In this project, such conditions enabled participants to express their individual, collective and often painful lived experiences of racial biases. Schoone et al. (2023) contend that "students have critical insights into the education system" (p. 923), further arguing that their voices should be privileged in school improvement considerations. He wā pai (Hamley et al., 2023) was created in this instance through whanaungatanga that honoured the mana of individuals as well as the extant contexts and connections between them, enabling taiohi to contribute powerfully into the collective space. This approach has the potential to ensure taiohi perspectives and voices become benchmarks for school improvement processes and for change in systems, curricula or policies.

Because of the wā pai that was created through whanaungatanga, taiohi were frank in their discussions with each other. They did not shy away from speaking their truths about their experiences of racial bias, which will be confronting for some. Their honesty may cause discomfort, but allowing discomfort to prevent honest discourse about racial bias and racist systems in schooling only serves to maintain the constructs of Pākehā privilege and the status quo (Borell et al., 2009). The purpose of this project was not to dwell on the negative—rather it was to harness the strength taiohi demonstrate on a daily basis to manage what are traumatic events. Taiohi perspectives hold crucial messages for education professionals, and their ability to manage the discomfort caused by both systems and people is exemplary.

Tikanga

Before advertising for participants, the research team held an open community hui, with a specific invitation to local hapū and iwi to inform them of the project, and to also seek their permission to work with their young people. Doing so ensured that localised tikanga were put in place as safety mechanisms to support the research team in our work with taiohi Māori and in our community. The research topic did cause discomfort for some schools, however. These issues were addressed by clarifying the intention of the research, which was not to vilify schools but to amplify taiohi voices to improve their education experiences.

Kaumātua were also consulted to advise our next steps in relation to the discomfort expressed by some schools. Had kaumātua told the team they did not want this discussion to be had with young Māori people, the project would have ended there. Kaumātua were happy for us to proceed. This was an example of the ways tikanga Māori can be utilised as a research approach to guide interactions and safeguard engagements with people, places and information (Hetaraka, 2023).

Participants

Participants self-selected to take part in this project. All taiohi positively identified as Māori and attended high schools in the Tai Tokerau region. Despite the instances of racial bias participants reported in this project, they all had successes at school that manifest in various ways. Some participants held school leadership roles, some

attended multiple high schools, some now have young children of their own, and all are experiencing successes as taiohi Māori. It is important to note that the participants in this project all come from whānau who have high expectations of them as taiohi Māori.

All participants belong to whānau who are educated in Western and Māori forms of education. Coincidentally, they were all also raised by single mothers who made sure they were children of their respective kāinga. While it is beyond the scope of this project to determine if these factors play into the resolve these taiohi demonstrate to live confidently and successfully as Māori, the findings of Webber and Macfarlane (2017) support an argument that they are indeed contributing factors. The research team is very aware that far too many young people have similar experiences of racism at school but may not have the internal or external resources to manage in ways that this particular group has.

Data collection and analysis

Our original research design proposed to explore taiohi experiences of racism through the visual arts. As the project progressed and the final group came together, we decided the best approach was to conduct wānanga. Mahuika and Mahuika (2020) describe wānanga as spaces that encourage critical thought, repetition, debate and whakapapa, performance, and normalise the centrality of emotion. Wānanga was selected as an appropriate approach to this project as it established a space from which taiohi could share their experiences and also garner support from each other as they traversed this topic that has been an intergenerational source of trauma.

During the analysis phase of the project, the team realised that what taiohi had shared with us was so clear, poignant and powerful that we had to explore ways of allowing their voices to be heard with a minimal overlay of (potentially distracting) academic analyses that tend to emphasise researchers' perceptions of data. Archibald and Onwuegbuzie (2020) promote the use of poetry in research as a transformational meaning-making process to open up new methodological, epistemological and theoretical spaces.

A debate around using poetry in research exists on a spectrum that ranges from the belief that anybody can engage in the creative process of poetry writing through to the argument that only scholarly experts with in-depth training have the ability to produce "good" poetry (Lahman & Richard, 2013). We agree with the approach that Lahman and Richard (2013) take when they see their research poems as "good enough". However, because the research team lay no claim to the poems that have surfaced from this project—they are the words of taiohi Māori—we might also expose our bias and argue that the works are in fact good poetry.

