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**The Culturally Grounded Leadership Dynamic: Promoting Māori Success in
English-Medium State Boys' Schools in Aotearoa**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the
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ABSTRACT

This exploratory study investigates the relationship between leadership action and sustained school success among male Māori learners in Aotearoa New Zealand. Although the national commitment demands that Māori students achieve success as Māori, research has yet to explore the specific culturally grounded leadership dynamic required to drive genuine institutional transformation.

English-medium single-sex boys' secondary schools achieve higher University Entrance outcomes for Māori boys than English-medium co-educational secondary schools; the leadership strategies driving this success remain largely undocumented.

A qualitative comparative multi-site case study design, grounded in a Te Tiriti-led application of Cunningham's (1998) Māori-centred framework, was employed. The researcher collected data through in-depth interviews with senior leaders, including two Headmasters, and Year 13 Māori students from three boys' secondary schools.

The study found that effective leadership establishes this dynamic by integrating Te Ao Māori principles such as mana and whanaungatanga into formal institutional structures. The study identified strategies to more closely align cultural identity with educational excellence, thereby mediating the perceived conflict between peer acceptance and academic success.

Academic achievement statistics provide the empirical context for this study, grounding the qualitative analysis of leadership strategies. The thesis concludes by presenting a contextualised model of effective strategy that defines this successful dynamic, offering an empirically-based guide for institutional transformation and policy in Aotearoa New Zealand.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Overview

In 2014, a report from the New Zealand Council for Educational Research (NZCER) titled 'Achievement in Boys' Schools 2010-12' (Wylie & Berg, 2014) highlighted that boys in single-sex boys' secondary schools achieved higher University Entrance results, compared to their peers in co-educational settings. While this report offered a broad overview, it did not explicitly detail the specific pedagogical and leadership strategies that contributed to the success of Māori students in those schools. While the 2014 NZCER report provides a foundational justification for examining these specific institutions, broader educational research by scholars such as Hawkes (2001) and Biddulph (2008) also emphasises the unique relational and developmental needs of boys in single-sex environments, making these schools a critical site for exploring targeted pedagogical strategies.

The primary purpose of this study is to move beyond documenting this statistical success and to critically examine the deliberate leadership practices undertaken at English-medium State Secondary Boys' Schools to enhance the academic performance and overall flourishing of male Māori learners.

The New Zealand Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007) and the Māori Education Strategy, Ka Hikitia (Ministry of Education, 2013a), provided the core policy direction for English-medium schools, acknowledging the importance of enabling Māori students to achieve educational success as Māori (De Goldi, 2018).

Although a body of published research describes the influence of leadership on student achievement and confirms the theoretical necessity of transformational leadership to decolonise practice (Murfitt, 2019), far less work has been undertaken to explore how senior

leaders in these environments explicitly operationalise these strategies. This study aims to fill that gap by focusing on leadership practices, thereby developing an empirically grounded model for achieving and sustaining this success. While the particular practices are context-specific (e.g., Haka, brotherhood), the principles (e.g., relational trust, culturally responsive leadership) are generalisable.

1.2 Researcher's Position

As a Pākehā researcher, I approach this study with a clear understanding of my positionality. While this research investigates a kaupapa of profound significance to Tangata Whenua, I acknowledge that it was not initiated by a Māori community. Therefore, it does not claim to be Kaupapa Māori Research in the strict sense defined by Smith (1996) or Pihama (2019). Instead, this study is primarily guided by Cunningham's (1998) Māori-centred research framework, which allows for Māori participation and analysis while acknowledging the researcher's non-Māori control. However, I extend Cunningham's framework by aligning my practice with the emerging methodology of 'Tangata Tiriti' research (Bell, 2024; Hursthouse, 2024). This approach moves beyond passive observation to active responsibility.

My commitment to this responsibility is personal and professional; my wife and sons whakapapa to Ngāti Kahungunu, and my research practice is driven by a desire to ensure their heritage is honoured. This positionality embodies the 'Māori-Pākehā hyphen' described by Jones (2014)—a space of relationship and tension that requires me to uphold Te Tiriti obligations without appropriating an indigenous voice. The specific ethical mechanisms used to navigate this space, including kanohi ki te kanohi (face-to-face) engagement and the use of a cultural advisory group, are detailed in Chapter Three.

1.3 Background to the Study

The education system in Aotearoa New Zealand has long struggled with the structural legacy of colonisation. This struggle is characterised by the persistence of 'whitestream' schooling—a concept defined by Milne (2013) as an educational environment that views Eurocentric norms as the neutral standard, thereby positioning Māori identity as 'other' and forcing students to assimilate to succeed. In response to the enduring educational disparities caused by this hegemonic discourse, government policies such as Ka Hikitia have explicitly mandated that institutions enable Māori students to achieve educational success as Māori (Māori Education Strategy, 2013). This directive creates an ethical mandate for school leaders to move beyond compliance toward transformative change. In this context, transformation is defined not merely as incremental improvement, but as the structural redesign of the school's operating logic to validate Māori knowledge systems (mātauranga) alongside western academic traditions.

The present study is uniquely situated within a compelling paradox: while national disparities persist, single-sex secondary boys' schools demonstrate higher academic outcomes (University Entrance) for Māori students. The literature suggests that sustaining this institutional success hinges upon transformational leadership that deliberately moves beyond symbolic gestures, intentionally operationalising Māori values (such as mana and whanaungatanga) as the organising logic for the school's core functions.

1.4 Research Aims

The central purpose of the study was to address a context-specific gap in the empirical research. While there is a substantial body of literature addressing leadership for Māori success generally, there remains a paucity of research concerning the practical

implementation of these transformative practices specifically within English-medium State single-sex secondary boys' schools.

The overarching goal was to investigate the leadership strategies that facilitate male Māori learners achieving educational success as Māori within the context of State single-sex secondary boys' schools in Aotearoa New Zealand.

The following aims guide the study:

1. To document the specific mechanisms and strategies senior leaders employ to integrate Te Ao Māori values into the institutional structure and daily practice of the school.
2. To determine the correlation between these leadership practices (rooted in transformational and distributed leadership theory) and the observed academic success and positive post-school pathways (University Entrance data) of male Māori learners, as perceived by leaders and students.
3. To develop a contextualised model of effective leadership strategies, based on empirical evidence, that successfully connects transformative leadership theory to sustained superior educational outcomes for male Māori learners in single-sex settings.

1.5 Outline of Chapters

This thesis is structured into six chapters, designed to move systematically from establishing the need for the research, to presenting the findings and offering a conclusion:

Chapter One: Introduction

This chapter introduces the research context—State single-sex secondary schools for boys—and identifies the primary paradox: the potential for success amid historical disadvantage. It establishes the researcher's position, defines the research aims and questions, and provides a final outline for the thesis.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

This chapter presents a comprehensive review of the relevant literature. It critiques the legacy of colonisation and hegemony and defines success through the lens of Te Ao Māori (mana and mana motuhake). It concludes by demonstrating the need for a transformational and distributed leadership model.

Chapter Three: Methodology

This chapter details the study's methodological design and ethical foundations. It operationalises a Tangata Tiriti research stance applied within Cunningham's (1998) Māori-centred framework, justifying the qualitative, comparative case study approach. The chapter outlines the methods for data collection and analysis—specifically Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019)—demonstrating how this reflexive method addresses the ethical imperatives of conducting Te Tiriti-responsive research.

Chapter Four: Findings and Analysis

This chapter presents and analyses the data collected from the case study schools. The findings are structured thematically, aligned with the research aims, and focus specifically on the operational mechanisms senior leaders use to integrate cultural practices and respond to the developmental needs of male Māori learners.

Chapter Five: Discussion

This chapter interprets the research findings through a critical dialogue with the existing literature. It moves beyond description to analysis, conceptualising the 'Culturally Grounded Leadership Dynamic' based on the empirical evidence. The discussion examines how the interplay between institutional structures and student agency disrupts whitestream norms, offering a theoretical explanation for the academic success observed in the case study schools.

Chapter Six: Conclusions and Recommendations

This chapter synthesises the study's major conclusions to provide a definitive response to the research question. It outlines the theoretical and methodological contributions—specifically the value of a Te Tiriti-led framework—and acknowledges the limitations of the research scope. The chapter closes by presenting the Culturally Grounded Leadership Dynamic model alongside offering targeted recommendations for school leaders and policymakers, arguing for the structural operationalisation of indigenous values to ensure equitable outcomes for male Māori learners in English-medium secondary school settings.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This chapter systematically examines the core concepts that define and shape the educational experiences and outcomes of male Māori learners in English-medium single-sex secondary schools for boys, establishing the theoretical framework for this study. The review is structured to first define the macro-level issues of power and policy before focusing on the specific psychological and relational experiences of the target demographic.

The review begins by outlining the structural imperative (Section 2.2), encompassing the historical legacies of colonisation, hegemony, and assimilation. It establishes the rationale for focusing on the unique context of single-sex boys' secondary schools. The subsequent sections focus on systemic implementation.

Section 2.3 examines the policy response and pedagogical imperative, exploring the efficacy of government strategies, such as Ka Hikitia, and the foundational role of whanaungatanga (relationships) in culturally responsive pedagogy.

Section 2.4 examines the relationship between leadership, gender, and identity. It highlights how a strong cultural identity protects students as they navigate the tension between fitting in with their peers and striving for high grades. The section argues that structured 'rites of passage' are essential for aligning a sense of social belonging with educational success.

Finally, Section 2.5 grounds the proposed solution in the principles of transformational and distributed leadership theories, as these models are required to drive institutional change and address the identified psychological challenges. The chapter concludes by synthesising the

literature to clearly identify the empirical research gap concerning the operationalisation of these transformative leadership practices within the study's specific context.

2.2 The Structural Imperative: Colonisation and Hegemony

A critical analysis of Māori educational success requires framing the discourse within the deep-seated structural and ideological forces that shape the New Zealand schooling system. Hegemony, as conceptualised by Antonio Gramsci (1971), refers to the subtle dominance of one group's values and beliefs over others, an ideology that, though often invisible, profoundly shapes societal and institutional norms (Waitere & Court, 2009). In the New Zealand context, a historical Pākehā (European) majority has influenced the structure and curriculum of schools, thereby creating a pervasive 'whitestream' culture (Milne, 2013). This ideological dominance leads to a sense of alienation for Māori students whose cultural identity and knowledge are often marginalised (Waitere & Court, 2009).

2.2.1 The Legacy of Assimilation and Colonial Dynamics

Historically, the New Zealand school system has sustained colonial power dynamics, thereby perpetuating the disadvantages faced by Māori across generations (Waitere & Court, 2009). Scholars such as Milne (2013) argue that colonial education systems promoted deliberate assimilationist policies that actively discouraged the development of Māori cultural identity. Historical accounts of restrictions evidence this, and in some contexts, the ubiquitous prohibition of Te Reo Māori in schools (Iti, TEDxAuckland, 2015; Bejarano, 2005; Spring, 2009). This historical context continues to resonate, rooted in the Crown's genuine failure to "keep the promises enshrined in the 1840 Treaty of Waitangi" (Waitere & Court, 2009, p. 116). This enduring structural issue creates an environment in which Māori students are subjected to stereotyping, low expectations (Bishop & Berryman, 2006), and a

deficit-thinking context—the unconscious bias that assumes a lack of positive Māori attributes (Berryman et al., 2018; Milne, 2013). While Māori sought to acquire the knowledge of the colonial settlers to enhance their own mātauranga (Harker, 1982), this acquisition was not reciprocated by the colonising culture.

