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Quality education, connection and wellbeing: Māori tertiary students' accounts

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A sometimes-neglected aim of education in the context of Māori, the tangata whenau *(indigenous peoples) of Aotearoa New Zealand, is to build Māori students (*tauira*) as Māori, a process that supports them to navigate the academic world as well as enhancing their* Māoritanga *(Māori practices, beliefs, way of life). Notions of educational quality, therefore, involve wellbeing—the extent to which Māori* tauira *flourish as individuals and as collectives. Talking with Māori* tauira *is a helpful way of inquiring into this area because of the power of dialogic engagement to enhance thought and action. In this article, we draw on video-based dialogic research to present two significant aspects of Māori tertiary* tauira *experiences that focus on wellbeing and* Māoritanga*. What might seem like mundane aspects of tertiary life––finding a friend and connecting with other Māori—emerge as significant in the development of four Māori university students. Lessons for tertiary providers include the value of paying attention to collective ways of creating wellbeing and the potential of formal support structures to moderate the isolating effect on Māori of enrolment in a tertiary institution.*

Keywords: Māori tertiary education; relational connection; dialogic; wellbeing; everyday colonialism; racism

INTRODUCTION

Māori aims for Māori education

For much of their time as the Indigenous peoples of Aotearoa New Zealand, Māori followed long traditions of education carried out by tribal groups that ensured survival and flourishing. Education included aspects such as navigation, *rongoa* (traditional medicine), cultivation, building and various arts such as oratory. More importantly, education was deeply rooted in *whakapapa*, serving as a means to understand Māori identities, connections to ancestors and the place of people within the broader Māori world. *Whakapapa* provided a framework for understanding the world through a uniquely Māori sensibility, weaving together knowledge, values and practices that affirmed our collective identity as tribes and extended families and guided our interactions with the environment and each other. However, the disruption of European arrivals supplanted this educational landscape and 'colonisation as an education policy became assimilation, which in turn became integration . . . [arguably maintaining] the

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underlying ideology of racial subjugation of Māori by Pākeha [settlers of European origin]' (Hetaraka, 2024, p. 2). Given this new educational landscape, developing appropriate purposes for introduced forms of education alternatives became essential to the flourishing of Māori. These purposes developed over time to the point where Durie (2003) wrote of multiple educational aims for Māori: for Māori to live as Māori; to actively participate as citizens of the world; and enjoy good health and a high standard of living. He argued that since success for Māori involves a solid foundation in a Māori reality, '[e]ducation should be as much about that reality as it is about literacy and numeracy' (Durie, 2003, p. 200). This clarion call gained widespread agreement amongst Māori at the February 2001 first Hui Taumata Mātauranga, (Macfarlane, 2015), a significant Māori consultative event at which Māori education was central.

One consequence of Māori thought about education applied in the formal sector is the elevation of Māori culture as a significant element in ideas of educational success. Edwards et al. (2007) claim that many Māori:

> [W]ish to receive an education that prepares us and our children for the world, but supports our cultural imperatives where these have been interrupted, or ensures that our cultural roots are not severed as a price for this inclusion and aspiration. (p. 140)

At a microcosmic level, this means that success comes when 'children's search for ultimate purpose and meaning is supported in culturally congruent ways, as their values are evident in their day-to-day school life and reflected in classroom events' (Edwards et al., 2007, p. 140). For Māori, this means education that reflects and, therefore, does not undermine Māori norms and values; for instance, emphasising *whanaungatanga* in education—thinking that embodies values of inclusivity understood through family, rather than cut-throat competition—a process through which the successful are increasingly rewarded and through which others become excluded. Ideas of Māori educational success also need to be purpose-referenced because 'it is misleading to use crude comparisons with non-Māori as a type of shorthand for best outcomes or to assume that Māori-non-Māori comparisons always provide useful information about Māori progress' (Durie, 2003, p. 202).

Māori views of wellbeing

A helpful literature review of Māori relational health that pays attention to wellbeing is by Wilson et al. (2021). The authors observed that across a wide range of Māori health-related texts, four overarching themes capture the essence of many Māori health models: '(1) Dimensions of health and wellbeing; (2) *Whanaungatanga* (connectedness); (3) *Whakawhanaugatanga* (building relationships); and (4) Socio-political health context' (p. 3544). Elaborating on the first category, health and wellbeing, Wilson et al. give four frequently cited elements: *wairua*, *whānau, hinengaro* and *tinana*. These will now be briefly unpacked.

