

TRANSITORY MĀORI IDENTITIES

Māori students shape-shifting like Māui

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Abstract

Māui is remembered in Māori narrative as a change maker, a challenger of boundaries and a trickster. However, in the 21st century these characteristics are likely to be frowned upon rather than celebrated in Aotearoa New Zealand's education system. Māori students experiencing complex needs, like Māui, are known for pushing the boundaries. Rather than signalling strength of character, these characteristics are frequently viewed as deficits. This article discusses research with five Year 10 mainstream Māori students experiencing complex needs in their lives, and how shape-shifting, as a positive mechanism, allowed the participants to enact their identities in different ways and in different contexts. Using Pūrākau, a Māori narrative qualitative research methodology, the pūrākau of the participants, whose experiences or stories have been unrecognised or unheard, are privileged (Lee, 2005, 2008). Overall, the participants wanted professionals to get to know them for who they are, know that they have life aspirations and know that they are proud to be Māori.

Keywords

“at-risk” youth, Māori, identity, mainstream secondary education, challenging behaviours, Māui, complex needs, alternative education

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Introduction

The 2016 animated Disney film *Moana* brought the illustrious and powerful ancestral hero Māui to cinema screens worldwide (Osnat & Clements, 2016). Whilst this was a first for Disney in terms of its Polynesian storyline, the retelling of pūrākau (tales) of Māui is common across Māori and Polynesian societies. Māui is a popular figure in Māori and Pacific cultures and is remembered for his exceptional qualities, including māia, āhua whakamua, manawanui, ihumanea and māhaki (Ware, 2009). However, beyond these incredibly positive attributes, Māui was also seen as a nanakia who pushed the boundaries and challenged the status quo (Ware, 2009).

Like our tūpuna Māui, Māori students experiencing complex needs in their lives become well known for challenging the boundaries, risk-taking and opportunistic behaviours. Unlike Māui who is remembered as a hero, they are more likely to be labelled as troublesome, defiant and hōhā. These students face a tyranny of categorisation in the mainstream education system and are “boxed” by educational professionals and unable to move past the labels applied to them such as “at-risk”, “has behaviour problems”—anything and everything but the label “hero”.

In 2013, a desire to hear such students’ stories led me to research with Māori high school students involved with government agencies due to experiencing complex needs in their lives (Cliffe, 2013). This article discusses the research findings, and how they, like their tūpuna Māui, take on the role of a shape-shifter to transform their āhua in response to different contextual expectations. The findings suggest that a broader understanding of these students would provide a context to reduce the negative education statistics for Māori (Education Counts, 2017).

Literature review

Analysis of Māori achievement statistics in New Zealand has been performed repeatedly for the last 100 years (McKinley & Hoskins, 2011). Historically, two sets of dominant discourses have shaped the Māori achievement debate in New Zealand (McKinley & Hoskins, 2011). The first discourse, grounded in deficit theories, is based on social and cultural factors such as lower socioeconomic status, poorer home lives, and language deficits (Harker, 1971). The second, and more recent, discourse points to teacher and school incompetence and the inadequacies of the broader New Zealand education system to address Māori student educational needs within cultural frameworks (Macfarlane, 2004; McKinley & Hoskins, 2011). McKinley and Hoskins (2011) argue that monoculturalism and unequal power relations have influenced the disparities in the mainstream schooling system for Māori and that the education system has not made the “institutional, cultural and practice shifts” necessary to change Māori underachievement (p. 86).

Change is undeniably necessary as Year 10 Māori students continue to represent the highest rates of stand-downs, suspensions and exclusions (Education Counts, 2017). Additionally, statistics and research suggest that involvement with government agencies, and disengagement from education, places a student experiencing complex needs in their lives at greater risk of “not being engaged in education, employment or training” (NEET) (McLeod & Tumen, 2017; Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment, 2017; Ministry of Education, 2016).

Further, disengagement from education inhibits access to the necessary educational qualifications and skills required to fully participate in society (Macfarlane, 2007; Ministry for Social Development, 2004). In 2017, it was reported that Māori youth NEET rates were higher than any other ethnic group (Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment, 2017).