The approach utilised in this project was "found poetry", or research poems created from words of participants as they appeared in the transcripts. The research team analysed which words told certain stories or made particular meanings, but the words largely appear in poems as they do in transcripts. Some poems are part of group discussion; some are the words of individuals—in all cases the research team have altered minor words only slightly for connection or flow. Some titles came from the discussion; others were invented by the research team. Fitzpatrick and Fitzpatrick (2021) describe found poetry as poetic conversations and argue that such conversations allow the disruption of the traditional research practices that maintain problematic power relationships. This method of analysis (and dissemination), used in ways that support participants and readers to dismantle systemic, implicit and overt violence, aligns with the way Mahuika and Mahuika (2020) define wānanga as a research methodology.

The process of creating found poems in this project resonated with Richardson's (1994) reflection that "writing up interviews as poems honours the speakers' pauses, repetitions, alliterations, narrative strategies, rhythms, and so on. Poetry may actually better represent the speaker than the practice of quoting snippets in prose" (p. 522). In many ways, using poetry as a meaning-making tool in this project also reflected Māori-developed creative tools for analysis and dissemination that highlight participant voice, such as pūrākau, pūkōrero and tauparapara (Hetaraka, 2020; Lee, 2008).

Poetry became a way for the research team to return power to participants as they expressed their experiences of racism in institutions charged with preparing them to succeed in the world. Fitzpatrick and Fitzpatrick (2021) remind us that complex, nuanced, creative and poetic expressions of knowledge have been part of the repertoire of Indigenous scholars, elders and artists since time immemorial. Perhaps the connection these taiohi Māori have with their whakapapa provided the conditions that made poetry the logical form of expression in this work.

Ngā whakahua

Following is a selection of poetry organised into themes identified by the research team as (1) Identity, (2) Teacher talk and (3) Equity. Each section includes poems and short accompanying analytical narratives to illustrate links the research team made to themes of racial bias. The experiences taiohi Māori shared are challenging, and the research topic is one we hope will eventually become irrelevant. For now, though, racial bias remains a far too common injustice experienced by many people on a daily basis. Transforming racial bias should be the responsibility of everyone in our society.

There is not space here to include all the poems because they occupy approximately 20 pages. However, it is hoped that they will all be published eventually as a resource to benefit teachers, schools and other young people navigating their experiences. We have included a selection of poems that illustrate key ideas that were important to taiohi Māori in relation to their experiences of racial bias in schooling. While racial bias is generally understood as an individual's expressions of racism, it is important to note that taiohi often pointed out the systemic racism that causes individuals to act or speak in racially biased ways. Throughout the wānanga and poetic conversations, it became clear that taiohi were acutely aware of the insidious ways embedded institutional racism impacts unconscious biases.

Identity

Webber (2012) argues that positive racial-ethnic identity is an essential element in raising resilience in taiohi Māori, supporting them to feel more comfortable at school and therefore encouraging them to hold high academic aspirations for themselves. A strong and recurring theme in this project was the construction of Māori identities at school. A feature of the Tai Tokerau context significant to this project is that 61.1% of teachers identify as Pākehā compared to 26% who identify as Māori. At the same time, 53.4% of students in Te Tai Tokerau identify as Māori, much higher than the nationwide average of 25% (New Zealand Government, 2024). Therefore, more than half the student population of Te Tai Tokerau is Māori but only a quarter of teachers identify as Māori, with the vast majority claiming to be Pākehā. Comparing teacher-student demographics in the Northland region provides a rather obvious reason for the feeling taiohi Māori express here of having their identities guessed at based on a host of identity markers and presumptions.