Wairua (the spiritual dimension) 'refers to a person's spirit or soul that exists before the birth of a person and beyond their death' (Wilson et al., 2021, p. 3544). A person's *wairua* can act as a guide and be damaged or cared for according to circumstances, the actions of others or, indeed, the person themselves. *Whānau* (extended family network) embodies Māori collectivity and is particularly significant since Māori do not exist in isolation—without their family and other aspects of community. *Hinengaro* (the mental dimension) encompasses one's feelings, sense of self and levels of confidence and self-esteem. Central to this element is the *mauri* (the spark or essence of life), which the environment may influence in positive and negative ways. Finally, *tinana* (the physical or bodily dimension) provides shelter for a person's essence and is *tapu* (sacred) 'as the source of sustenance for the person's body and health' (p. 3546). While

these elements do not provide a complete picture, they are useful here for their prevalence in educational circles, such as in the work of the Mental Health Foundation of New Zealand (2024) and materials designed for schools (New Zealand Health Association, 2023).

Wilson et al. (2021) noted that health and wellbeing are holistic and relational for Māori, an understanding substantiated by the connectedness present in and between all four dimensions discussed above. Relatedness and connectedness in health and wellbeing differ from many Western views of health, which focus on the body (Durie, 1994), see a person as a disconnected, not a relational, self (Giddens, 1991) and separate mind, body and spirit (Poltorak, 2010). From this relational perspective, Durie's (2003) multiple aims of education should be seen as integrated. Good Māori health is dependent on being able to live well as Māori: elevating Māori culture; active participation in the world is a mark of confidence (an aspect of *hinengaro*) combined with opportunity; a high standard of living can support an environment in which caring for the *wairua, hinengaro* and *tinana* becomes increasingly possible as stressors like hunger, work-related time-poverty caused by low wages and exposure to oppression can be reduced. Poverty of any kind is not conducive to wellbeing.

Māori in tertiary education

In Aotearoa New Zealand, two major streams of education exist for Māori. These are often termed 'mainstream', that is, education provided for all on a model developed in European contexts, and *Kaupapa* Māori education, an alternative system developed by Māori for Māori which adapts some elements of Western educational practice (schools, classrooms etc.) to Māori means and ends. Mainstream education has embraced some elements of Māori thought, such as the *Whare Tapa Whā* model of wellbeing, structured through *wairua, whānau, hinengaro* and *tinana* (New Zealand Health Association, 2023). However, *Kaupapa* Māori education began with the first *kōhanga reo* (pre-school language nest), *Pukeatua Kōkiri,* opened in 1982 in Wainuiomata, a suburb close to the capital, *Te Whanganui a Tara* (Wellington) (Walker, 1990). Since then, many Māori education facilities have developed in early childhood, primary, secondary, and tertiary sectors. Here, however, we focus on mainstream tertiary education, the area of our employ in which we seek to make change.

In 2023, there were 73,450 Māori students enrolled in tertiary education of one kind or another in Aotearoa New Zealand (Education Counts, 2024). Despite the existence of (Māori tertiary institutes), the majority of these students attended mainstream universities and polytechnics. A key feature of Māori students' experiences in mainstream tertiary education is everyday racism, a term that Essed (1991) unpacks as 'systematic, current, familiar practices' (p. 3). In the context of Aotearoa New Zealand, Mayeda et al. (2014) developed the more contextual term, 'everyday colonialism' (p. 63), to address both the past and present of these experiences. Colonialism extends beyond landgrabs and into other areas of life, such as ontology, the organisation of knowledge (Duarte & Belarde-Lewis, 2015), and 'how we do things' activities that carry assumptions based on beliefs and values that may not be shared by all. Everyday activities include behaviour that indicates negative attitudes toward Māori students and/or *te reo Māori* (Māori language) and ignorance of *tikanga* (Māori customs, attitudes and principles). For example, *tikanga* points to the significance of developing relationships at first meetings and of acknowledgements at partings; the aspects of life that experience suggests are seldom adequately marked in the tertiary normal.