2.2.2 The Critique of Homogeneity and the 'Melting Pot'

In the contemporary educational landscape, this hegemonic discourse persists. School leaders may act in good faith to create a homogeneous environment for students to flourish (Milne, 2013); however, this approach overlooks the ongoing struggle of indigenous people for self-determination and the development of their identity, a battle shaped by colonisation. Schools continue to generate a culture that attempts to bring students together as a "cohesive whole" (Fraise & Brooks, 2015) with good intent, as minority groups are often pressured to surrender parts of their identity to assimilate into a 'melting pot' society. Attempts at inclusion and the celebration of diversity can, paradoxically, be misinterpreted as reinforcing the dominant system. Frase and Brooks (2015) term this outcome a "cultural collision," suggesting that such efforts can accelerate the hegemonic discourse. This aligns with Milne's (2013) challenge to the 'melting pot' assumption. Despite the presence of diverse cultural identities within schools, the fundamental norms and values often remain those of the dominant culture. This is the prevailing discourse in English-medium schools, which are dominated by a white mainstream (Milne, 2013). Tomlins-Jahnke (2008) clarifies that the term "'mainstream' [is] a euphemism or code word for schools that privilege a Western/Eurocentric education tradition" (p. 6). Practices intended to be inclusive, such as promoting phrases like "global citizens," can encourage homogeneity and encourage the idea of "colour blindness" (Shields & Sayani, 2005, p. 97), which sustains the hegemonic narrative. This hegemonic discourse was also discussed in the historical accounts of the

imposition of colonial systems, including the introduction of western thinking, attitudes, practices, and knowledge into Māori communities (Pihama, 2019). Milne (2013) states that these are colonial practices that are inherently deliberate, designed to assimilate students.

Moreover, schools are challenging this dominant discourse by employing strategies of strategic exclusion to achieve inclusion. For instance, the establishment of separate whānau form classes creates a distinct space for cultural safety. This aligns with the findings of Jones (2001), who argues that such separation is not about segregation, but about providing a productive space where indigenous students are freed from the "burden of teaching" the dominant culture. By removing the pressure to explain themselves to Pākehā peers, these spaces allow Māori students to focus on their own learning and identity. Consequently, while outwardly exclusive, this separation paradoxically empowers students to participate more fully in the wider school. This practice exemplifies the educational tension identified by Durie (2005), who suggests that we are operating at the interface of the "indigenisation of New Zealand schools on the one hand, and globalisation on the other" (p. 6).

2.2.3 The Transformative Alternative: Affirming Mana and Tapu

The imperative for change requires educators to move decisively beyond deficit notions (Bishop, 2003) and instead embrace the rich cultural diversity of rangatahi. This pathway toward genuine transformation is guided by Kaupapa Māori, representing the deliberate "reassertion of indigenous Māori cultural aspiration" (Bishop, 2008, p. 223). Central to this is the principle of Taonga Tuku Iho (treasures handed down from ancestors), which mandates that educators respect each child's tapu and mana (Bishop, 2003).

This focus on identity was central to the seminal study *Ka Awatea* (Macfarlane et al., 2014), which established that while academic achievement is crucial, it constitutes "only one feature

of a Māori student's emerging distinctiveness" (p. 148). Building on this foundation, a follow-up study by Duckworth et al. (2021) revisited these themes by engaging with the original researchers and adhering to Te Arawa Tikanga. Through interviews with eight participants, Duckworth et al. (2021) confirmed that a positive sense of mana motuhake remains the prerequisite for success. This research highlights that mana motuhake is realised when students develop cultural efficacy and can engage meaningfully with their culture as a strength.

Effective leadership is required to actively intervene, dismantle these cultural barriers, validate Māori cultural assets, and promote success defined by Māori aspirations (Durie, 2003).

2.3 Defining Success and the Policy Response

The foundational commitment to addressing educational disparities began with the launch of the first Māori education strategy in 1999, creating an environment for iwi partnerships and targeted support (Ministry of Education). This strategic direction was later codified in the ongoing government policy statement, *Ka Hikitia* (2008, updated 2013), which established 'enjoying and achieving educational success as Māori' as its guiding principle. Alongside this policy, the government funded significant professional learning and development (PLD) programmes, notably *Te Kotahitanga* and subsequently *Kia Eke Panuku*. While a 2013 Auditor-General (OAG) report evaluated and highlighted implementation challenges specific to the *Ka Hikitia* policy, it is important to note this report did not lead to the creation of *Kia Eke Panuku*. Both of these PLD programmes ultimately ceased receiving government funding around 2016, leaving *Ka Hikitia* as the primary enduring policy directive.

2.3.1 Te Kotahitanga: Establishing Culturally Responsive Practice (c. 2001)

One of the key professional development programs created to address these disparities was Te Kotahitanga (Bishop & Berryman, 2006), which was a significant research and professional development initiative. As part of its research, Te Kotahitanga gathered student voices through interviews with principals, teachers, whānau members, and students (Bishop & Berryman, 2006). Findings from this research indicated that students, whether engaged or disengaged, perceived being Māori in a New Zealand secondary school as a negative experience, directly influenced by stereotyping and low expectations from teaching staff (Bishop & Berryman, 2006).

Te Kotahitanga, therefore, aimed to challenge these perceptions through targeted professional development and culturally responsive teaching and learning practices. Its framework was constructed around the rethinking of stereotypes by teachers and the development of key whanaungatanga (relationships) between Māori learners and teachers (Berryman & Eley, 2017), with the express purpose of improving attendance, engagement, and achievement (Berryman et al., 2014). This intervention established the Effective Teaching Profile (ETP), which rejected deficit theories and fostered positive change in Māori student achievement by promoting reciprocal teaching (ako) and strong relationships (Bishop et al., 2003). This framework includes observable elements that make culturally responsive pedagogy tangible. The success of the Te Kotahitanga reform programme resulted from its focus on developing a culturally responsive pedagogy of relations (Berryman et al., 2018), which extended its influence beyond the classroom and into students' whānau. By demanding that educators challenge negative biases (known as deficit ideologies) and adopt teaching practices that affirm identity, the programme fostered genuinely inclusive learning environments conducive to academic success for all students (Bishop & Berryman, 2006). This approach requires

reciprocal teaching and learning, embodying the principle of ako. This success is built on ako, a reciprocal dynamic where students and teachers engage in mutual learning (Kia Eke Panuku, n.d.-a). Berryman et al. (2018) emphasise the importance of active listening and knowledge sharing in this process, highlighting educators' role in creating opportunities for meaningful dialogue and learning exchanges that contribute to Māori educational success.

2.3.2. Ka Hikitia and Kia Eke Panuku: Mandates and Implementation Challenges

The success and core principles of Te Kotahitanga significantly influenced the Ministry of Education's subsequent national policy. This was formalised in 2008 as Ka Hikitia: Managing for Success - The Māori Education Strategy 2008-2012 (Berryman & Eley, 2017), which codified the strategic direction of ensuring Māori students achieve educational success as Māori (Ministry of Education, 2013).

However, the implementation of Ka Hikitia faced significant practical challenges. A 2013 Auditor-General report, while complimentary of the strategy's intent, detailed serious execution issues:

The Ministry of Education (the Ministry) introduced Ka Hikitia slowly and unsteadily... poor planning, poor programme and project management, and ineffective communication with schools have meant that action to put Ka Hikitia into effect was not given the intended priority. As a result, the Ministry's introduction of Ka Hikitia has not been as effective as it could have been...

Although there has been progress, this transformation has not yet happened.

(Office of the Auditor General, 2013, p.7).

This was compounded by the Auditor-General's finding that schools lacked coherence regarding the understanding and measurement of 'educational success as Māori. This

deficiency led to the education reform initiative, Kia Eke Panuku: Building on Success (n.d.), which operated in 93 secondary schools to guide English-medium schools on this premise.

Kia Eke Panuku drew on input from over 150 Māori senior students, selected for their demonstrated educational success, as well as educational experts (Māori and non-Māori) (Berryman & Eley, 2017). The thematic analysis of these senior students' interviews highlighted the essential components of success:

- Being able to resist the negative stereotypes about being Māori
- Having Māori culture and values celebrated at school
- Being strong in your Māori cultural identity
- Understanding that success is part of who we are
- Developing and maintaining emotional and spiritual strength
- Being able to contribute to the success of others
- Experiencing the power of whanaungatanga
- Knowing, accepting and acknowledging the strength of working together
- Knowing that you can access explicit and timely direction
- Being able to build on your own experiences and the experiences of others (Student Voices collated in themes - Kia Eke Panuku, n.d.) (Berryman & Eley, 2017)

2.3.3. Progress and Persistence of Stereotyping

A comparison between the 2001 student interviews (Te Kotahitanga) and the 2015 cohort (Kia Eke Panuku) reveals both progress and persistent challenges (Berryman & Eley, 2017).

The 2001 cohort often reported believing they had to give up their cultural identity to succeed, whereas the 2015 cohort reported greater agency over their own success. This should be taken with a word of caution, given that the 2001 cohort included students from

both Year 9 and Year 10, whereas the 2015 cohort consisted of senior students. Hence, a difference may well be telling in the lack of dependency on adult influence among senior students. However, the two cohorts shared an enduring awareness of negative stereotyping and low expectations (Berryman & Eley, 2017). While national strategies employed over the past twenty-five years have succeeded in lifting overall Māori achievement rates, the relative disparity—or 'achievement gap'—between Māori and non-Māori remains stubbornly persistent (Bolton, 2017). The endurance of both this statistical gap and the students' negative lived experiences underscores that national policy alone has been insufficient. The need, therefore, is for an investigation into the specific leadership actions required to actively overcome these systemic challenges at the institutional level.

While the longitudinal National Certificate of Educational Achievement data suggest some success in 'narrowing' the statistical achievement gap between Māori and non-Māori, a direct result, perhaps, of the work undertaken through targeted achievement and credentialing policies. However, what is also clear is that the lived experiences of Māori students, as referenced by the two studies above, have not significantly improved, and negative stereotypes and low expectations persist for rangatahi (Berryman & Eley, 2017). Despite these challenges, Māori students have demonstrated substantial achievement and have narrowed educational data gaps. While policies such as Te Kotahitanga, Ka Hikitia, and Kia Eke Panuku have sought to support Māori learners, their effectiveness is often constrained by deeper systemic factors. The persistence of uncertainty among schools regarding what 'educational success as Māori' means in practice reflects broader issues within the educational landscape—issues rooted in historical and structural conditions that shape how Māori culture is valued in schools.