Taiohi, even a few years removed from high school age, still struggled to verbalise expressions of their identities as Māori schoolchildren. The source of much of this complexity was feeling that being Māori wasn't valued by others in their school communities. Taiohi Māori expressed that they feel their identities are (re)constructed by teachers who often believe they know students but who can only guess at Māori identities and assemble them through lenses coloured by realities that are different to those of students themselves:

How do they know I'm Māori?
It's hard
It's a hard question
Because I have to imagine what they see
When they look at me

I'm brown
Brown eyes
Brown skin
Strictly Māori

But some people think I'm White
They only know I'm Māori because
My
Mum
Pushed it
I was a Māori-speaking boy

I do kapa haka
They see me and expect me to mihi
To karakia
To karanga

But they don't care enough to learn any
Tikanga that goes with those things
They don't care if I feel ashamed
Because I don't have my language
They expect me to know

It's hard to look at yourself
From other people's perspectives
And try and see what they see

Taiohi Māori also experienced confusing and demoralising impacts on their sense of identity by school systems that restrict choice in curriculum, specifically by positioning te reo Māori and Māori-based subjects as non-academic, and generally through unhelpful timetable clashes. Systems such as these have been described across generations and continue to be highlighted by taiohi Māori in regions outside of Te Tai Tokerau (Smale, 2024). At a crucial time in the development of positive

racial-ethnic identities, taiohi were engaged in complex fluxes between feeling proud to be Māori while intuiting others' stereotypical packaging of Māori identities. This example of institutional racism has been experienced by generations of Māori, including members of the research team:

it was a choice
you are put in a position where you are forced
to choose between the two,
a passion or your culture
you may love art and you have to choose
art or Māori
like it's a choice
it was a choice
between going through school as mainstream
or be one of those Māori kids who have
to take the Māori class
all the way through
who has been identified as a naughty kid
the choice is even harder
because it's not just the choice
"what i love to do and my identity",
it's also the labelling that comes with
my identity
knowing if i choose that path
everyone
is
gonna know
who i am as that Māori
then that makes it hard to choose.

Despite the multitude of research on the invaluable impact positive cultural and ethnic identity has on student success (Allen & Webber, 2019; Turner et al., 2015; Webber, 2012; Webber & Macfarlane, 2017), taiohi continue to report feeling that in order to succeed in their schooling they must leave important and special features of themselves and their culture at the school gates:

Block
There's so much that happened at school
It's hard to sift it all out
It's hard to untangle it all
It's hard to know what bits of the racism was intentional
Or what was just jokes
And I know that stuff has happened
But I remember at the time having to be like
Block it out and
Just keep going
Even if it wasn't racism toward me
In terms of structural inequity or bias
I had to block it out
And keep going
I had to block it out
To succeed

Strongly linked to the capacity schools have to support students developing positive racial, ethnic and cultural identities is the notion of Mana Ūkaipō, as theorised by Webber (2023). Mana Ūkaipō in school is generated for taiohi when they know they have a place at school, that they are valued and that they are valuable to the school structure. Taiohi shared narratives that illustrated ways school structures could create either a sense of belonging or a feeling of exclusion. School structures often worked to make these taiohi feel isolated and at times ashamed of their identity as Māori:

an empty exam room
i was in the Māori class
so that meant that i was Māori
there was no one who wanted to
learn Māori who was
who was non-Māori
yeah, it was **just** Māori kids
it starts as a whole classroom
and then you get to year 13
and then there's only one person
in the exam room

Experiencing Mana Ūkaipō in schools also extends to feeling culturally safe. Webber (2023) contends that Mana Ūkaipō is cultivated in students when their cultural knowledge systems, identities and histories are prominent and valued at school. Taiohi Māori in this project emphasised the potential for real harm to be caused when schools either do not have enough knowledge and understanding of Māori practices or proceed without the guidance of cultural experts:

that's a culturally unsafe space
they don't help us as a culture at school
but they're quick to ask
for help when they want us
to welcome people into the school
i was the oldest Māori student and
i had to do the karanga
but they didn't even ask me
they assumed that i could speak Māori
but i couldn't speak Māori
they chucked some White girl in there
with me to karanga
but they didn't even bother
learning the tikanga
around that

very strange
yeah, a really unsafe space

Another recurring theme related to identity that surfaced in wānanga was a perception that teachers and students saw taiohi Māori as different, and not in ways that engendered positive feelings. Stracuzzi and Mills (2010), in their study with youth living in rural Coos County, New Hampshire, reported school connectedness was one of the central features in prompting socioemotional wellbeing for young people. Being made to feel different and disconnected from school was a common experience for taiohi, and it came up at multiple points during wānanga:

That School is a Joke

i was just looked at differently

coming from a Māori school
and just being affirmed as Māori
everyone embraces it
then you go to **that** school
and you don't wanna embrace it
in front of your classmates

just constantly looked at differently

students and teachers
who kind of give you
that vibe
because i come from a
Māori school
just to expect the least
i just feel out of place

Teacher talk

A range of studies have found that teachers have systematically lower expectations of taiohi Māori and judge their academic performance more harshly than that of Pākehā students (Meissel et al., 2016; Rubie-Davies & Peterson, 2016; Turner et al., 2015; Webber et al., 2013). Teacher expectations and perceptions of student ability and achievement have been closely linked to teacher beliefs and perceptions about student ethnicity (Turner, 2013). The Education and Training Act (2020) charges teachers with affirming student identities as a key aspect of their professional role. It is therefore disheartening to hear the dejection taiohi Māori experienced when they felt what was being constructed about them was based not on "truth" or shared lived experience, but on flawed perceptions and assumptions about their ethnicity.

Often when taiohi Māori described interactions between themselves and teachers, they recognised that these interactions were regularly coloured by sociopolitical influences on teachers. The sociopolitical example in the following poetic conversation highlights that some practices in education are so racially biased that they have been completely normalised. Many teachers, board members, parents and students will be very familiar with the reporting of Māori student achievement. For a generation, reporting on achievement according to ethnicity was done publicly and without a cautionary thought, perhaps due to a distorted belief that this was conducive to student-centred learning and supporting priority learners (Education Review Office, 2012). Following is a taiohi experience of this type of reporting:

the national average
my teacher says
"here is all the data,
here is where all the Māori sit"
"for the Māori students that are in this classroom,
you were in this bracket"

in front of the whole class.

"based on ethnicity,
your average sits here"
"this is where you sit"

in front of the whole class.

I say
so, if that is where I landed,
after a year in your class
then what the f_ck is wrong with you?
I'm asking questions of you,

in front of the whole class.

Taiohi also grappled with the different relationships they had with Māori and non-Māori teachers. They discussed many non-Māori teachers with whom they had positive experiences and interactions with, but they also expressed sometimes uncomfortable relationships with non-Māori teachers who assumed a closeness with students. The next poetic conversation reflects findings (Basford & Schaninger, 2016) that self-serving biases can make people overconfident, cause blind spots and ensure people remain

unaware of what they need to learn. Here taiohi unpack the differences in relationships between Māori and non-Māori teachers,* describing the overconfidence some teachers have in their relationships with taiohi Māori:

I think they mean well
Miss Maryann would call us Drongos
She would call us Drongos and stand on our toes
Literally, with her big, clunky-ass shoes

Miss Maryann would ask us if we had dope in our bags
People would carry around their bags
She'd be like "Why are you carrying your bag?
You got dope in there or something?"

She's just straight up
She's a bit too straight up
It's uncomfortable

Whaea Mereana looks at me as the same and not different
It's comfort
It's like whānau
It's like Aunty and Uncle vibes

She's still hard on us, she's strict
She knows it's not a good thing to say I have dope in my bag
She knows a joke
And our people like to joke

Miss Maryann does have a good heart I think
She's just not able to understand. She just doesn't understand.
Whaea Mereana
I don't know, she just understands

Taiohi also reported instances of interactions with teachers and students that appear to be outrightly racist. As part of this particular discussion, one participant disturbingly wondered why some teachers seemed perfectly comfortable making negative, sweeping comments about taiohi Māori and Māori practices in front of them. It was encouraging to hear the decision-making processes, the generosity of spirit and the courageous response of taiohi Māori here:

Push Back

When we do some of those things our cultural heroes do
Suddenly the racism shows

When we are vocal
It confronts them

When we actively try to create safer spaces for all students
They don't want to dig too much

They feel confronted about
Themselves

They push back on it

Sometimes the whole class would hold the teacher to account:
"Miss, we forgot to do karakia this morning"

The teacher would blatantly say
We don't need to do that silly stuff

They push back

You could go through school ignoring it
Avoiding it

But when we choose to Push Back
We say this is for us, this is what we are doing
And we offer our Māoritanga for everyone to participate in

Embrace it

Taiohi Māori also expressed a deep gratitude and aroha for teachers who, in their words, could see them. The final contribution to the poetic conversation was a retort to the argument for staying in school. It serves as a reminder of the ever-present tension that exists for too many taiohi who see little reflection of their positive cultural identities at school and therefore see little relevance or value in school. The following is an ode to Māori teachers; taiohi sentiments here align to Lee's (2008) findings that Māori teachers do make a difference for taiohi Māori:

* Teacher names have been invented here. At times taiohi spoke of specific teachers; at other times they spoke in general about differences in relationships. The two teacher names have been inserted to denote a non-Māori teacher and a Māori teacher, respectively.