In a Ministry of Education (2016) study, students who left school after achieving National Certificate of Education Achievement (NCEA) at Level 1 were more likely to be NEETs than those students who left school after achieving NCEA Levels 2 and 3. Engagement in this study was a more significant factor in determining NEET status than academic achievement (Ministry of Education, 2016). Engagement of students may thus be a more appropriate measure for school success.

Whilst statistics are critical to understanding Māori student engagement, they do not provide an accurate story of the underlying issues for Māori learners in education. Some Māori students may experience difficulties in education; for others these may be exacerbated by complexities in other areas of their lives (High and Complex Needs [HCN] Unit, 2001). As was the case for the participants in this study, these complexities may require intervention from government and non-government agencies outside of school (HCN Unit, 2001). It was key that this research provided an appropriate platform to learn from the experiences and perceptions of the participants. The theoretical foundation would need to provide a basis for understanding how these students adapt, articulate and enact their identities in different ways, depending on their social milieu (Webber, 2011). The pūrākau of Māui as the shape-shifter provided a culturally relevant metaphor to explore their identity-making as Māori adolescents.

Several Māori academics have referenced the stories of Māui. Rameka's (2011) early childhood assessment framework compared the positive qualities and characteristics of Māui to tamariki Māori. Ware (2009) used pūrākau and āhuatanga of Māui to analyse Māori youth development. Keelan (2009) focused on Māui's entrepreneurial behaviour to construct a model for Māori youth to develop exceptional business skills. Like the work of Rameka (2011), Ware (2009) and Keelan (2009), the research reported in this article drew on the pūrākau of Māui, but for very different reasons. The

character of Māui and the pūrākau about him were explored in the original study (Cliffe, 2013) to deconstruct labels such as "complex needs" and to reconceptualise Māori adolescent identities in the 21st century as fluid and ever-changing.

The metaphor of Māui as shape-shifter and its application to identity development was conceptualised from a traditional Māori story about how Māui transformed himself into different bird forms in a quest to find his parents. When Māui transformed himself into different bird forms, his brothers "did not approve of any of the birds when he showed himself to them" (Thornton, 1992, p. 60). Māui thus decided to transform himself into the āhua of the kūkupa. In his new form of the kūkupa he appeared before his brothers one more time and they said "E tama e, ka pai koe!" (Boy, now you are very handsome!) (Te Rangikāheke, 1849, as cited in Thornton, 1992, p. 34). Whilst shape-shifting is something that is drawn from this story about Māui, it is also something that is characteristic of the natural developmental stage of adolescence.

Regardless of complexities in the lives of any young person, adolescence proves to be a time of change—and potential. "Adolescence is not [characterised as] an affliction, but a normative crisis, i.e., a normal phase of increased conflict characterised by a seeming fluctuation in ego strength, and yet also by a high growth potential" (Erikson, 1956, p. 72). During adolescence, young people constantly bridge the expectations of others with their own desires and aspirations. In doing so, they learn different mechanisms to express themselves and enact their identities, including their cultural identity as Māori (Webber, 2011).

Māori cultural identities have become a highly debated and politically charged topic fraught with both opportunity and challenge. Māori academics agree that identifying as Māori in the 21st century is a sociopolitical process (Borell, 2005; Rata, 2012; Webber 2007, 2011; Webber & Kukutai, 2017). Where

opportunity allows us to explore new understandings of what it means to be Māori, there are still many challenges associated with the debate about the place of traditional indicators, including complex positionings of what being Māori “actually means” in modern times (McIntosh, 2005; Webber, 2007).

There are no easy answers to these questions, especially when Māori identities are complex and are influenced by factors such as colonisation, urbanisation, transience, and the impacts that these things have had on the social fabric of Māori society (Borell, 2005; McIntosh, 2005). In the context of the 21st century, there are a range of options for how one identifies as Māori (Rata, 2012; Webber & Kukutai, 2017). But when who and what we identify with does not fit with stereotypical descriptions of what being Māori means due to “unwritten criteria” (see below), then we face a real challenge of living on the fringes of both Māori and colonised New Zealand societies (Webber, 2007).