Strategies designed to counter negativity, stereotyping and everyday colonialism have developed in some tertiary contexts. For example, Airini et al. (2010) identified good practice when looking at non-lecture teaching as a tool to help Māori students succeed in degree-level studies. McClutchie (2020) described a short program aimed at helping Māori students to lead,

assume power, and be transformed by the normalisation of Māori success in leadership and learning. Research also suggests the benefits of specific support services such as *Āwhina*, a university-based initiative for Māori students (Richardson et al., 2018; Wilson et al., 2011). However, such attempts take place in a contested arena, indicating current debate regarding the justification, fairness or divisiveness attributed to designated Māori spaces in tertiary settings (NZ Herald, 2024). Arguments against such provision seem to rely on a view that default spaces in tertiary education are in some sense neutral, unshaped by histories of importing educational ideas from distant places and the ever-present consequences of Aotearoa New Zealand's colonial past. In this situation, research into the experience of Māori *tauira* from a strengths-based approach capable of educating tertiary providers in what matters to their Māori students has great value. That is an aim of our study.

THE RESEARCH

The researchers

This research, which seeks to honour Māori voices and viewpoints, has a relational core. Relationships are at the heart of our work with *tauiwa*, an endeavour in which we are partners who aim to act with care and passion. As a result, presenting ourselves as researchers and writers is integral to the discussion.

Adreanne

I am deeply rooted in my Rongomaiwahine heritage, having been raised on the ancestral homelands of Mahia. While my professional journey unfolds in the university's urban setting, my heart and soul stay intertwined with my home community, where my home remains and my family continue to reside. The collaborative work I have undertaken with young Māori since my doctorate (which explored their societal perspectives) has been a privilege and an ongoing journey of learning and sharing. My research is deeply embedded within a Māori worldview, which I refer to as *Kaupapa Māori*, and which continues to be a vessel through which I navigate my role in academia and community collaboration.

Martyn

I am Anglo-Welsh but have lived in Aotearoa New Zealand since the 1990s. In my time as a teacher in secondary education, I saw unnecessary issues faced by Māori students and their strengths in pursuing paths of credit to themselves and their *whānau*. I took the posture of a learner from the Māori communities of the schools where I worked and benefitted as a result. In the present endeavour, my major contribution is an orientation to catalytic research, which aims to change situations for the good of communities. In this, I understand research as a form of leadership and leadership as an act of service.

Together we are a partnership that works across the borders of *te ao Māori* and formal education, leveraging our diverse backgrounds and experiences as critical tools in the development of our relationship, in the design of our research engagements, and in curating and caring for the *mana* (inherited and endowed authority) of those *tauiwa* who have joined with us on our journey.

Research approach

To garner and amplify the voices of *Māori tauiwa* as they reflect on their experiences in tertiary education, we set up a pilot study titled 'Telling it like it is: Māori student voice in tertiary education.' This was funded by Te Herenga Waka, Victoria University of Wellington, and was

conducted from 2022 to 2024. The project received ethical approval from the University Ethics Committee (Ethics approval number: 0000031043).

The primary objective was to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of young Māori students in their first undergraduate degree at Te Herenga Waka | Victoria University of Wellington. Our study introduced an innovative approach to data collection and dissemination, aiming to broaden the reach and impact of the research beyond traditional academic audiences. We employed semi-structured, dialogic interviews video-recorded via Zoom. Using Zoom as a medium of communication has become somewhat normalised in the tertiary sector as a consequence of COVID-19 lockdown responses, thus making the approach more naturalistic (Tossell et al., 2012) than might have otherwise been the case. The remote video-based approach was chosen to align with the preferences and communication styles of the younger generation and produce versatile media resources for multiple purposes.

Recruitment strategies included accessing the university's student email list to distribute information to self-identified Māori students in their final year of undergraduate study or first year of honours work. We also distributed hard copy information packs in areas frequently visited by Māori students, such as Āwhina (Māori academic support), the gym, student health services, and other relevant locations. Finally, we used our existing relationships to identify and potentially recruit *tauiwa*.

As a result of these recruitment strategies, six young Māori students became participants. Table 1 summarises the demographic details of the four whose stories form the backbone of this article, including their *iwi* (tribal) affiliations.