The Māori teacher
It was nice to have her
She wasn't even my teacher
But just having her at school
Made a difference
She's a Māori teacher

He's a Māori teacher
He had a bigger voice
And an open office
He made sure we were heard
He could talk to kids and stop them dropping out

… But there's nothing wrong with dropping out …

In the course of the wānanga, relationships, teacher talk and pedagogical practices were often discussed as parts of a whole. Taiohi Māori surfaced their perceptions of the interplay between teacher assumptions about students and their pedagogical practices and decisions. Gorski (2019) reminds educators that racism-infused misperceptions of students' cultures cannot justify the failure to create racially just schools. Yet taiohi discussed multiple experiences of teachers who appeared to have little insight into their own contribution to instances of conflict in classrooms.

Unfortunately, the types of situations taiohi referred to would often end with students being disciplined for unacceptable behaviours. Disciplinary decisions such as these are made based on racial biases and attributed by education professionals to cultural defects in students (Rudd, 2014). Importantly, teacher pedagogies were identified as a key barrier to taiohi accessing curriculum content, yet in many instances it was students, not teachers, having to absorb the impact of poor teacher practices:

My teacher called me a hoodrat
I remember once
The maths teacher
He made my whole class cry
When you get singled out
When they call you to the front of the class
That's when I just gave up on school

They label us as disruptive
But no wonder!
He had no cultural awareness
He's just a maths teacher
He just writes on the board

How am I supposed to understand
If you're not talking or helping?
Then they ask why I don't go to class
It's coz my teacher called me a hoodrat
Equity

Notions of equity and racial biases are often locked together in an uncomfortable dance across societies. Taiohi reported being subjected to racial biases across a number of schooling experiences that caused them to perceive inequities in relationships, school systems, pedagogical practices and outcomes. Taiohi described some features of "equity" they had experienced in schools in ways that align to deficit ideology, which seeks to "fix" students of colour by attributing disparities to their communities while simultaneously ignoring the role of racism (Gorski, 2019):

White Saviour
There's this funny thing between equity and like
… now this just feels racist
They've identified a group
They've identified the needs
But that hasn't been done with us
Or for us

It's just what the system thinks we need
… and it's always based on deficit
Always

It's never positive
Just the framing of it

There's a weird thing about it
They're targeting this certain group
… and they're the problematic group
I get the intention behind it
But it makes me feel uncomfortable

It's not about who you are
What you want to do with your life
It's just shifting you into this box
Because they think that's what is good for you

There are teachers who care about you
Who took the time to know who you are
To support you
Who saw your potential

But when they only see a number
And think help is ticking boxes
And feel glad they have done that
That gives big White Saviour vibes

Gorski (2019) argues that "racism is a tangled structural mess of power, oppression and unjust

distributions of access and opportunity" and that the "mess cannot be resolved with greater cultural awareness alone" (p. 58). Taiohi discussions illustrated their awareness of tensions in access and opportunity. In wānanga, they discussed the opportunities they were offered at school. Many of these opportunities helped to shape their lives, but they were also coated with a bitterness. Taiohi named the precarious potential for access and opportunities to be felt as racism dressed as equity:

There's a spot for a Māori
It was unusual, aye?
You'll get that spot because you're the good Māori
You'll be the Māori Head Student
You'll fit because there's always like a Māori Head Student
Right?

There's that thing where they
alternate
One year there will be a Māori Head Student
The next it will be a White kid

You're only gonna get it
Because you fit the Māori thing
Like that's a little provisional thing
Because there's a little equity spot
For you

Disregarding the work you've done
Disregarding your own merit
You're the token Māori
So you're gonna get that spot

And there can only be one.

So it's you.