Māori identity research thus provides a basis for understanding Māori students’ lives in a modern era (Borell, 2005; McIntosh, 2005; Rata, 2012; Webber, 2007, 2011). Whilst a gap in the research exists for Māori learners involved with government agencies, existing studies provide some insight into the complexities for Māori in navigating through multiple contexts in a multicultural New Zealand. In a study conducted by Webber (2007), participants of dual heritage (Māori/Pākehā) sometimes felt that they lived on the fringes of both Māori and Pākehā society. These participants did not feel accepted by either Māori or Pākehā communities and felt like “edge walkers” in both societies (Webber, 2007).

In another study, Borell (2005) investigated understandings of Māori identity with adolescents living in an urban area in South Auckland. This research highlighted the complexities of identifying as Māori, and how modern Māori identities draw from a broader set of factors beyond traditional markers of Māori identity (Borell, 2005). Connection to place, namely

South Auckland—referred to as Southside—generated a strong sense of belonging for the participants in this study, including participants whose tribal links were associated with other areas outside of the South Auckland region. Borell (2005) thus argued that being Māori was more likely to be associated with experiential indicators, including notions of poverty and dysfunctional families rather than traditional indicators such as speaking te reo or doing kapa haka. Subsequently, experiential indicators have become a greater marker of Māori identity over time through the wider discourses of racism, which is propagated in the reporting of negative statistics in the media (Borell, 2005).

In Webber’s (2011) study, a positive cultural identity for Māori students was a salient factor to buffer the negative consequences of stereotype threat, which occurs when members of a group are aware of the negative stereotypes associated with belonging to that group (Steele, 1997). Stereotype threat can serve either as a motivational factor for the student to work harder to disprove negative stereotypes or as a self-protective mechanism to disengage to cope with negative stereotypes (Steele, 1997; Webber, 2011). Developing a positive cultural identity may thus be critical for the Māori learner experiencing complex needs to buffer the negative consequences of being pigeonholed because of their challenging behaviours.

Culturally responsive pedagogies as a means of improving educational outcomes for Māori students with challenging behaviours are increasing in number (Bevan-Brown, 2009; Bishop & Glynn, 1999; Glynn & Berryman, 2004; Macfarlane, 2004, 2007); however, research with Māori students involved with multiple government agencies is limited. The original study addressed this research gap (Cliffe, 2013). Its findings therefore contribute to improving our understanding of the causes of educational disengagement in Māori students, particularly students at Year 10 level, who are at higher risk of disengagement (Education Counts, 2017).

Methodology

Pūrākau, a Māori narrative methodology, was used for this study to investigate the educational experiences of five Year 10 mainstream Māori students involved with government agencies due to complex needs in their lives (Lee, 2008). Pūrākau was chosen because it provided a basis to gain insight into Māori students' stories that have been unrecognised or unheard (Lee, 2005, 2008). According to Lee (2008), pūrākau have a pedagogical intent and hold key messages which have the potential to provide guidance and understanding of human behaviour.

Based on Kaupapa Māori theory and collaborative storying (Bishop, 1996), the researcher used multiple, semi-structured interviews with five Year 10 mainstream Māori students. In-depth conversations (lasting at least an hour per interview) were beneficial to this study as this provided time to fully explore the research question, which was *How do Māori students experiencing complex needs perceive the role being Māori plays in their lives?* These in-depth conversations facilitated a process for both the researcher and the participants to co-construct collaborative pūrākau based on their educational experiences in the mainstream system (Bishop, 1996).

Year 10 Māori students (three male and two female) were selected to participate in this study because of their increased risk of disengagement in comparison to other year levels (Education Counts, 2017). The participants were engaged in mainstream education at the time of the interviews. Due to challenging behaviours, they had received multiple stand-downs, suspensions and/or exclusions from school. Identification and selection of participants was initially made by a nominated staff member of the participating schools. Set criteria guided the selection of participants who experienced complex needs in their lives.