As previously referred to, success in two cultures, according to Macfarlane et al. (2014), is vital to ensure a structure that builds pathways towards success and maintains or harnesses identity. Durie (2001) confirms the belief that formal education means, or should mean, preparation for participation in broader society and for Māori society. In other words, students benefit from participating and having high expectations in both cultures; consequently, we observe progress toward equity (Durie, 2001). In a separate paper, Durie (2016) postulated that education should be about a student's perception of self-identity (Durie, 2016), and Bishop et al. (2007) promote the idea that Māori students should be seen as bearers of the rich, unique, and dynamic cultural assets inherent in indigenous peoples. Being Māori is precisely that, a lived reality, so education should reflect this (Durie, 2003a). Educationalists, therefore, have a role in shaping students' hearts and minds to embrace this reality (Milne, 2013).

2.3.4 The Pedagogical and Relational Imperative for Māori Success

The literature confirms that student engagement and achievement hinge significantly on effective leadership, teaching methodologies, and learning environments, all of which are underpinned by robust governance (Ministry of Education, 2013). Leaders play a crucial role in enhancing the quality of student learning by modelling effective practices, spearheading professional development, and guiding curriculum development and pedagogical shifts (Ministry of Education, 2013). According to Lewis (2016), whilst positioning leadership in a transformative manner is crucial for achieving educational equity, acknowledging difference is a key driver of cultural leadership, where cultural identity serves as the central lens.

Developing an understanding of cultural identity is therefore vital to dismantling hegemonic discourses of all students, allowing them to flourish in an environment that equally welcomes their Māori and Pākehā identities (Fraise & Brooks, 2015).

2.3.4.1 Culturally Responsive Pedagogy and Deficit Thinking

While acknowledging that external socio-economic factors play a significant role in student achievement, within the school environment itself, the quality of teaching self-evidently remains the most significant lever for improving outcomes (Alton-Lee, 2003; Hattie, 2009). Hattie (2009) emphasises that "[t]eachers who are passionate about making a difference are more likely to make a difference" (p. 243). However, effective teaching for Māori students requires more than just passion; it necessitates a culturally responsive and relational approach (Kia Eke Panuku, n.d.-a). When teachers demonstrate knowledge of a student's whakapapa (ancestral heritage) or interests outside the classroom, they validate the student's identity, transforming the classroom from a sterile institutional environment into a space of whanaungatanga where learning is 'safe'.

The Te Kotahitanga ETP encapsulates these principles by rejecting deficit theories such as the 'whitestream' discourse that assumes a lack of positive Māori attributes (Milne, 2013), and instead fosters positive change in Māori student achievement (Bishop et al., 2003). This framework includes observable elements that make culturally responsive pedagogy tangible. For instance, teachers are encouraged to use ako to build whanaungatanga with students and their whānau (family) (Berryman et al., 2018). Bishop and Berryman (2006) concluded, "[f]undamental to the ETP is the creation of a culturally responsive context for learning where teachers understand the need to explicitly reject deficit theorising as a means of explaining Māori students' educational achievement levels" (p.31). Macfarlane (2004) expands on this by arguing that such a context must be grounded in whanaungatanga. In this view, the 'context' is one in which Māori cultural knowledge is treated as valid educational capital, essential for engaging the learner, rather than as a deviation from the norm.

2.3.4.2 The Primacy of Relationships (whanaungatanga)

A central theme in the literature on Māori education is the critical importance of relationships. The concept of whanaungatanga is paramount (Wilson et al., 2021). Building strong, respectful relationships between teachers, students, and their families is seen as the cornerstone of effective teaching and learning for Māori students. These relationships are not just about friendliness; they are about fostering trust, mutual respect, and a shared understanding of what success means. This relationship-driven approach challenges traditional power dynamics in education, creating a more inclusive and supportive environment. Research on male Māori learners highlights the importance of relationships with positive male role models, which can be a significant factor in their motivation and engagement (Berryman & Eley, 2017).

Building student-teacher connections, as advocated in Ka Hikitia and Te Kotahitanga, requires educators to prioritise cultural belonging and holistic well-being (Berryman et al., 2018). Research indicates that the quality of these relationships is directly correlated with attendance, learning, and achievement (Alton-Lee, 2015). This intentional shift, summarised by Milne (2013), focuses on successful attributes and promotes an authentic identity that allows Māori students to reclaim their educational sovereignty.

2.3.4.3 Cultural Identity as a Protective Asset

The practical implementation of culturally responsive pedagogy depends heavily on fostering a robust sense of heritage. This cultural grounding, defined by Phinney (as cited in Milne, 2013) as a cluster of factors including self-labelling, belonging, and active group involvement, is critical for learner well-being. Martinez and Dukes (1997) argue that a healthy ethnic self-perception acts as a buffer against societal denigration and stereotyping

(Pinckney IV et al., 2011). Similarly, Duckworth et al. (2021) suggest that nurturing Māori cultural efficacy builds the critical resilience necessary for sustained academic excellence.

Cultivating this environment requires transformative visionaries who place indigenous culture and achievement at the heart of school operations (Murfitt, 2019). Such guidance grants students the legitimacy to feel a sense of belonging and the empowerment to participate in institutional decision-making. This approach mirrors Durie's (1998) goals for Māori advancement: identification as Māori, access to cultural knowledge, and fluency in Te Reo. When these principles are operationalised, students can thrive and succeed in ways that truly honour their cultural roots.

2.3.4.4 The Intersection of Gender, Identity, and Academic Risk

Research on boys' motivation indicates that a poor relationship with schooling can rapidly degenerate into total disengagement (Koca, 2016). For male Māori learners, this risk is compounded by the intersection of gendered expectations and cultural stereotypes. Rather than viewing this through a deficit lens of inherent 'hypermasculinity,' Hokowhitu (2004) argues that Māori men often navigate a colonial construction of masculinity that limits them to physical domains—the 'warrior' or the 'athlete'—while tacitly excluding them from the intellectual sphere. When these limiting scripts are brought into the classroom, academic struggle is experienced not merely as cognitive difficulty, but as a fundamental threat to identity.

Drawing on Brown's (2012) analysis of the 'armour' men wear to protect against shame, the classroom can be interpreted as a site of high vulnerability. In a Māori context, this aligns with the concept of whakamā (shame/embarrassment). A student fearing the loss of mana may adopt a defensive posture of refusal or apathy—a 'performance' of disinterest used to mask the vulnerability of trying and failing (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Hokowhitu, 2004).

Dismantling this defensive posturing requires pedagogical strategies that mitigate emotional risk. Brown (2012) suggests that 'courage' in this context is defined by the acceptance of vulnerability, which necessitates a foundation of trust. This parallels Hawkes' (2001) assertion that a 'relational bridge' is the prerequisite for boys' engagement. In a high-trust, relational environment, the need for 'armour' is removed.

Therefore, supporting the transition to manhood for Māori students requires more than generic pastoral care; it requires the restoration of a positive cultural identity. While Eium and Eium (2004) highlight the general need for belonging and action in adolescent development, Durie (2003) argues that for Māori, this belonging is inextricably linked to access to Te Ao Māori. Cultural identity acts as a 'protective factor' (Webber, 2022), providing a counter-narrative to the limited 'warrior' script. By integrating whanaungatanga and creating culturally affirmed spaces, schools provide a secure platform where male Māori learners can maintain their mana, ensuring they do not need to disengage from education to protect their sense of self.

2.4 The Intersection of Experience: Māori Boys' Education

This section shifts the conceptual lens to the specific intersectional experience of male Māori learners. It begins by outlining the cultural and philosophical concepts essential to their education, then synthesises literature on identity and engagement to examine the distinct navigational challenge these students face: the complex task of maintaining a secure cultural identity while meeting the demands of a mainstream academic environment. This inquiry highlights the critical role of structured rites of passage in supporting students to reconcile these often-competing spheres.

2.4.1. Cultural Foundation: Te Ao Māori Concepts as a Leadership Framework

Understanding the educational journey of male Māori learners necessitates a lens firmly rooted in Te Ao Māori. This is not merely a cultural backdrop, but a methodological and philosophical approach that privileges indigenous worldviews (Macfarlane et al., 2014).

Within this paradigm, fundamental concepts such as whanaungatanga, mana motuhake, and whakapapa form the bedrock of successful engagement (Duckworth et al., 2021).

The intrinsic sense of belonging is crucial for developing both personal and academic efficacy within the school community. However, a universal approach to pastoral care is insufficient. As Milne (2013) argues, without centralising indigenous epistemologies, schools remain 'whitestream' spaces where the distinct potential of Māori students is rendered invisible, leaving them vulnerable to subtle forms of deficit theorising.

2.4.2. Male Development and the Navigation of Identity

The motivation and engagement of boys have been linked to relational pedagogy and clear structure. Authors such as Martin (2003) and Lashlie (2005) stress that effective pedagogy requires strong relationships where the teacher actively demonstrates an investment in the student's interests and world (Biddulph, 2008). This necessitates establishing the boundaries and clarity needed to navigate what Lashlie (2005) defines as the 'Bridge of Adolescence'—a metaphorical transition in which understanding the 'rules of the game' provides the security boys need to move toward manhood.

However, these general developmental needs take on specific complexity when viewed through an intersectional lens. Rather than a simple transition, Māori boys face a navigational challenge compounded by hegemonic masculinity—a concept defined by Connell (2005) as the dominant, culturally exalted form of manhood that marginalises other expressions of

identity. In the Aotearoa context, Hokowhitu (2004) argues that this hegemony manifests as a colonial construct, restricting Māori boys to physical or stoic roles (the 'warrior' or 'athlete') while excluding them from intellectual domains. Consequently, the developmental task for these students is to negotiate the tension between hegemonic scripts that limit and authentic indigenous understandings of what it means to be tane (men) (Macfarlane et al., 2014). The challenge, therefore, lies in navigating an environment where 'academic success' and 'masculine authenticity' have historically been positioned as opposing forces.

2.4.3. Leadership and the Rites of Passage Imperative

Anthropological scholarship has long established the importance of community-based developmental processes for marking the transition to adulthood (Caddie & Ross, 2010). The power of specific Māori rites of passage is highlighted by Ware and Walsh-Tapiata (2010), who argue that practices such as Mau Rākau (traditional martial arts), Whaikōrero (oratory), and the assumption of Tuakana (mentorship) roles should be intentionally integrated into school culture. This integration serves as a strategic solution to the intersectional experience of male Māori learners, providing a structured, culturally grounded pathway to a positive masculine identity.

Effective leadership must provide three specific scaffolds for development: visionary mentorship that projects a belief in the student's future potential (Biddulph, 2008); cultural connection that anchors their identity within a collective history (Rubenstein, 2013); and skills for courage, defined by Brown (2012) as the capacity to embrace vulnerability and navigate risk. The most successful leadership operationalises these elements through structured rites of passage that transition young men toward leadership and service. These are often integrated with cultural activities (e.g., kapa haka and tuakana roles) that affirm self-worth. This focus on elevated purpose aligns directly with transformational leadership,

inspiring students to look beyond self-interest to achieve outcomes that benefit their wider community (Burns, 1978).

2.5 The Role of Transformative Leadership

There is substantial evidence that the successful translation of culturally responsive policy into sustained school-wide success depends on effective school leadership. Robinson et al. (2009) posit that the challenge for leaders extends beyond merely improving achievement; it involves simultaneously reducing disparities and significantly enhancing the educational potential of Māori learners. Consequently, the literature indicates that success in this domain is predicated on leaders embracing a transformative and culturally aware vision (Macfarlane et al., 2014).