Table 1: Demographic details of student participants

Participant alias	Gender	Age	Iwi	Region	Programme of study
Daisy	Female	22	Tuwharetoa, Te Arawa	Central North Island	Bachelor of Laws (LLB) and Bachelor of Arts (BA) in Psychology: Graduated from BA and in last trimester with 2 papers to complete
Everest	Female	20	Ngati Maru	Bay of Plenty	Bachelor of Media Studies. Graduated. Working in the media industry
Uenuku	Male	20	Ngati Kahungunu	East Coast of North Island	BA in Māori Studies In final trimester of BA
Wairoa	Male	20	Ngati Kahungunu	East Coast of North Island	Bachelor of Architectural Studies (BAS). Graduated and taken Master of Arts (MA) scholarship to continue study

During the dialogic interviews, participating *tauiwa* were encouraged to discuss the following:

- Their university experience as Māori students
- Highlights and challenges encountered
- Information they wished they had known at the beginning of their studies
- Advice they would give to their younger selves
- Anything else they deemed significant for research purposes.

Our innovative approach extended beyond data collection to encompass a multifaceted approach to analysis and dissemination. For scholarly outputs, we conducted a thematic analysis of the dialogic interview transcripts, identifying key patterns and insights from the participants' narratives. The video recordings were edited and curated to create engaging media resources for various purposes, including educational materials for schools and workshops, training resources for academic staff and short-form content for social media platforms. This multi-pronged engagement with the data was designed to widen our audience beyond traditional academic readerships, targeting younger generations who primarily consume information through social media and video resources. By doing so, we aimed to make the research findings more accessible, relatable and impactful for first-generation Māori university students as well as other stakeholders in the education sector. Research that aims to create positive change is supported by wide and varied dissemination of this nature.

FINDINGS

In this section, we present some findings shaped by the thematic analysis of *tauiwa* responses in the dialogic videos. These are organised into two themes: Finding a Friend and Connection with *Māo*. Each theme reflects relatedness and connectedness as central to Māori ideas of wellbeing.

Theme 1: Finding a friend

Although all new students can experience some dislocation on moving out of home, this may happen at a different intensity for Māori students because of the cultural value placed on being connected. Many Māori students travel to a university in a city location where previous layers of connection to *whanau* and community are muted and, consequently, wellbeing affected. Thus, finding a friend—forming new connections to mirror those muted by distance and separation—emerged from the data as significant for Māori *tauiwa.*

The theme of finding a friend holds profound significance for Māori university students like Daisey and Everest, and encompasses crucial cultural, social and emotional dimensions of their university experience. For Māori students transitioning from small, tight-knit communities to large urban universities, friendships serve as vital links to their cultural identity and sources of support in an environment that can feel unfamiliar or alienating.

The 2018 census showed that Māori have a higher proportion of their population living in rural areas and small urban areas compared with the total population of Aotearoa New Zealand (Environmental Health Intelligence New Zealand, n.d.). Both Daisey and Everest's experiences highlight the profound challenges Māori students face when transitioning. Daisey describes the move as a 'whole big shock', emphasising the stark contrast between her previous life and the new urban setting:

> Just when I moved here it was like a whole big shock, I think, for me like I just wasn't . . . I don't know what to expect, and I wasn't [ready], you know I lived with my mum my whole life.

Similarly, Everest expresses this shift as a culture shock: 'I come from a small town, so coming to a big city was like a culture shock. Everything was different; the people, the pace, even the air felt different'. These parallel experiences underscore the disorienting nature of the spatial and cultural transition for Māori students who have grown up in tight communities with strong cultural ties.

The unfamiliarity of the urban university environment can be further compounded by the lack of visible Māori representation, intensifying feelings of isolation and cultural disconnection. Daisey's experience in attending a law lecture highlights this isolation:

> I was the only one [meaning the only Māori] and the room, it's huge . . . um, and no one around me looked brown. I was so scared like honestly petrified.

Everest echoes the isolation of this sentiment:

> In my first few weeks, I felt so alone. I couldn't see anyone who looked like me or understood where I came from. It was like being on a different planet.

These experiences underscore the importance of finding friends who share similar backgrounds and experiences, especially in academic settings where Māori students may feel underrepresented and misunderstood and where they may face the kinds of negative experiences described by Mayeda et al. (2014).