Definitions of what constitutes “complex needs” vary across the justice, education, welfare and health sectors. Therefore, the researcher

used the HCN Unit (2001) descriptors in the construction of criteria. The HCN Unit works across government and non-government agencies and with children and young people experiencing the highest and most complex needs in New Zealand. Typically, these young people are at risk or are a risk to others and are involved with government agencies. The HCN Unit (2001) intervenes when interventions with the young person do not appear to be working. Using these descriptors as a guideline, the researcher constructed criteria that stipulated that the participants

- needed to self-identify as a person of Māori descent;
- needed to be 13–15 years of age and enrolled at a mainstream secondary school in Rotorua;
- needed to be involved with government agencies such as the Ministries of Health, Justice, Social Development and Education due to complex needs in their lives (whilst it was preferable that the young person was involved with two government agencies at the time of the interviews, involvement with one agency and retrospective involvement with another agency was also deemed acceptable);
- needed to have exhibited challenging behaviours leading to school disciplinary action, including (but not limited to) stand-downs, suspensions, exclusions or expulsions from their previous or current school.

The conditions of the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee were met prior, during and following the collection of the data. First, the researcher ensured that informed consent/assent was obtained from all involved, including the participating school(s), the participant(s) and the parent(s) and/or caregiver(s). How the young people were presented in the study was also carefully considered. Hearing about the experiences of

these students was not only a privilege but also a responsibility. The researcher's previous experience in working with Māori students experiencing complex needs in mainstream education and in youth justice meant that she felt she had a responsibility to represent not only the recurring themes of the findings, but also the participants' pūrākau. The reasons were simple. Although these students represent a small cohort of students in our mainstream schools, many continue to represent the highest percentage of students who are either stood down, suspended or excluded (Education Counts, 2017). Many of these students remain silenced and on the fringes of the mainstream education system.

For the above reasons, the interpretations of the participants' pūrākau needed to ensure that their mana remained intact and did not perpetuate the negative rhetoric associated with being Māori, being stood down, suspended or excluded, and experiencing complex needs in their lives. For this reason, the study presented the participants' pūrākau separately from the discussion about the complex issues that they were facing in their lives.

In terms of the presentation of the findings, five individual pūrākau based on verbatim data were represented in the study. The interview data was complemented by notes written by the researcher, based on her impressions of the participants and how they presented themselves in the interviews. The pūrākau were authenticated by the participants and were "deliberately crafted re-presentations based on the interviews" (Lee, 2008, p. 36). The Pūrākau methodology is based on the premise that the reader will "arrive" at their own conclusions about the meanings implicit within the pūrākau. However, academic qualitative research requires that these meanings be made explicit, and therefore thematic analysis was also employed in the study.

Braun and Clarke (2006) describe thematic analysis as "a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within

data" (p. 79). Thematic analysis also acknowledges that analysis is not a linear process but a recursive one. Therefore, the researcher cycled through the data set repeatedly to identify patterns of meaning, which produced three overarching themes. These themes are discussed as key pedagogical points in the next section.

Findings

The research findings in this study include the pūrākau (stories) of the five Year 10 participants. All of the participants had previously, and at the time of the interviews, been engaged with government agencies due to complex needs in their lives. Whilst the pūrākau are presented as standalone narratives in the original research (Cliffe, 2013), this article discusses the three main recurring themes from the overall data set, describing how these students shape-shift like their tūpuna Māui to enact their identities. The three key pedagogical points arising from this study were that the participants wanted teachers and professionals to (a) get to know them for who they are, (b) know that they had aspirations for their own lives and (c) know that they were proud to be Māori.