2.5.1. Transformational Leadership and Decolonisation

The nature of the challenges—rooted in hegemony and the 'whitestream' necessitates a transformational leadership approach (Murfitt, 2019) to achieve fundamental cultural change. Transformative leadership theory, according to Shields (2011, 2013), provides a framework in which leaders must demonstrate moral courage and activism by actively addressing systemic inequalities.

Shields' seven tenets include: the ability to "deconstruct practices that perpetuate the privilege of some to the exclusion of others while, at the same time, using the power they have to redress inequitable resource distribution" (Shields, 2013, p. 584). By possessing a "deep awareness of the systems and behaviours" that underpin how society operates (Murfitt, 2019, p. 22), transformative leaders establish a moral purpose (Fullan, 2003) that positions young male Māori learners and their cultural identity firmly at the heart of the institution.

2.5.2. Shared Power and Distributed Leadership

Research suggests that transformational change cannot be achieved solely by senior leadership; it relies on shifting power and responsibility through a distributed leadership approach (Fournier et al., 2022). In this context, distributed leadership actively engages the wider school community to support the principle of mana motuhake specifically for Māori learners and their whānau (Durie, 1998, cited in Berryman et al., 2017). As Walker (2009) suggests, leaders who understand and utilise indigenous practices and community norms are best placed to motivate innovative, culturally-aligned ideas.

This model of shared leadership requires active collaboration with whānau, kaumātua (elders), and the community, thereby facilitating the tuakana-teina reciprocal learning approach (Clarkin-Phillips, 2009). By weaving together the threads of change with all stakeholders, the collective focus moves beyond merely narrowing the achievement gap to the more profound goal of enabling rangatahi (young people) to achieve educational success as Māori (Berryman et al., 2017).

2.5.3. Conclusion: The Unanswered Question of Leadership Strategy

The synthesis of this literature review indicates that the educational success of male Māori learners is significantly enhanced by the successful integration of Te Ao Māori values, mana motuhake, whanaungatanga, and rites of passage. Furthermore, the literature suggests that sustaining this integration extends beyond standard management, calling for a transformative set of leadership strategies, focused on decolonising institutional practice by operationalising cultural principles as the school's core organising logic (Murfitt, 2019; Milne, 2013).

However, a critical gap remains in the existing research. While the need for transformative change is established, there is a lack of detailed, empirical analysis on how these leadership

practices are explicitly integrated, operationalised, and sustained by senior leadership in the specific institutional context of English-medium State single-sex secondary boys' schools.

The investigation that follows will address this strategic gap by analysing the practices of leaders in these specific educational settings and examining the leadership dynamics that facilitate positive educational outcomes for Māori male learners.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

The research question for this study:

What deliberate actions do the leadership of English-Medium State Secondary Boys' Schools take to promote a sense of belonging, language, culture, and cultural identity among Māori students, and how do these actions influence their educational achievement and pathways?

To address the distinct facets of leadership practices, contextual dynamics, and student outcomes contained within this overarching inquiry, the study is further guided by three sub-questions:

1. Leadership Practices: How do school leaders operationalise Māori cultural values (such as mana and whanaungatanga) to create a culturally safe environment within a 'whitestream' single-sex boys' school?
2. Contextual Dynamics: In what ways do leadership practices leverage the specific social dynamics of a boys' school (such as the 'brotherhood') to foster cultural identity and belonging for Māori students?
3. Impact and Perception: How do Māori students and staff perceive the relationship between these culturally grounded leadership practices and the students' educational achievement and future pathways?

The research was conducted via a multi-site case study of three English-medium state secondary boys' schools in Aotearoa, New Zealand. The schools were initially selected for their representation of Māori students, a key factor in ensuring the study's findings would be relevant and meaningful to the broader educational landscape in Aotearoa. The aim was to

include schools with at least 20% Māori students to reflect a nationally representative proportion of Māori students. However, the final school participation was determined by the schools' Headmasters' agreement to participate in the research. Consequently, the final sample comprises two schools that met the desired criterion and one with an 11% Māori student representation. While a potential limitation, the inclusion of a school with lower Māori representation offers valuable insights into a different context, thereby enriching the overall study.

This chapter describes the methodology used in conducting the study. It includes a description of the qualitative case-study approach and its justification. It will also consider the ethical issues associated with the study and the implications of conducting this research as a non-Māori researcher.

3.2 Research Aim and Objectives

The overarching aim of this research is to identify and document the nature of the culturally grounded leadership dynamic within English-medium state secondary single-sex boys' schools. To achieve this aim and provide a comprehensive answer to the central research question and its sub-questions, the study has established the following specific objectives:

1. To document leadership practices (Addressing Sub-Question 1): To identify and analyse the specific deliberate actions and structural mechanisms senior leaders employ to operationalise Māori cultural values within the school environment.
2. To analyse the contextual environment (Addressing Sub-Question 2): To examine how leadership practices leverage the unique social dynamics of the "brotherhood" to foster a sense of belonging and cultural safety for Māori students.

3. To evaluate perceived impact (Addressing Sub-Question 3): To determine how Māori students and staff perceive the relationship between these leadership actions, the affirmation of their cultural identity, and their subsequent educational achievement and pathways.
4. To inform future practice: To identify current knowledge gaps and document the specific professional support leaders require to move from intention to the practical realisation of "success as Māori".

3.3 Research as a non-Māori

3.3.1 Who is the researcher?

My commitment to this kaupapa stems from a place of love and respect for my wife, whose iwi is Ngāti Kahungunu, and our two boys. As a child of Tangata Tiriti, I am obligated to this research not merely as an academic exercise, but as a personal pledge to assist schools in enhancing their leadership kaupapa for Māori students.

I have refined this positionality by adopting a 'Te Tiriti Ally' stance. As distinct from generic 'research involving Māori'-which has historically been extractive this research acknowledges my responsibility to uphold the provisions of Te Tiriti o Waitangi. Being an ally is defined here by what I can do: I can use my position within mainstream institutions to identify and dismantle "whitestream" barriers, and I can create academic space for Māori voices to be heard by those in power. This approach does not claim an indigenous standpoint; rather, it positions me as an ally working to ensure that the "options and opportunities" promised in Articles Two and Three are realised within the school system.

3.3.2 Non-Māori research involving Māori

Throughout my research journey, I was tasked with establishing an appropriate framework to support my study. Initially, I thought I might be able to utilise Kaupapa Māori research principles. Still, I found that I had to adapt those principles to fit my research rather than seeking a lens through which I could confidently address my research objectives. I was buoyed by Smith's (1999) pragmatism, who poses two critical questions regarding researcher positioning: "Can a Māori researcher who is anti-Māori carry out Kaupapa Māori research?" (p. 184). The answer is unequivocally "no." The second question, "Can a non-indigenous researcher carry out Kaupapa Māori research?" seemed relevant to my situation. Smith provides two responses. The more radical view asserts that Kaupapa Māori research is exclusively for Māori researchers. The alternative response is a qualified "yes," contingent on the non-indigenous researcher collaborating closely with Māori and ensuring that power and control remain within a Māori framework.

Further to these structural mechanisms, Bishop (1999) contends that non-Māori researchers must engage on Māori terms, embracing Māori practices and understandings to establish their identity within the research. Just as Māori identity is deeply tied to whānau, hapū, and iwi, a research whānau can provide a sense of identity and facilitate participation. Bishop emphasises the necessity of fully "living" the research context, necessitating a case study approach, becoming part of a research whānau, and mitigating insider/outsider dualisms. This involvement extends beyond methodological concerns to include physical, ethical, moral, and spiritual engagement (Bishop, 1999).

Despite these approaches appearing to suit the context, a persistent concern remained that this research was neither initiated nor commissioned by Māori, and therefore could not be considered 'Kaupapa Māori' research. Consequently, I have adopted a Tangata Tiriti-led

application of Cunningham's (1998) 'Māori-centred' framework. While I cannot speak as Māori, I can use my position as a researcher to investigate the "whitestream" structures that govern English-medium schools and identify where they fail to uphold Treaty obligations.

This approach shifts the focus from the Treaty's "principles" to its provisions. Specifically, I am acting as an ally by:

Article 2 (Tino Rangatiratanga): Creating an academic platform that protects and elevates the self-determination of the students' voices.

Article 3 (Oritetanga): Actively working to dismantle "gatekeeping" practices through research that promotes equity.

By positioning myself this way, I ensure that my research is not an "extractive" exercise on Māori, but a potentially transformative exercise for the non-Māori institutions they inhabit. This "allyship" was operationalised through *kanohi ki te kanohi* (face-to-face) engagement. For instance, in initial meetings, I intentionally shared my personal *whānau* connection to the *kaupapa*-not to claim "insider" status, but to establish the relational accountability necessary to be a trusted Treaty ally.

3.4 Data Collection Methods: Semi-Structured Interviews

To answer the research question, this study investigated a phenomenon that is deeply rooted in subjective reality: the lived experience of leadership practice and student identity. As the leadership practices required to foster 'success as Māori' are not a static variable but a complex interplay of relationships, values, and personal perceptions, it cannot be adequately captured through quantitative metrics alone. Therefore, the study required a method capable

of exploring the nuances of human interaction and the specific cultural context of the 'brotherhood.'

3.3.1 Rationale for Interviews

Qualitative interviewing was selected as the primary data collection method because it facilitates the exploration of participants' distinct perspectives and the meanings they ascribe to their educational experiences (Cohen et al., 2018). In the context of Māori boys' education, where oral history and storytelling are culturally significant, interviews provide a platform for whakawhiti kōrero (dialogue). This approach aligns with the study's Tangata Tiriti stance, prioritising kanohi ki te kanohi engagement to build trust and ensure that the mana of the participant's story is preserved.

3.3.2 Interview Design

The study employed semi-structured interviews. Unlike a rigid questionnaire, this format utilises a flexible framework of open-ended questions that allow the researcher to probe deeper into emerging themes while maintaining focus on the research objectives. This flexibility was critical for two reasons:

1. For Leaders: It allowed them to move beyond official policy rhetoric to describe the practical, day-to-day challenges and "deliberate actions" (Research Sub-Question 1) they take to operationalise culture.
2. For Students: It created a conversational space where they could articulate their feelings of belonging and perceptions of the "brotherhood" (Research Sub-Question 2) in their own language, without being confined to preset categories.

3.5 Data Analysis

The qualitative data were analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) (Braun & Clarke, 2020). Unlike earlier iterations of the method, RTA centres the researcher's subjectivity as a resource rather than a bias to be eliminated. This was essential for ensuring the integrity of this Tangata Tiriti research. By engaging in a reflexive process questioning my own cultural assumptions and checking my interpretations against the participants' stated meanings I was able to generate themes that honoured the Māori worldviews shared by participants while acknowledging my position as an outsider looking in.

The analysis followed six key phases:

1. Familiarisation with the data: I began by transcribing all interviews verbatim. This process involved capturing not only the spoken word-including the accurate transcription of specific Te Reo Māori terminology-but also paralinguistic features such as significant pauses, laughter, and emphatic shifts in tone.
2. Generating initial codes: I systematically worked through the entire data set, coding for interesting features across the interviews. Codes were developed from both the data itself (e.g., 'whānau relationships,' 'kapa haka') and in relation to the research question (e.g., 'leadership actions,' 'student identity').
3. To identify potential themes, I collated the codes and relevant data extracts. I then sorted the different codes into broader themes.
4. Reviewing themes: I reviewed the identified themes against the coded extracts and the entire dataset to ensure they accurately represented the data. I also checked for sub-themes and refined the names and scope of the themes.
5. Defining and naming themes: I described each theme and the aspects of the data it captured.