Both Daisey and Everest's journeys illuminate the emotional toll of the transition, encompassing academic concerns and social anxieties, both erosions to their wellbeing. Daisey candidly expresses her fears:

> Yeah, it was a big shock. Um! But yeah, I think I think I was just scared. I was scared of everything. I was scared of failing. I was scared of not making friends. I was scared of not fitting in.

Similarly, Everest related:

> I was scared of everything - failing my classes, not making friends, losing touch with my culture. It felt like I was trying to balance two worlds, and I wasn't sure I could do it.

Living in two worlds for Māori is well documented. Hook (2007) noted that 'Māori must assimilate two world views to make their way in the Pākehā world as well as in the Māori world' (p. 3). The two-worlds experience is particularly pertinent in education (Matthews, 2016; Roberts & Stewart, 2014). Daisey and Everest's parallel experiences highlight the interconnected nature of academic success and social belonging for Māori students, emphasising friendships' crucial role in navigating the complex terrain shaped by transitioning from home to university and inhabiting two worlds at once.

However challenging situations may be, they can also produce strengths. Daisey and Everest's negative experiences led to significant friendships that became sources of comfort and cultural connection. Daisey recounts:

> I didn't even know but there was this Māori sitting behind me. I ended up meeting him 'cause he sat behind me . . . We've been friends now for years. He was like my . . . comfortable person, you know—in law, and he was Māori. He ended up being Māori and my colour.

Similarly, Everest describes a pivotal moment of connection:

> I remember the first time I met another Māori student in one of my classes. It was like finding a piece of home. We started talking, and suddenly, I didn't feel so alone anymore.

These experiences underscore the importance of cultural familiarity and kinship in creating a sense of belonging that supports wellbeing in an otherwise unfamiliar environment.

Friendships with other Māori students serve as more than just sources of emotional support; they become crucial conduits for understanding and navigating the complex university system.

For students like Daisey and Everest, who come from backgrounds where university culture and processes are unfamiliar, connections in the form of friendship provide invaluable insider knowledge and guidance. Daisey's experience illustrates this perfectly as she recounts a conversation with another Māori student who opened her eyes to academic possibilities she had not known existed:

> She told me that she studied Law and . . . well, you can do that like you can do it all in one degree. I had no idea, and she told me I could, so I said 'OK', and went and found out more myself.

Everest similarly describes how her Māori friends helped her access important information and resources:

> My Māori friends were like guides. They knew which professors[were] supportive and which courses were aligned with our cultural values, and how to access support services. It was knowledge I wouldn't have found in any university handbook.

The value of these friendships is amplified in a context where Daisey had been given deficit-orientated *wairua*-sapping advice by a person designated as a support person to Māori students:

> He was telling me that I couldn't do Law . . . trying to pull me off the idea saying how Māori students normally don't do too well.

In such circumstances, supportive friends who offer empowering advice become even more valuable.

Through significant friendships, both Daisey and Everest gained a support system and a deeper connection to their cultural identity within the university context. These connections helped them navigate the challenges of balancing their cultural background with the demands of university life. Everest reflected:

> Finding other Māori students helped me see that I didn't have to choose between my culture and my education. We could bring our whole selves to university, support each other, and succeed together.

This understanding resolves some tensions between the two worlds since the company of other Māori means that Everest's Māori self and her academic work can comfortably co-exist.

In summary, the experiences of Daisey and Everest illustrate how the theme of 'finding a friend' for Māori university students goes beyond mere social connection. It encompasses cultural affirmation, emotional support and practical guidance for navigating an unfamiliar academic landscape. These friendships become lifelines, helping students bridge the space between their cultural background and the demands of university life, ultimately contributing to their wellbeing, academic success and personal growth. Their stories highlight the critical importance of fostering environments within universities that facilitate these connections and support the distinct needs of Māori students.

Theme 2: Connection with Māori

For Māori university students like Wairoa and Uenuku, the concept of 'connection with Māori' is not merely a social preference but a profound cultural, social and emotional necessity. This connection serves as a crucial lifeline and wellbeing support, helping these students navigate the often-challenging transition from their close-knit, culturally rich communities to the predominantly non-Māori urban university environment.

The significance of Māori connection for university students like Wairoa and Uenuku stems from the deep-rooted cultural values and collective identity inherent in Māori culture. For Māori, identity is intrinsically linked to *whakapapa* (genealogy), *whānau* (family) and community. As discussed above, connection is a key aspect of Māori wellbeing. When Māori students leave their familiar surroundings to pursue higher education, they often find themselves in an environment emphasising individualism and Western academic norms—a stark contrast to the collectivist, culturally-grounded Māori worldview.