Know me for who I am

The first key pedagogical point that emerged from the interviews was that the participants wanted to be known for who they are as young people, not just for their behaviour or complex needs. One participant said: "I want teachers to see us for who we are, not for what we've done or what they read on our reports and stuff." Getting to know the participants for who they are does not ignore, make excuses for, or mask challenging behaviours or complexities. Instead, a different lens is applied in which behavioural problems or complex needs do not become the main filter for how the teacher or the professional interacts with the young person. Another participant spoke about wanting

teachers to have a balanced perspective of both their positive and their negative attributes:

I would like them to see me as a like a top student. Like always on task always doing work trying my best and giving it 100%. Like, I want teachers to notice my good goods, not just my bads. [I] just want them to see, like, don't forget the bad sides, but like don't just add the bad sides . . . like add the good sides as well. Some teachers are just straight negative. But then I like those teachers that are straight up with you and tell [you] your negatives and your positives.

This key pedagogical point illustrates that whilst it is essential to challenge unacceptable behaviours, language laden with underlying deficit connotations powerfully affects Māori learners and can contribute to their disengagement to education (Education Counts, 2017).

“Framing” was another issue identified as affecting Māori students experiencing complex needs. Framing in this study referred to a deficit-based and limited perception that teachers and professionals can hold of a young person, based on past or current behaviours. Participants in the study spoke about their struggles in the education, social services and justice systems. For the most part, this struggle was characterised by professionals who framed them only according to past or negative behaviours, which were generally based on negative teacher judgements and “grudges” that they held against the young person. The participants perceived that some teachers boxed them according to who they perceived them to be, and what they perceived them to be capable of. Sometimes, these perceptions were static and based on past interactions and experiences with the student. The participants expressed that the teachers who framed them according to their past and current behaviours also inhibited their access to the curriculum. One participant said:

I really wanted to change and then when I got

there (back to school) he (teacher) still put me at the back of the class. One time he was like, “You should just leave the school altogether just like last year,” and I was like, “No.” When he sent me to the back I was like, “Nah I want to sit at the front, sir,” and he said, “No,” and I was like, “Why?” and he said, “Because I said so.” I was like, “Oh, but I want to learn,” and he was like, “Not eh, you're still the same, you should just get out of my school,” and I said, “Catch you up” [i.e., “I'm out of here”].

This participant's comment highlights the microaggressions and the uncertainties that some students experiencing complex needs face when trying to access education in the mainstream environment. Whilst they may genuinely want to learn, they may feel confined within a teacher's low expectations, negative attitudes and perceptions towards them. However, like our tūpuna Māui, these students are more than the sum of their behaviour. Ascribing a one-dimensional label may seem fitting as it labels their negative behaviours, but it is in fact detrimental because it blankets their positive qualities as well. Framing of a young person's identity can therefore be a harmful mechanism that reifies low expectations of Māori students experiencing complex needs or exhibiting challenging behaviours.

Low expectations were also perceived by the students when professionals and teachers used phrases such as “you always”, “you never” or “you're just the . . .”. The dichotomy between wanting the young person to change and yet not believing change is possible can characterise a teacher's interactions with a student. The participants in this study thus indicated that they wanted teachers to stop framing them according to their past behaviours and instead have high learning and behavioural expectations of them. One participant said:

Don't think I'm just like, oh, she's the druggie girl that got caught so many times and is

always getting suspended and stuff. [See me] like a successful child, a successful kid and like she's got potential, she can do this and that, but she just doesn't show it I guess.

As shown by the above comments, the framing of the participants' identities leads to deficit theorising, which has far-reaching implications. Negative framing inhibited students' access to educational opportunities, which is a crucial element to gaining the necessary qualifications to contribute to society (Macfarlane, 2007). It also impacted how the young person felt about themselves and their potential. The participants wanted to be seen as young people who had potential and who wanted to learn and achieve—to do well in life. Māori adolescents, much like Māui, must be allowed to “shape-shift” and try things out, and to challenge boundaries, as adolescence is a time of “identity-making” (Erikson, 1956). Adolescence is a time when young people begin to identify their aspirations for their lives (Erikson, 1956).

Know that I have aspirations

The second key pedagogical point from the participants' pūrākau was that teachers and professionals needed to get to know the young people for who they are, what they want to achieve, and how they can be supported towards achieving their goals and aspirations.