6. Producing the report: The reporting phase involved interlacing three distinct strands: the raw data (participant quotes), the researcher's interpretive analysis, and the relevant academic literature. By integrating these elements, I was able to present a comprehensive account in which the data provided the evidence and the narrative provided the theoretical significance.

To ensure the transparency and rigour of this analysis, a sample of the thematic coding process for both student and staff participants is provided in the appendices (see Appendix 1). These tables serve as an audit trail, illustrating the direct linkage between the raw participant narratives, the initial codes generated, and the final overarching themes discussed in the findings. By providing this documentation, the study upholds the criteria of dependability and confirmability, allowing the reader to trace the interpretive journey from the 'kanohi ki te kanohi' interviews to the theoretical conclusions of this research.

3.6 Exploratory Multi-Site Case-Study

According to Brooks and Normore (2015), qualitative approaches in educational research have yielded many insightful studies that have "deepened our understanding of how dynamics such as influence, power, communication, collaboration, administration, abuse, equity, management and organisations work in educational organisations and contexts" (p. 1). As this research has aimed to gather, record, and analyse a range of leadership perspectives held by school community members, from the senior leadership team to student leadership representation, a qualitative approach was considered appropriate.

Maykut and Morehouse (1994) state that the qualitative researcher faces a paradox: they must be aware of others' systems and worldviews while also being self-aware of their own biases. In line with Braun and Clarke's (2019) approach to Reflexive Thematic Analysis, I did not

attempt to achieve an impossible 'blank slate' objectivity. Instead, I treated my positionality as a resource to be managed through critical transparency. By consistently checking my coding against the raw transcripts and discussing emerging themes with my supervisor, I ensured that my bias was made visible and held in check, rather than unconsciously shaping the findings.

The literature review revealed a lack of reported studies on how boys' secondary schools have improved the achievement levels of Māori students. Recognising this knowledge gap, I employed a case study approach. According to Simons (1996), a case study involves thoroughly understanding a specific case to grasp its unique characteristics and operations. She highlights the paradox of case studies: "By studying the uniqueness of the particular, we come to understand the universal" (p. 231). In the context of this study, the 'universal' refers not to a generalised rule, but to the broader theoretical principles of leadership. While the specific actions (the particular) may be unique to these schools, the underlying mechanism-that affirming cultural identity drives engagement-offers a transferable insight applicable to the wider educational sector. Flyvbjerg (2006) supports this, noting that case studies offer deeper insights through "intense observation" than broad statistical analyses (p. 236).

A qualitative, multi-site case study design was chosen to comprehensively capture the complexity of leadership strategies. Defined by Yin (2014) as an inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, the multiple-case design is distinct in its ability to follow a 'replication logic.' This means that each school is treated as a natural setting, allowing the researcher to identify convergent themes that transcend the idiosyncrasies of a single site (Yin, 2014; Stake, 2006). By analysing these deliberate leadership practices across three distinct schools, the study moves beyond isolated anecdotes to establish a more robust understanding of how leadership influences Māori success. As

noted by Lincoln and Guba (1985), while this approach does not claim statistical generalisability, it enhances 'transferability.' By documenting common successful practices across multiple unique sites, the study provides a rich, cross-contextual evidence base that can be adapted and applied to similar educational contexts.

To ensure the rigour of this evidence base, the study adheres to the evaluative criteria established by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Unlike quantitative measures of validity and reliability, the value of this qualitative inquiry is judged by the following four criteria:

- **Credibility:** This is established not by seeking a single objective truth, but by demonstrating that the findings are a plausible and faithful representation of the participants' shared realities. Strategies such as data triangulation (comparing leader and student perspectives) were employed to ensure this accuracy.
- **Transferability:** This is addressed not by claiming universal application, but by providing 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973) of the specific school contexts and leadership practices. This depth enables readers to make informed judgements about whether the findings can be meaningfully transferred to their own settings
- **Dependability:** This is ensured by maintaining a transparent audit trail of the analytical process and documenting the evolution of codes and themes, to ensure the research process is logical and traceable.
- **Confirmability:** This is achieved through reflexivity. Rather than claiming to remove researcher bias, I have documented how my positionality influenced the analysis, ensuring the findings are a clear, coherent, and valid interpretation of the raw data.

The qualitative data from the semi-structured interviews were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, following the updated six-phase process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2019; 2020). Acknowledging that 'patterns' are not passive entities waiting to be found, this

systematic process facilitated my active interpretation of the data, allowing me to construct core themes that reflected the participants' experiences through the lens of the research questions.

The case study approach was selected as the most appropriate design for this small-scale, exploratory investigation. Rather than seeking a comprehensive or exhaustive analysis, this approach enables a focused, context-specific exploration of leadership practices within three boys' state English-medium schools (out of a total of 52 nationally). By focusing on a select number of sites, the design prioritises depth of insight over breadth of coverage, enabling a nuanced examination of how leadership influences the culture, identity, and educational pathways of Māori students in these settings.

3.6.1 Selection of Schools

The research was conducted via a multi-site case study of three English-medium state secondary boys' schools in Aotearoa, New Zealand. The schools were identified for their intended representation of Māori students, a key factor in ensuring the study's findings would be relevant and meaningful to the broader educational landscape in Aotearoa. The aim was to include schools with at least 20% Māori students to reflect a nationally representative proportion of Māori students.

The schools were not selected based on any specific UE performance data. Instead, the selection was based on their geographical location (urban areas) and their willingness to participate in the research. Consequently, the final sample comprises two schools that met the desired criterion and one with an 11% Māori student representation. While a potential limitation, the inclusion of a school with lower Māori representation offers valuable insights into a different context, thereby enriching the overall study.

This multi-site approach enables a deeper understanding of each school's unique context. For instance, one school is located in a large metropolitan city with a diverse student population. At the same time, another serves a more urban town community with strong iwi affiliations, and the third is a large, well-established institution in a large metropolitan city. These differing contexts offer a valuable lens for examining how leadership practices are implemented and adapted to specific contexts.

The process of securing participating schools was characterised by significant institutional gatekeeping and a series of practical challenges that highlight the pressures currently facing the secondary sector. Initially, six schools that met the criteria (all-boys, state-integrated or state, English-medium) were approached via formal invitation to the Headmaster/Rector/Principal.

Several schools did not respond despite multiple follow-ups, while others declined, citing 'research fatigue,' internal staffing pressures, or conflicting priorities with ERO reviews. This recruitment phase highlighted the significant operational demands that limit institutional capacity to participate in external research. Ultimately, three schools-School A, School B, and School C-agreed to participate. These schools were not selected because they claimed to have "solved" the challenge of Māori success, but because their leadership demonstrated a willingness to be transparent about their journey, successes, and ongoing tensions.

3.6.2 Selection of Participants

In alignment with the principle of transparency, it is necessary to distinguish between the study's initial sampling frame and the final participant group. Originally, the research design sought a "360-degree" view of leadership practice, intending to recruit not only Senior Leaders and Students, but also Board of Trustee members and school Kaumātua. The

rationale was to triangulate the findings across the layers of Governance (Trustees), Cultural Guidance (Kaumātua), and Operations (Management).

However, the practical realities of conducting Master's level research within a limited timeframe necessitated a pragmatic refinement of this scope. While Senior Leaders and Students were accessible, securing participation from governance and Kaumātua proved challenging. Board members are often volunteers with infrequent on-site presence, and accessing Kaumātua requires significant lead time to establish the requisite whanaungatanga and trust—a process that extended beyond the temporal constraints of this study.

Consequently, the final participant sample was narrowed to focus specifically on Senior Leaders (including Headmasters) and Year 13 Māori students. While this limits the insight into the complex dynamics of the schools' strategic governance layer, the senior staff interviewed often spoke to the strategic direction from the Board and their engagement with mana whenua, providing a partial view of these perspectives.

Recruitment Process: To initiate recruitment, an email was sent to the Headmasters of all selected schools. Each Headmaster received a recruitment pack containing formal letters outlining the study's purpose, invitation letters for participants, information sheets, and consent forms. Additionally, Headmasters and Boards were offered the opportunity to meet with the researcher *kanohi ki te kanohi* to discuss and clarify the study's purpose before agreeing to participate. None accepted this offer.

3.7 Data Sources and Their Relevance

The following data collection techniques were employed to achieve the research objectives:

3.7.1 Interviews

Face-to-face, semi-structured interviews were considered the most appropriate method for collecting senior and student leaders' views. This method enables an in-depth exploration of participants' perspectives while providing sufficient guidance to maintain the conversation's focus on the research objectives (Creswell, 2013; Kvale, 2007). It also allowed leaders to discuss issues more widely, making the researcher more knowledgeable about the unique contexts of each environment.

Participants were given the opportunity to receive a copy of their recorded interview and review the transcript before signing the release form. The semi-structured interviews provide rich, qualitative data that capture the experiences and perspectives of school leaders, which are essential for understanding the specific leadership practices and strategies employed to improve the educational outcomes and cultural identity of Māori students. This aligns with the literature on effective leadership practices, cultural identity, and educational outcomes.

3.7.2 Education Counts Quantitative Data

The Education Counts website provides access to current and historical school leavers' attainment data. The raw data available through this documentation has allowed an insight into a statistical analysis of Māori students' achievement across varying schooling types, i.e., State All Boys', State Co-Educational, and State Integrated. This quantitative data provides a measure of educational outcomes, enabling statistical analysis of Māori students' NCEA achievement across different types of schools. This contextualises and supplements the

qualitative interview findings and was further complemented by the literature on educational attainment and disparities.

3.7.3 Education Review Office (ERO) School Reports

The most recent ERO School Review Reports were obtained from the ERO website. The observations and recommendations in these reports served as a contextual backdrop for the interview process, helping shape the questions and providing a broader understanding of the schools' environments. No attempt was made to correlate the comments in these ERO reports with the views of individual participants at Senior Leadership. ERO reports provide an external evaluation of schools' performance and practices, particularly regarding the educational success of Māori students. These reports offer a broader context for understanding how schools are perceived and evaluated in terms of their support for Māori students, aligning with the literature on school evaluations, cultural responsiveness, and educational equity.

Integrating these data sources ensures a multifaceted understanding of each research context. The qualitative data from interviews provides detailed insights into the actions and decisions of school leaders. The quantitative data from Education Counts offers measurable outcomes, highlighting patterns and disparities in NCEA achievement. The evaluative data from ERO reports add an external perspective on the effectiveness of leadership practices.