And I should be grateful I got it

Conclusion

Meyer (2008) argues that racism, colonisation, power, hegemony and oppression are all symptoms of acts of denial that flourish when unawareness is encouraged in society. If the words of these taiohi Māori can make just one teacher aware of their conscious or unconscious biases, we will be one step closer to combating institutional racism and transforming experiences for all taiohi. To understand the ways we contribute to any situation first requires a deep examination of our beliefs and our assumptions. A crucial message presented by taiohi Māori about acts of racial bias in schools is that even well-intentioned teachers who perhaps have good relationships with taiohi Māori can still contribute to experiences of racial bias. It is anticipated that this stark realisation will activate in teachers a deep dive into their assumptions about what they think is happening in their everyday interactions with taiohi Māori.

Dei (2005) contends that uncritical methodologies deny the existence of oppression. This level of unconsciousness has enabled deficit theories to underpin educational and social policies that have actively encouraged cultural exclusion from the education system for generations (Ford, 2013). The design of this research project purposefully sought to highlight experiences of institutional racism and has opened space to unravel injustices. Critical analysis of these experiences in turn has allowed for the exploration of solutions that will repel racist structures. It also offers education professionals space to examine any self-serving biases that may be causing them to overlook their limitations (Basford & Schaninger, 2016).

As Māori, as parents, as youth, as human beings concerned with justice, it is heartbreaking to know children and young people are subjected daily to racial discrimination in Aotearoa, sometimes in situations where perpetrators are unaware of the impact of their actions and words. These taiohi Māori were shaped, but not defined by, their experiences of racial bias. They sit comfortably in their mana. In situations that have attempted to make them powerless, they have knowingly and wilfully held on to the power that is rightfully theirs. Taiohi Māori illustrate this when they speak of their cultural heroes. The research team certainly consider all taiohi involved in this project our cultural heroes:

We can name our heroes
Our parents and grandparents
Have an ability to do well in both worlds
They can be in academia
And in their culture

They are movers
They are the people you see in photos and in museums

They are so humble
They've done all these amazing things
They are my heroes
And they are so humble

They would sacrifice everything
For the collective

Our Taua is
A White-passing Māori lady
Staunch in her Māoritanga
She uses her White-passing privilege for
Our family
For our peoples' benefit
She knew what she needed to do
She plays the game
She is undoubtedly Māori in her whakaaro
She stands up for what is right

Our cultural heroes are
4th Gen Ngāti Kuri
HĀ
We're surrounded by people doing something in their field
These are things that are
Just amazing

The fight our heroes have done
Is for us
To take the next step
We're in a place where we can progress
We're not having to sacrifice as much
Like their sacrifice

We're able to grow
Do things that have not been done before
This generation is doing all the things
That those generations
Made possible

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Glossary

Aotearoa	New Zealand
aroha	love
HĀ	acronym for education provider History of Aotearoa; lit. "breath"
hapū	kinship grouping
hui	gathering/meeting
iwi	tribal kinship grouping
kāinga	home/village/ community
kapa haka	Māori performing arts; a group of Māori performing artists
karakia	prayer
karanga	a call, usually the first voice heard in ceremonies
kaumātua	tribal elders
Kaupapa Māori	Māori theory/ philosophical framework
mana	authority/power/prestige
Māori	Indigenous peoples of New Zealand
Māoritanga	"Māori-ness", a broad expression of Māori identity
mātauranga Māori	Māori knowledge systems
mihi	speech of greeting, acknowledgement, tribute
ngā whakahua	expressions/outcomes
Ngāti Kuri	tribal group from the northern-most region of New Zealand
Pākehā	New Zealander of European descent
pūkōrero	narrative that maintains the speaker's voice as much as possible
pūrākau	narrative, story
taiohi	youth
tāngata whenua	Indigenous people
taua	grandmother (South Island dialect)
tauparapara	prophetic verse
te ao Māori	Māori worldview
te reo/te reo Māori	the language/the Māori language
Te Tai Tokerau/Tai Tokerau	Northland, New Zealand
tikanga	Māori sociocultural values and practices
wānanga	discussion and knowledge sharing
whaea	female relative who has given birth
whakaaro	thought
whakapapa	genealogy
whānau	family grouping
whanaungatanga	kinship/connection/ relationships

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