The participants wanted to succeed at school, to have good careers. Ultimately, they wanted to make their families proud of them. Whilst some of their career goals were still forming at the time of the interviews, the participants spoke about career and life aspirations which were influenced by their family, professionals and the opportunities available to them. One participant spoke about wanting to speak Māori and travel, and to pursue a career as a youth worker or a counsellor. She felt that she could use her life experiences to help other young people who had experienced challenges like herself. Two other participants wanted

to develop their hobbies and pursue a career in creative arts—to “make something of their lives” in order to make their family proud. Another participant spoke about developing his kickboxing and a career in agriculture or farming alongside learning the ways from his own iwi. The last participant wanted to follow in the footsteps of his brother, who was an accomplished bushman and hunter.

Whilst school offers opportunities, it can also present barriers which hinder access to those opportunities. Barriers identified by the participants of this study included a lack of money, not hearing about school activities and not knowing what opportunities to pursue. Whilst teachers may not be able to solve complex issues in a young person's life, they have agency at school and can encourage and support a student to achieve their potential in the classroom and school context. This could promote Māori student engagement in education. For this to happen, it is necessary for educators to bracket their biases and negative assumptions about Māori students who present with challenging behaviours, and instead see the young person holistically as someone who has both challenges and aspirations. One participant said: “All I need is a hobby to get me out of the house, cos I'm always at home. [I] just watch TV with a bong.”

A number of the participants also spoke about wanting to pursue extracurricular activities with friends and needing financial support and a mate as encouragement. One participant said: “Oh, if I had a mate with me, thumbs up, I'd be there every week, yep if I had a bro with me, [I would say,] ‘Yeah bro, that's us, after school.’” How Māori students experiencing complex needs are supported to realise their aspirations is critical to their success and engagement in education. Low teacher expectations can impinge on their success in accessing educational opportunities (Webber, 2011). Bishop, Berryman, Tiakiwai and Richardson (2003) suggest that as agents of change teachers are instrumental in supporting Māori students

to move forward to pursue their aspirations to succeed as Māori.

Know that I am proud to be Māori

The third key pedagogical point that emerged from the interviews was that the participants self-identified as Māori and stated that being Māori was important to them. They all wanted to be identified as Māori youth, and not labelled according to their challenging behaviours or complex needs. In their pūrākau the participants spoke about the tensions associated with identifying as Māori; however, they all felt a sense of pride and of belonging to their cultural identity.

Speaking te reo Māori, their connection to the homelands, phenotype and involvement in things Māori at school were some of the areas discussed with regard to their Māori identity. Four of the five participants spoke about the positives of speaking te reo Māori, and the intrinsic benefits of building self-esteem and self-confidence. One participant felt proud to learn te reo because she felt competent and able to pronounce Māori words correctly. She was the only participant actively taking te reo as a subject at school. However, three of the four remaining participants had experiences with learning te reo Māori at primary or intermediate, but identified barriers to taking it as a subject at high school. Two participants found learning te reo to be a very difficult task, and for that reason they did not pursue it as a subject. Another participant struggled with his decision-making around a tikanga dilemma of learning “native” Māori as opposed to “modern” Māori. Finally, one participant spoke about contradictory feelings about learning te reo Māori. He spoke of feelings of jealousy because a Pākehā peer knew more te reo than he did. He also spoke about the difficulties of learning te reo Māori and the perceived lack of benefits from pursuing a language that was not widely spoken.

McIntosh (2005, p. 45) has suggested that there are a number of “unyielding criteria” of

Māori identity that exclude many Māori. When there is a mismatch between expected standards and perceived competence, the individual may not want to engage in traditional activities. This can be to the detriment of enhancing a positive Māori identity and engaging Māori learners in education. Therefore, this article positions a secure cultural identity for Māori students experiencing complex needs as involving more than speaking te reo Māori and doing kapa haka.

With regard to whānau, community, marae, iwi, whakapapa and whenua, these things were also important to three of the five participants. One participant spoke about the mana and the pride that came from talking about his grandmother’s knowledge and her status as a kaikaranga for his iwi. Three participants identified with whenua and tribal areas by right of whakapapa, which gave them a sense of belonging and a positive sense of Māori identity. The importance of whakapapa was linked to their surname in Te Ao Māori and being “known” in Māori communities. For a different participant, it was her connection to her tūrangawaewae and her home that was most important to her. She said: “Like I know it’s like a shithole and that, but it’s home for me.”