By integrating these data sources, the case study approach enhances the credibility of the findings, in which the self-reported strategic intent of the Senior Leadership (the 'top-down' view) was presented in direct relation to the self-reported lived educational experience of the Year 13 Māori students (the 'bottom-up' view). This relationship enabled cross-examination: leadership claims about cultural affirmation were assessed against students' actual sense of

belonging, while student narratives were contextualised by the specific leadership decisions that enabled and facilitated them. This approach ensures that the research effectively addresses the research question, providing a rounded understanding of how leadership practices in boys' state English-medium schools influence the NCEA achievement and cultural identity of Māori students. The combined data sources align with the themes identified in the literature review, including leadership practices, cultural identity, and educational outcomes, contributing valuable knowledge to the field.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

A full ethics application was completed. The application was reviewed by my supervisors, who advised that they had judged it to be low risk against the institutional screening questionnaire items. The low-risk ethics application was subsequently accepted by the Human Ethics Committee of Massey University.

However, as Mutch (2013) notes, ethical research requires more than just institutional acceptance; it demands a reflexive understanding of the power dynamics inherent in the researcher-participant relationship. This is particularly acute in this study, given the involvement of student participants and the cross-cultural nature of the inquiry. Consequently, the ethical framework for this research was grounded not only in university compliance but also guided by the Te Ara Tika guidelines (Hudson et al., 2010), ensuring the research upheld the mana of all participants.

3.8.1 Insider-Outsider Researcher Positionality

The identity of the qualitative researcher is an essential aspect of the investigation because of the intimate role the researcher plays in data collection (Corbin Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). In this study, I navigated a complex Insider-Outsider continuum.

As an Outsider: Culturally, as a Pākehā researcher, I was an outsider to the lived experience of Te Ao Māori. To mitigate the risk of misinterpretation or bias, I adopted a position of 'cultural humility,' prioritising the participants' voice over my own interpretation and using the Te Ara Tika framework to guide my conduct.

As an Insider: professionally, as an educator, I held 'insider' knowledge of the boys' school environment. This insider status provided significant advantages, specifically a rapport with Headmasters and an understanding of the 'unspoken rules' of the brotherhood. This allowed interviews to flow freely and enabled me to probe deeper into the school's operational realities.

3.8.2 Te Ara Tika and Relational Ethics

To ensure the research was culturally safe, the principles of Te Ara Tika (Hudson et al., 2010) were applied. In this study, ethics were not a "checkbox" but a lived practice of relationality:

Whakapapa: I moved away from transactional data extraction by investing time in whanaungatanga before the recording began. This involved sharing my own background to allow participants to "size me up," ensuring a reciprocal flow of information.

Mana: To uphold the mana of the student participants, I adopted a 'strengths-based' approach. I consciously avoided deficit framing and instead focused on students' expertise as culture holders.

Manākitanga: I practised manākitanga by actively protecting participants' stories. I treated their cultural knowledge as a taonga that required the utmost care. Trust was gained not through a single gesture but through a consistent commitment to listening and ensuring that their voices remained the central focus. I signalled my respect for their space by adhering to

school-specific protocols and ensuring that the research process provided a "safe space" where their identity was validated rather than questioned.

3.8.3 Benefits and Risks to Participants

Risks: While the research was not expected to cause physical harm, participants might experience apprehension when discussing sensitive cultural topics. For students, there was a potential risk of feeling coerced by school leadership to participate. To mitigate this, I emphasised the voluntary nature of the study directly to the students, independent of their teachers, ensuring they knew they could decline without consequence. **Benefits:** The potential benefits include supporting school leaders to develop a deeper awareness of how to operationalise "success as Māori." The sharing of these findings has the potential to enhance professional learning across the sector, directly benefiting future cohorts of Māori boys.

3.8.4 Confidentiality and Anonymity

Principals and their schools were advised that they would be assigned pseudonyms (e.g., "School A," "Senior Leader") in the final thesis. However, the specific nature of the Headmaster role in New Zealand creates a certain level of identity disclosure; the educational community is small, and descriptions of specific school contexts (e.g., "single-sex boys' school in a large city") can lead to informed guesswork. Participants were informed of this limitation during the consent process. To mitigate the impact, strict confidentiality codes were used for all data storage, and identifying details (such as specific staff names or recognisable school events) were redacted from the transcripts where necessary to protect the mana of the individuals involved.

3.8.5 Data Management

All interviews were transcribed by the researcher to ensure accuracy and immersion in the data. Audio recordings and transcripts were stored on password-protected devices, and physical consent forms were secured in a locked cabinet.

3.9 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the methodological design employed to investigate the leadership dynamic within English-medium state boys' schools. By grounding the inquiry in a Te Tiriti-led application of Cunningham's (1998) Māori-centred framework, the study ensures that the research process itself honours the cultural context of the participants. The use of a qualitative, multi-site case study approach has enabled depth of inquiry that statistical data alone cannot provide, capturing the nuanced realities of both Senior Leaders and Year 13 Māori students.

With the ethical, theoretical, and procedural foundations now established, the following chapter presents the findings derived from this recruitment and analysis. It moves from the how of the research to the what, detailing the specific themes that emerged regarding leadership influence, student belonging, and the operationalisation of success for Māori boys.

CHAPTER FOUR FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents research findings that aim to address the central research question:

What deliberate actions do the leadership of English-medium state secondary boys' schools take to promote a sense of belonging, culture, and identity among Māori students, and how do these actions influence their educational achievement and pathways?

This chapter presents the findings from interviews of leaders and students of three English-medium state secondary boys' schools regarding their experiences of belonging, culture, and identity.

The first section, 4.2 Student Leadership, describes the themes that emerged from student interviews. It will first examine cultural connection and identity by highlighting initiatives that strengthen students' sense of cultural identity and their connection to their Māori heritage. Following this, the section will address leadership and role modelling, demonstrating how senior Māori students act as influential leaders within their schools. Finally, it will present students' views on what they consider a successful pathway and how their schools support their aspirations.

The second section, 4.3 Staff Leadership, similarly explores key themes that emerged from interviews with senior staff at each school. It will examine strategic direction, then address relational leadership. Finally, it will present the findings on barriers and equity.

School Contexts

The table below provides a summary of the participating schools' key demographics, Māori leadership features, cultural initiatives, and the retention of Māori students to at least their 17th birthday. These data help to contextualise the thematic findings that follow.

Overview of Participating Schools: Key Demographics, Cultural Initiatives, and Māori Student Support Features

School	Roll	% Māori	Māori Leadership Features	Cultural Initiatives	Retention to Age 17 (2023)
A	2200+	24%	Māori staff in SLT and Board, Māori students in the prefect team, and the Dean of Māori.	Kapa haka, Te Whare, Whakamoemiti, Māori vertical tutor groups, homework club	76%
B	1800+	12%	Māori staff on SLT, distributed leadership of Māori achievement, Kaiawhina. Māori students in the Prefect team.	Kapa haka, cultural club, Māori tie, customdesigned-blazer with cultural imagery, karakia in every class	87%
C	1200+	32%	Cultural prefects, Kaiārahi Māori.	Kapa haka (national competition), STEM Academy, tikanga (compulsory for juniors)	75%

Source: School roll, demographic, and retention data adapted from Education Counts (Ministry of Education, 2023); leadership and cultural initiatives derived from researcher interviews (2024 & 2025).

4.2 Student Leadership

This section explores the perspectives of Year 13 Māori student leaders, focusing on their sense of cultural connection, their role as leaders and role models within the school, and their definitions of success as young Māori men.

4.2.1 Cultural Connection and Identity

A key finding from the student interviews was the profound impact of cultural visibility and representation on their sense of belonging and identity. Students noted that seeing their culture represented and celebrated in the school environment was a decisive factor in their sense of belonging. This visibility was most often linked to traditional Māori practices such as haka and kapa haka.

Students described how these initiatives were not merely school activities but integral parts of their cultural journey. The haka, in particular, was highlighted as a core element of artistic practice that fostered a sense of unity and shared identity. Furthermore, students saw their involvement in these cultural groups as a way to connect with their heritage and strengthen their sense of self.

Across schools, Māori student leaders described two layers of belonging. The first is the overarching concept of the school 'Brotherhood' a traditional term common to boys' school culture. However, the data suggests that Māori students interpret this term through a specific cultural lens. The essence of this shared identity was described by a Year 13 student at School B:

Brotherhood. Honestly, like brotherhood, like it's like a family, like a brotherhood, like we all got each other's backs. Yeah, it's just the first thing that comes to my mind. It's what most people refer to as well, all of my friends like we all think of us at

school as a brotherhood, I think if you ask most people they'd say that (Year 13 student, School B, 2025)

In this excerpt, the student adopts the school-wide vernacular of 'brotherhood' but explicitly defines it as being 'like a family.' This indicates that, while the terminology is institutional, the students' lived experience of it closely aligns with the Māori value of whanaungatanga. Beyond this general school belonging, Māori students articulated a distinct and culturally specific sense of belonging that stemmed from dedicated spaces, integrated practices, and inclusive cultural groups within the school environment. For example, a student leader at School B described the Māori student group as a sanctuary that functioned differently from the wider school structures:

[I]t's like a whānau at school where you can come to... it's like a second whānau at school... make sure boys are achieving well but also making sure boys feel comfortable and safe at school and also connecting to their Te Ao Māori side'. (Year 13 student, School B, 2025).

This culturally particular sense of belonging allowed students to connect with and uphold Māori values and principles, such as whanaungatanga and manaakitanga (care and respect), which were foundational to their leadership development and overall well-being.

4.2.1.1 Cultural Visibility and Representation

Cultural visibility and representation, through both physical markers and school initiatives, played a significant role in fostering a sense of belonging and cultural affirmation among students. As students reflected on their experiences, it became clear that a strong connection to their Māori heritage was not just about knowing their whakapapa, but also seeing it valued and celebrated within their school environment.

Students across all three schools spoke about the significance of visible and tangible markers of cultural identity. While the introduction of cultural symbols into a colonial uniform can risk appearing tokenistic-functioning merely as aesthetic inclusion-the students in this study framed these markers as authentic symbols of distinct belonging.

For instance, a Year 13 student at School B described the 'Māori tie' not as a general accessory, but as a specific signifier of membership within the Māori student group. He noted:

...you've got these ties and they're special. They're like Māori ties. When you're part of [the culture group], you get one of these, and it's just to show you're part of that group. (Year 13 student, School B, 2025)

By linking the tie specifically to participation in the [culture group], the student suggests that the artefact's value is derived from belonging rather than mere aesthetics. Therefore, the artefact is not seen as tokenistic because it is tethered to a relational reality. It physically distinguishes the wearer as part of a 'safe group,' transforming the uniform from a symbol of homogeneity into one that accommodates dual identity.

Dedicated and safe spaces, such as the Te Whare (a pseudonym for the school's Māori learning space) at School A, were central to students' sense of belonging, creating an immediate and profound feeling of cultural ownership. A Year 13 student from School A described the impact of the Te Whare space:

Before the whare was built, it was kind of like average, but in terms of belonging, as soon as we got that Te Whare, like all the Māori boys came there knowing that, you know, this is our place (Year 13 student, School A, 2024)

In addition to visible and physical forms, students discussed the value of cultural capital as a distinct leadership asset. Rather than being just a 'normal' part of school life, proficiency in Te Reo Māori and tikanga was viewed as a specialised skill set that enhanced a student's leadership capabilities. One Year 13 student highlighted how his cultural knowledge provided a unique platform for influence:

Through kapa haka and speaking the reo, embracing the reo, I've been able to show my leadership in ways that a lot of the school's population can't... (Year 13 student, School A, 2024)

This suggests that for Māori students, culture is not just an identity marker but a form of high-status capital that distinguishes their leadership contribution from the mainstream.