The experiences of Wairoa and Uenuku vividly illustrate the challenges Māori students face when transitioning to university life and the critical need for connection with other Māori. Both students moved from small, predominantly Māori communities to urban university environments, a shift that brought significant cultural and social adjustments. Wairoa's experience highlights the profound sense of dislocation that can occur. He reflects on his struggle to form meaningful connections, even within the Māori student community:

> Maybe not isolated, but yeah, I did feel like even though this group [of Māori students] was isolated . . . I couldn't really . . . [get] any meaningful, meaningful connections with the other[s].

This reveals the complexity of Wairoa's situation. Even when surrounded by other Māori students, Wairoa found it challenging to forge deep, consequential connections. This suggests that mere proximity to other Māori is not enough; there is a need for structured opportunities and spaces that facilitate genuine connection and cultural expression.

Similarly, Uenuku experienced a significant culture shock when transitioning to the city university environment. He describes being 'quite shocked by the urban environments' after coming from 'a green environment to a man-made environment'. The drastic change in physical surroundings compounded the sense of disconnection from his cultural roots with disconnection from nature. Coming to university meant coping with these factors in addition to the academic workload.

Both Wairoa and Uenuku's experiences demonstrate the profound impact that connection (or lack of connection) with other Māori can have on a student's university experience. Without strong Māori connections, students often report feelings of isolation, disconnection from their cultural identity and a sense of being adrift in an unfamiliar environment. Uenuku's reflection captures this sentiment. Speaking of the gym, he says:

> [After considerable time] I finally found a space for myself where I can feel more and more . . . You know, open to express my own identity.

This admission underscores the long and often challenging journey many Māori students face in finding a sense of belonging and cultural affirmation within the university setting. Conversely, when Māori students do find meaningful connections with other Māori, the impact can be transformative. Wairoa's experience illustrates this. He recalls:

> I think, you know, this was also the time when I started to become more and more and more in my own cultural identity.

Experiences of disconnection and finding oneself through connection highlight the value of engaging with Māori-centred spaces and finding a supportive Māori community at the university level. In Wairoa's case, the strength he found in connection helped him express his cultural identity. Connection enhanced his sense of belonging and facilitated a deeper exploration and embracing of his Māori identity, a factor in his wellbeing. For Uenuku, in

addition to the gym, Āwhina, a Māori academic support unit, provided cultural and academic reassurance.

> I mean, it's familiar. You don't feel excluded. And that's because they're playing with the same rules that I play with. Especially if you grew up in a Māori centric environment, you already understand the rules and in order to have won in the game, everybody needs to know the rules. So, you don't feel left behind . . . It's familiar.

This experience suggests the indivisibility of *hinengaro* and *wairua* as factors that, when cared for, support academic progress through connection and the value of Māori-framed activities and spaces.

The experiences of Wairoa and Uenuku underscore the critical importance of 'connection with Māori' for Māori university students. Like finding a fried, this connection is a fundamental need that supports cultural identity, emotional wellbeing and academic success. The difference is one of scale. Finding a friend is deeply interpersonal, whereas connection with Māori is broader and more societal. As universities continue to strive for equity and inclusion, recognising and facilitating wider kinds of connections should be a priority. Experiences of cultural dissonance can lead to feelings of isolation, disconnection and even identity crisis.

DISCUSSION

Māori students who participated in this study revealed negative experiences balanced by strengths found in relationships with others. The challenges in the needs for Māori connection are multifaceted. First, the university environment, with its emphasis on individual achievement and Western academic traditions, can feel at odds with Māori cultural values and ways of learning and lead to a sense of cultural disconnect, a disorientating experience of two worlds. This mirrors Māori experiences in education elsewhere (Matthews, 2016; Roberts & Stewart, 2014). Secondly, many universities may not have dedicated spaces or programmes that facilitate Māori cultural practices and connections and those that do are forced to defend them against claims of discrimination. Third, the Māori student population itself is diverse, with varying levels of cultural knowledge and connection. This can sometimes create barriers to connection for students who feel less confident in their cultural identity—although connection itself can act to (re)build a sense of identity as Māori. Next, the demands of academic life can make it challenging for students to prioritise cultural connections and activities, especially in environments where the value of connection is not appreciated as central to an individualised ethos. Finally, in many university courses, Māori students may find themselves as one of few, if not the only, Māori in their classes, limiting opportunities for casual cultural connection.