Unwritten criteria for “being Māori”

The participants self-identified as Māori. However, beyond self-identification, they unconsciously and consciously applied unwritten criteria about what made a person Māori. They used these criteria as benchmarks to make decisions about how they saw their own identity.

One participant spoke about his Māori identity being based on his bloodlines and whakapapa, and he identified blood quantum and phenotype as defining criteria for belonging to the Māori ethnic group. This participant talked about the inclusion/exclusion experiences he felt at times because he had Māori blood alongside the physical characteristics typical of what he called a “white boy”. He

saw himself as being on the fringes of being Māori because he felt that he was not cultural enough. Regardless, this participant was proud to be seen as Māori, particularly when in the company of Māori friends.

Judgements were also made about the different types of Māori and different subgroups in Māori society. Overall, the participants located themselves within, outside, in opposition to, or on the fringes of, these subgroups. Decisions about their own Māori identities were based on up-close-and-personal experiences as insiders or outsiders of these subgroups. Other assessments of Māori identities were more globalised and derived from Māori stereotypes.

In using inclusionary and exclusionary measures, the participants determined who might fit the “in-groups” and who was relegated to being “outcasts” of both of these groups. One paradox in this study was that the participants recognised positive outcomes associated with kapa haka and learning te reo, yet at the same time exclusion criteria forced them to question their Māoriness. Webber’s (2007) study also identified internal conflicts in terms of questioning the strength of one’s Māoriness. If proving one’s Māoriness is associated with inadequacy and whakamā, then this can leave the young person feeling inferior to others. Whakamā has the potential to isolate some Māori youth and leave them in a state of identity limbo, trying to figure out where they belong or if they fit in.

West’s (2012) research on Māori adoptees found that feelings of whakamā were also associated with not knowing one’s whakapapa and te reo Māori. This caused a participant in her study to feel a “bit white” (West, 2012, p. 80). Webber (2007) earlier discussed issues of authenticity and legitimacy for Māori who are not seen to be steeped in traditional dimensions of Māori culture. Webber (2007) suggested that they may be considered invisible, and that this invisibility causes them to be at risk of marginalisation. Marginalisation in this study was experienced in two ways: (a) when “in-groups”, teachers or professionals put unreal

expectations on Māori youth to perform to certain standards according to traditional indicators; and (b) when the Māori youth put unreal expectations on themselves to perform their Māori identities.

Discussion

The findings from this study suggest that Māori students experiencing complex needs in their lives want teachers and professionals to get to know them for who they are, not just for their challenging behaviours. Unlike other adolescents, the participants in this study were not only navigating adolescence but also shape-shifting with regard to their identities through the complex challenges that they faced in their lives. Despite these barriers, they too had aspirations for their lives, and wanted to achieve in education and be known for who they are.

For teachers and professionals to understand what makes young Māori experiencing complex needs in their lives “tick”, the participants in this study indicated that they must get to know them for who they are, not just label them or categorise them because of their challenging behaviours. When professionals place a glass ceiling on Māori students based solely on low expectations and past behaviours, this negatively affects their overall engagement with teaching and learning, and ultimately their engagement with and attendance at school.

This article argues that it is imperative to challenge negative teacher perceptions as they can have a ruinous effect on Māori student engagement in education. If we expect to see improved engagement by these students in mainstream education, then engagement and attendance must remain pivotal aspects to governmental policy (Education Counts, 2017). Only then will we realise Māori potential and student academic success for this cohort of students.

In the broader context of identity politics and being Māori, the findings from this article

suggest that Māori identities are influenced by larger social and political agendas in both Māori and wider New Zealand society. As with other research on Māori identities, the debate around the choice to self-identify as Māori or not, the politicised issue of what counts as an authentic Māori, and what criteria are being used to define such an identity were also at play for the participants in this study. For these reasons, identifying as Māori in 21st-century New Zealand society continues to be a complex sociopolitical process for Māori youth.