This statement highlights how cultural proficiency functions as specialised leadership capital. Rather than viewing culture solely as an identity marker, the student frames his knowledge of Te Reo and tikanga as a unique asset that distinguishes his leadership contribution from the mainstream. However, this distinctiveness presents a critical tension. Participants noted that while these roles empower students, there is a risk that this specific cultural utility can slide into tokenism-where Māori boys are valued primarily for their ability to perform ceremonial duties, potentially reinforcing the 'cultural performer' stereotype rather than acknowledging their broader leadership agency

Students highlighted the normalisation of Te Reo Māori and tikanga through daily practices such as karakia at the beginning and end of classes, kapa haka performances at assembly, and the visible efforts of both Māori and non-Māori teachers to embrace Te Ao Māori. One Year 13 student reflected:

We've got a karakia at the start and end of each class... small things like that help make us feel more comfortable in school as Māori. (Year 13 student, School B, 2025)

Visible cultural practices, such as performing kapa haka at assembly, were described as opportunities to feel "proud to be Māori". Students mentioned seeing boys enjoying the performances and teachers showing support.

...we've had the Kapa Haka group, we've had them perform at assembly one time. And you know, we don't have any of the boys laughing or anything; we actually had them enjoying it. And I've had teachers come up to me once we have done performances, and they've said they've really liked them, and they're like, I'll see us perform again and all that stuff. So I think one thing I like about it is the support we get from the teachers. I really think that sort of helps us shine in who we are and feel comfortable in our own state. (Year 13 student, School B, 2025)

Cultural expression was also discussed in relation to the students' whānau connection to culture. A Year 13 student at School C commented on how their parents' moko kanohi and their mother's learning Te Reo influenced them:

My mum and my dad both have moko kanohi my mum has been trying to learn [Te Reo], and they took that home to me. So it also boosted my knowledge, I guess. (Year 13 student, School C, 2025)

Through such support, including mentoring and homework initiatives like Ngā Mangai (homework club for Māori students), students described how their "conduct has improved like massively" (Year 13 student, School A, 2024) and how they were "persuaded... to do better" (Year 13 student, School B, 2025) in classes, seeing older role models combining cultural engagement with academic effort.

4.2.1.2 Integration into School Life

Beyond mere visibility, key cultural experiences were woven into the school's daily routines and structures. However, student perceptions of these initiatives varied, revealing a critical distinction between performative inclusion and relational embedding. This section examines how these programs were designed to foster students' sense of belonging and the nuances of their reception. Specifically, students tended to categorise initiatives as 'tokenistic' when they were restricted to ceremonial visibility (serving the institution's image), whereas practices were viewed as 'genuinely embedded' when they were grounded in consistent relationships and structural support.

A sense of belonging grounded in relationships came from regular cultural practices, not 'tokenistic' one-off events:

There's been times where it felt a bit tokenistic... like a 'dial-a-Māori' situation. (Year 13 student, School A, 2024)

In contrast, students valued opportunities where Te Ao Māori was normalised and embedded in daily school routines and collective moments.

Regular gatherings, such as Whakamoemiti, were highlighted as fostering a collective identity. One student from School A described this practice:

Whakamoemati, that's like where all of our Māori tutor groups come together, like one day a week, and we do karakia, sing songs, spread news, positively about just the Māori world... (Year 13 student, School A, 2024)

Māori tutor groups, often vertically structured, were also described as vital for maintaining cultural identity and visibility, particularly in schools with fewer Māori students. A student from School A noted the value of this structure:

Being in the Māori tutor group [Year 9-13] kind of maintains my Māori immersivity in the school, because we don't have many Māori boys around. (Year 13 student, School A, 2024)

Kapa haka was consistently mentioned as being more than a performance group; it was a core part of daily life for some, providing cultural identity and leadership opportunities. A student from School B explained how kapa haka allowed him to express his identity publicly:

I think it's really helped me show who I am, in the Te Ao Māori side, you know. Kapa haka, I get up most Monday mornings and do the karakia in front of the whole school... (Year 13 student, School B, 2025)

Students described these consistent daily practices as key aspects of their experience of belonging and of expressing their identity.

4.2.1.3 Cultural Identity and Personal Growth

Participation in school-based cultural activities and spaces, such as kapa haka and noho marae, contributed significantly to students' personal growth. Students consistently reported that these activities provided a powerful medium for developing confidence and deepening their pride in their cultural identity. This high self-regard and cultural agency move the process beyond mere cultural participation to what the study interprets as genuine personal transformation. This transformation is evidenced by the students' willingness to take on leadership roles and actively challenge negative stereotypes.

Students across the three schools described how their participation in school-based cultural activities significantly influenced their sense of cultural identity, either initiating new connections or deepening existing ones. A student at School A shared:

Yeah, I've always felt connected, a connection to my culture from just when I was little, and so now I can give back to the school my reo, helping out with all the mihi's, karakia... (Year 13 student, School A, 2024)

Engagement in cultural practices also contributed to students' confidence and pride in their identity. This pride often manifested in a desire to be a role model for younger students. A student at School A commented:

...just pretty much my job is just to be a good face for the youngest students, set good examples, high standards, in the school, and it's just about being someone that you can look up to (Year 13 student, School A, 2024)

A student at School B described how their former Head Boy, a popular and high-achieving student, positively influenced them and others. This Māori Head Boy was involved in various activities, including kapa haka and rugby. He consistently encouraged the student to do their best in class and served as an exemplary role model through his success, including earning an NCEA Excellence Endorsement and winning awards. Seeing his commitment and success inspired the student and others to improve their performance.

By being visible in cultural leadership roles and showing pride in their reo and tikanga, students aimed to challenge negative stereotypes by achieving success. Student A from School A shared:

So I sort of, I don't want to, like, I'm not trying to be like, diss my own culture, but like fall into those stereotypes because then people will just be like, oh, of course SO

that's also pushed me to sort of trying to benefit myself further in life, not just for me, for my kids, family as well, and make sure I can, you know, take everyone's dream to retire your parents and stuff (Year 13 student, School A, 2024)

4.2.2 Leadership and Role Modelling

As senior students, the interviewees recognised a significant responsibility to act as leaders and role models for the younger Māori students in their schools. A title did not define their leadership; it was defined by their actions, particularly in upholding cultural values and supporting their peers.

Student interviews revealed that, for them, leadership and role modelling meant openly embodying a successful Māori identity in both cultural and academic settings. The mentorship role was central to their leadership identity. Students described taking on the responsibility of guiding junior students, providing advice, and setting an example for academic achievement and cultural participation. Dedication to the success of their younger peers exemplified their commitment to the community.

4.2.2.1 Pathways to Leadership, Role Modelling and Peer Influence

Both formal positions and informal cultural responsibilities influenced students' pathways into leadership roles. This section highlights how senior Māori students, through these varied roles, sought to serve as influential role models for younger Māori students, demonstrating that leadership could be both culturally grounded and formally recognised.

Across all three schools, students described leadership as being visible, reliable, and embedded in service to others. They discussed their roles as leaders to promote school values, particularly for younger Māori students.

Students' actions aimed to influence the next generation, showcasing what success, pride, and appropriate behaviours could look like. One student explained their motivation:

[W]hat drove me was just I wanted to make a difference in our school...but just in particular, our Māori boys. (Year 13 student, School A, 2024)

Students also spoke about their role modelling as a way to challenge negative stereotypes and show what it means to succeed as Māori. Seeing older students lead with integrity inspired younger students. As one student reflected on the influence of a senior role model:

...seeing him [senior role model] doing the right things rather than the wrong things sort of, it persuaded me to do better...and showed, being Māori to break those stereotypes that people label us with. And sort of showed that even though you're Māori, you can still do something greater than yourself and be a part of something greater than yourself. (Year 13 student, School B, 2025)

Students described themselves not as figures of authority, but as tuakana (older brothers) setting examples and walking alongside their younger peers. Two students from School A described their influence:

We've also supported them through, like, you know, some leadership opportunities ... helping them to fill out their applications for prefect roles. (Year 13 student, School A, 2024)

Another added:

It's just being there and letting them know that they have someone who is rooting for them to go far. (Year 13 student, School A, 2024)

As described by senior Māori students, their leadership involved acting as older brothers, setting examples, and providing support to their younger peers.

4.2.2.2 Leadership Through Cultural Practice.

Beyond official titles, leadership responsibilities naturally emerged from students' active involvement in cultural initiatives, such as homework and cultural groups. This section highlights how these programs created authentic spaces for leadership development, enabling students to guide their peers in meaningful, supportive ways.

Students across all three schools described how leadership responsibilities emerged and were embedded through their active involvement in cultural initiatives and programmes, such as Te wiki o te reo Māori and Ngā Mangai. For instance, one student highlighted the impact of the homework centre:

Ngā Mangai, our homework centre that we're all leaders in...we've been flooded...because we've just created, like, an environment where boys feel safe to go in there (Year 13 student, School A, 2024)

This initiative, driven by the students themselves, provided a safe space for their leadership. Students also explained how cultural groups offered opportunities for younger peers to develop leadership skills. Regarding events like Te wiki o te reo Māori, a student noted:

[This] kaupapa is pretty big for [culture group]...give[s] the younger boys a chance to show their leadership skills (Year 13 student, School B, 2025)

The cultural groups themselves were described as central to the grounding and development of students' leadership abilities. These spaces were also open to non-Māori students, fostering broader cultural understanding and support. Students found that expressing their cultural

identity publicly through practices like kapa haka also fostered their leadership. A student shared how kapa haka helped them:

[it] just shows the boys...don't be scared...you don't want to be scared to be Māori, be proud of who you are. (Year 13 student, School B, 2025)

The students described these cultural spaces as places for leadership, where senior students could create safe environments, mentor younger peers, and foster cultural understanding throughout the school.

4.2.2.3 Leadership Development Through Relational Pedagogy

The development of student leadership was also a relational journey. This section examines how these relationships fostered student confidence and improved conduct, demonstrating that leadership is not just an individual trait, but a collective, supported process.

Cultural initiatives and programmes provided an essential context for Māori student leadership. However, students also described how their leadership development was shaped by a relational journey that emphasised staff support, whānau involvement, and the opportunity to serve others.

Students consistently noted the importance of staff members who built deep, trusting relationships and acknowledged them as individuals. One student explained this connection:

The thing that sets [adult] apart is he makes us feel like an individual... other teachers look at us as School C students, whereas he looks at me as [an individual]. (Year 13 student, School C, 2025)

Some students initially hesitated to take on leadership roles but were encouraged by staff.