However, such issues are balanced by the power of connection exercised through friendship or at a wider scale. In both cases, links with other Māori are important to tertiary *tauiwa* for several reasons. First, connections with other Māori can provide a sense of cultural continuity, allowing students to maintain their cultural practices, speak *te reo Māori*, and engage in *tikanga* even while away from their home communities. In addition, shared experiences and understanding among Māori students also create a support network that can help navigate the challenges of university life, combating feelings of loneliness and alienation. Next, regular interaction with other Māori can reinforce and celebrate Māori identity, countering the potential erosion of cultural identity in the predominantly non-Māori academic environment and providing a balance between the two worlds (NZ Herald, 2024). Further, studies have shown that strong cultural connections can positively impact academic performance for indigenous students, providing motivation and a sense of purpose tied to cultural values and community expectations (Webber & Macfarlane, 2020). Finally, given that for Māori, wellbeing is holistic,

encompassing physical, mental, emotional and spiritual aspects, connection with other Māori supports wellbeing by addressing cultural and spiritual needs that may be overlooked in mainstream university support systems.

Tertiary providers can learn to do better by their Māori students (and themselves) by listening attentively to *tauiwa* voices, such as the four featured in this study, and taking appropriate actions. This means understanding the need for connection among Māori students operates on multiple levels. These include the cultural sharing and practising cultural traditions, speaking *te reo Māori* and engaging in *tikanga*; social forming friendships and support networks with other Māori students who understand shared experiences and challenges; spiritual—engaging in *wairuatanga* (spirituality) and maintaining connection to ancestral lands and traditions; academic—collaborating on studies, sharing indigenous knowledge and supporting each other's academic journeys; and the emotional—providing a safe space for expressing feelings, fears and aspirations unique to the Māori university experience. These levels are interwoven, and all contribute to the related nature of Māori wellbeing, widely discussed as embracing *wairua* (spirit), *whānau* (family network), *hinengaro* (mind) and *tinana* (body) (Durie, 1994; Mental Health Foundation of New Zealand, 2024) within a holistic entirety.

Listening to Māori *tauiwa* voices also means tertiary providers taking seriously the burden of balancing the two worlds experienced by those in this study, recognising these as representative of a wider issue of power and representation from which providers have much to learn about their environments and practices. Environments where Māori students feel isolated and/or experience racial discrimination, do not offer promise as learning spaces capable of transforming the world—a frequent university ambition.

In these circumstances, acting to build on prior or existing provisions (Wilson et al., 2011) or developing new spaces, programmes and opportunities for Māori students to connect with each other and their culture is a positive move. Such developments are a way universities can help bridge the space between the familiar, culturally rich environments these students come from and the often-unfamiliar terrain of higher education. In doing so, they not only support the individual success of Māori students—including to live as Māori, experience wellbeing and health, contribute as valued members of a global society and gain qualifications likely to lead to a high standard of living (Durie, 2004)—but also enrich the entire university community with the vibrant presence of Māori culture and perspectives. This, perhaps, is a contextually valid understanding of quality education.

CONCLUSION

This article has offered a window into Māori student experiences in tertiary education by listening to the voices of *tauira* using a dialogic video approach. Key findings include the significance of finding an understanding friend, often a fellow Māori and wider connections with other Māori in the context of the tertiary world. Relational resources of this nature take on special significance where *rangatira* must navigate the opportunities and burdens of living in two worlds and where 'everyday colonialism' (Mayeda, 2014, p. 63), a contextual understanding of racism, is often to be endured. In these circumstances, tertiary providers are not helpless but can find steerage by listening to their Māori students, protecting the provisions they have made for developing connections amongst Māori and seeking opportunities to expand and sharpen positive provision that responds to circumstance and Māori aspirations. In so doing, it is likely that university goals of successfully graduating students and those elucidated by Māori to live as Māori, experience wellbeing and health, contribute as valued members of a global society and gain qualifications likely to lead to a high standard of living (Durie, 2004), will coincide in reinforcing rather than conflicting ways.

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