These findings suggest that, like Māui, Māori students experiencing complex needs in their lives shape-shift in contemporary society. Unlike Māui, however, they do so in order to enact their identities in ways that positively transform their lives and give them a sense of connectedness and belonging to different contexts and communities. The range of Māui-like qualities allowed the participants to embrace, challenge and question the status quo, and transform themselves as they moved between their different environs. Therefore, shape-shifting for Māori youth experiencing complex needs is a powerful tool, affording them a strength-based mechanism for autonomy and power over their lives.

The metaphor of Māui as shape-shifter provides an alternative viewpoint from which to understand Māori young people who display challenging behaviours and experience complexities in their lives. Māui's ability to shape-shift between different bird shapes mirrors the potential that all Māori young people have to transform their own āhua. Accordingly, we should consider that these persona articulations are not a deficit, and rather act as a buffer for the negative impacts of transience, "framed identities" and other challenges they may face in their lives. By shape-shifting these young people encapsulate their transformative potential to enact their identities in diverse ways. Consequently, they may be more skilled at negotiating diverse realities through shape-shifting, perhaps more so than other adolescents

who do not have to negotiate as many different environs. Therefore, shape-shifting as an aspect of adolescent identity development should be considered more of an art form than a deficit.

Conclusion

This article brings to light different perceptions about being Māori—perceptions which are diverse, colourful and shaped by a myriad of experiences. Pūrākau, a Māori narrative methodology (Lee, 2008), was central to this study and played an important role as a conduit for learning about Māori cultural identities. Through pūrākau, different generational perspectives about our epistemologies, philosophical thought and cultural understandings as Māori are illuminated. However, these findings position cultural identity for Māori students experiencing complex needs as more than speaking te reo Māori and doing kapa haka. Whilst they were clearly proud to be Māori, there are multiple understandings of Māori adolescent identities in the 21st century. What these students encourage us to do most in their pūrākau is to move beyond the ticking off of items from the secure cultural identity "shopping list".

Teacher beliefs and deeply held assumptions based on low expectations and framed identities have also been explored, as has the dichotomy between "wanting" the young person to change but "not believing" change is possible. Challenging these perceptions is necessary, alongside advocating for the removal of the glass ceiling of low expectation that pigeonholes these students because of non-conformist behaviours. The challenge for teachers and professionals is to consider their own beliefs and move beyond the stereotypical assumptions of who they think these young people are. Pūrākau about Māui and other tūpuna can support this process, as they are rich cultural resources that can provide insights into understanding the behaviours of Māori adolescents.

Perhaps the answers to engaging these students lie in contemplating how we recognise and harness the Māui-like qualities exhibited by these Māori students and how we support them to navigate the complex needs in their lives whilst celebrating their transformative potential. Both are important; as are they. For they are like their tūpuna Māui: Māui the illustrious hero, Māui the trickster, Māui the shape-shifter.

Glossary

āhua	persona, form, nature	kūkupa	New Zealand pigeon
āhuatanga	characteristics	māhaki	humility
āhua whakamua	foresight	māia	potentiality
hōhā	nuisance	mana	prestige, authority, status
ihumanea	innovation	manawanui	resilience
iwi	tribe	marae	tribal meeting grounds
kaikaranga	female caller of the traditional Māori welcoming ritual at the marae	Māui	Māori hero and ancestor
kapa haka	traditional Māori performing arts	nanakia	trickster
Kaupapa Māori	research methodology based within a Māori worldview	Pākehā	New Zealanders of European descent
		pūrākau	story, tale, narrative
		Pūrākau	a Māori narrative qualitative research methodology
		tamariki	children
		Te Ao Māori	the Māori world
		te reo Māori	the Māori language
		tikanga	custom, protocol
		tūpuna	ancestor
		tūrangawaewae	place where one has rights of residence and belonging through kinship and whakapapa
		whakamā	shame or embarrassment
		whakapapa	genealogy
		whānau	family
		whenua	land

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