One student commented:

[he] pushed us towards becoming a cultural prefect and stuff. Gave us all the tools that we needed to become prefects and then just let us do it. (Year 13 student, School C, 2025)

Another student reflected when told by a significant adult:

...it's not like being a prefect's about you... (Year 13 student, School C, 2025)

Teachers who provided support and opportunities were seen as crucial, with one student noting that:

...all you need is a good set of kids who are going to run it, and a teacher who is there to support it, and you're pretty much unstoppable after that". (Year 13 student, School B, 2025)

Leadership development often followed the tuakana-teina model, in which older students guided younger ones. One student described mentoring a younger Māori boy, stating:

With the mentoring especially for Māori boys, it's like having them, you know, sit there and think someone's rooting for me... his conduct has improved like massively (Year 13 student, School A, 2024)

Cultural groups were seen as fundamental to this relational development, described previously as the "whānau at school" (Year 13 student, School C, 2025). These groups were also intentionally inclusive, with non-Māori students welcome, as one student highlighted:

Te Ao Māori needs Pākehā to survive (Year 13 student, School B, 2025)

Through their own words, leadership was considered an act of cultural service, grounded in shared values and sustained through meaningful relationships.

4.2.2.4 Barriers to Leadership and Representation

While there was strong evidence of positive leadership development, students also experienced significant challenges and barriers. This section examines how issues such as underrepresentation and feelings of tokenism undermined genuine cultural integration and made it difficult for students to lead authentically.

Although students expressed pride and actively engaged in leadership roles, they also described several challenges and barriers that limited Māori leadership and representation within their schools. Barriers included underrepresentation in prefect roles, fears of being tokenistic, reluctance among some Māori students, and insufficient visible staff support. Students called for proactive encouragement and more proportional representation. One student from School C explicitly stated:

For example, we don't have many Māori prefects in the school. So, me and him are the only two... so, I guess if we want to have more Māori prefects in the school, we have to show the other Māori students of the school that it's possible. (Year 13 student, School C, 2025)

A significant barrier was the perception of tokenism, in which some student leaders felt they were often called upon for cultural duties, such as pōwhiri, haka, or mihi, but were not always genuinely valued beyond those contributions. Student A at School A described this feeling earlier in this chapter, referring to some practice as 'dial-a-Māori'.

This sentiment was echoed by a student from School C regarding kapa haka:

It definitely feels like that sometimes because most of the time I feel like some of the school kind of looks down on the kapa haka group, but then when they need us, that's when they want us. (Year 13 student, School C, 2025)

Despite these feelings, some students acknowledged the complexity, with one stating:

I think it's something we could work on. (Year 13 student, School A, 2024)

Students also described instances where teachers' efforts to pronounce Māori words properly were lacking, which made it harder to promote the culture effectively. As one student reflected:

...it comes back to one thing that we talking about is just like for effort, like I know some the teachers will have, for example will have materials go out to our tutor group, but the teachers won't make an effort to pronounce words properly and its sort of like they won't try hard enough to sort of promote it that sort of hard area to reach, because if the teachers are not pushing it, it's of hard to spread to the students. (Year 13 student, School A, 2024)

Despite these challenges, some students recognised initiatives that aimed to make cultural leadership more inclusive, across Māori and non-Māori alike. One student explained:

[Culture group is] not just open for Māori boys, it's open for Pacifica, Pākehā, anyone that wants to come. (Year 13 student, School B, 2025)

These reflections highlight that Māori leadership in these schools is not a static phenomenon defined solely by success or failure. Rather than viewing challenges as fixed barriers, the data suggests an evolving landscape. Students described a dynamic environment-a 'work in

progress' where issues of representation and cultural perception are not permanent roadblocks but tensions actively negotiated as the school culture shifts toward greater inclusivity.

4.2.3 Student Perceptions of Success as Māori.

The students' definitions of success were multifaceted, extending beyond academic achievement to encompass a strong sense of cultural identity and personal well-being. For them, success was not merely about grades but about being a positive, well-rounded individual who was connected to their culture.

The students' aspirations were closely tied to the support they received from their schools, which they saw as crucial for enabling their pathways. They felt empowered to pursue their goals, whether academic or otherwise, with the support of their whānau and their school community. This support helped them feel secure and a sense of belonging.

For some, educational success was simply about "being in school" (Student at School C) and about being within their whānau and communities. The following subthemes describe how students articulated their perceptions of success as Māori.

4.2.3.1 Success as Personal Effort and Growth

This subtheme focuses on students defining success primarily in terms of the effort they put in, their willingness to learn, and the personal improvement they achieve, rather than solely on top academic grades. It highlights that for students, simply "being in school" and putting one's "best foot forward" were considered forms of success, alongside the desire to learn and try new things.

A student from School A reflected on how academic success varies for individuals:

How someone like determines success in academics it like varies. For me, if I get under a Merit, like that's embarrassing for me, but you know, for other people, wait, it's like I understand it. Everyone has their own goals and like Student B said I think the number one thing is effort and everything like the number one thing is effort, its like everything you know, sports, academics, performing arts, you know, leadership, even life in general, you know like it's effort, it's the effort that counts, and for Māori, you know, sometimes Māori students are like, oh, nah, like, I don't want to, I don't want to do that. And that's like the first indicator, you know that he knew he needs support to succeed. But yeah, it's just effort and if a boy just tries hard or anyone, if anyone just tries hard, you know, and puts gives 110 per cent, then no matter the result, they can say I succeeded because I put my best foot forward, you know. (Year 13 student, School A, 2024)

Students also described a desire to learn and try, acknowledging that hard work and effort were required at every level, even if the outcome was an "Achieved" grade. As one student highlighted:

Doesn't have to be anything big either. Could just be like an Achieved. (Year 13 student, School A, 2024)

A student at School B reflected on the importance of finishing school:

I just want to at least finish school, kind of set an example for my cousins and the younger years to finish school. It's worth it. There's no need to drop out just because it's hard or you don't like school. Like Student A said, like I pass [Achieved], Merits and not Excellences. You don't have to get Excellence to gain UE, just need to pass, that's good enough. (Year 13 student, School B, 2025)

For one student at School C, educational success was simply defined as engagement with the school environment:

I would say educational success is just being in school. That would be educational success for me. (Year 13 student, School C, 2025)

Students consistently asserted that success is highly personal and determined by individual goals, rather than a universal, externally imposed viewpoint or perception of success.

Students indicated that whānau, in particular, could shape their goals; however, it still came down to the individual to live and breathe them. As a student from School A highlighted:

I would say success is what you want to be, you know, you have your own goals. No one else can make your own goal like your goals for you. So you know if there those are your goals, then yeah, that's that is the success. But if you know it's its success is personal. No one else can determine that." (Year 13 student, School A, 2024)

In essence, students' perceptions of success extended beyond the classroom, encompassing personal effort, cultural pride, and the ability to set themselves up for a meaningful future, both personally and culturally.

4.2.3.2 Success as Pathways to Future Opportunities

This subtheme explores the importance students place on academic qualifications, such as NCEA Level 3 and University Entrance (UE), for opening doors to tertiary education and desired careers. Students viewed these qualifications as essential for preparing themselves for future steps, securing professional opportunities, and avoiding future struggles.

One student at School A highlighted the critical nature of these qualifications:

So getting Level 3, especially with Excellence, and UE it's it's really important to me...my academics is always my number one. Yeah, like, I need that to live, you know, I need to go to Uni. I need to get degrees and, you know, especially in like this day and age, and especially as Māori, it's like it's almost crucial. (Year 13 student, School A, 2024)

One student at School B commented on the long-term benefits of gaining further qualifications:

So I think for me, getting UE and NCEA Level 3 this year would sort of benefit me for the rest of my life, rather than sort of slacking a bit, failing, and then trying to struggle for the rest of my life, where it was half the first five years of my life trying to get a job...I want to try and gain Level 3 and UE, because I sort of looked at it, it'll benefit, like if I leave school with the highest things you can get, it'll sort of set me up for life better: (Year 13 student, School B, 2025)

Students indicated that these qualifications were essential for setting themselves up for life, securing professional opportunities, and avoiding future struggles.

4.2.3.3 Success as Breaking Intergenerational Cycles and Stereotypes

This subtheme deals with students' powerful motivation to succeed as a means of breaking negative intergenerational cycles and defying societal stereotypes associated with Māori. It highlights their drive to avoid perceived stereotypical outcomes (e.g., "state housing, benefits") and to prove to their whānau and younger generations that success and academic excellence are possible, despite debilitating rhetoric from others.

One student at School B commented on their motivation to avoid stereotypical outcomes:

I looked at it sort of when I was Year 11, Year 12, I looked at it as if I keep messing around in the class, if I keep doing this, keep doing that, I'm just going to have a hard time in life when I'm older and then I will be like I'll sort of a stereotypical state housing, I look at my oldies and you know, people's stereotypical, you think state housing, benefits and all that stuff. (Year 13 student, School B, 2025)

Students were motivated to complete their education and achieve, showing their whānau and younger peers that success and excellence are possible. A student at School C commented on the importance of proving to his whānau that:

Anyone can succeed and excel. So that's the importance to me. It's just pretty much showing my family I can do it, they can do it, and also seeing myself up for the future. (Year 13 student, School C, 2025)

For many students, success as Māori was deeply connected to knowing and embracing their cultural identity, connecting with their Reo, and having their culture valued within the school.

The significance of this cultural 'advantage' was evident from a student at School A who commented:

I feel that we some sort of advantage, 'cause we can also look at from a Māori viewpoint and the Pākehā viewpoint, because we're kinda living in both worlds, so it really depends on what the bro says, like, we can take either pathway (Year 13 student, School A, 2024)

The student went on to talk about how knowing who you are is important, whether you carry or have an affinity with the Maoritanga:

...from what I see it to be, it's like saying you succeed academically if you're a Māori who embraces their Māoritanga, but it's also living in the you know the Pākehā world. If you're Māori, you're Māori, you don't have to do that. You can succeed in the academics, and you have succeeded. You know, as a Māori, like you don't have to be entirely involved with the Māoritanga (Year 13 student, School A, 2024)

Another student at School C spoke of educational success being every school having access to a Māori teacher or resources that enabled students to connect to their culture, their Reo:

So educational success for me is that every school has a Māori teacher or someone that can provide them with their knowledge that they need to connect with their language and connect with their culture. That would be success for me. (Year 13 student, School C, 2025)

It was also emphasised by the students that contributing to their people and whānau held high importance, with one student explicitly stating a desire to rebuild their Marae after University as a form of giving back:

Personally, a big thing or a big reason is to why I've always wanted to kind of do well in school, then go to university, has been because I think I'm very lucky to have a father who's really, really supportive, he's kind of made his life goal to give me and my siblings, everything that he didn't. So he wasn't able to go to university, he never had their chance. He started working at a really young age, and I think he's always thought. My son should have that opportunity, so I think it's kind of just my responsibility to do that for a person like that who is dedicated his whole life to someone else, or more than someone else, so that's a big reason. But also, giving back to my people, my family. My Marae was burned down, I think, a couple of years before I was born. So we still get our land, but all our buildings were burnt down in an

accidental fire or something. So we've kind of been stripped of that place to call our home. We still get our land, we can still kind of visit it, but we can't visit in, you know, stay there and do all the things at Māori, have, you know, a lot of respectful and kind of help them to connect to what they care. So that's something like I want to do at university, which was study and be able to rebuild that place, help my family connect back to who we are and give them somewhere to call home." (Year 13 student, School A, 2024)

Some students also expressed that succeeding in the Māori world was sufficient for success, without necessarily needing to succeed in the non-Māori world. As Student A from School A reflected:

I think if they're succeeding in the Māori world, then they're succeeding anyway. They don't have to succeed in the other world to be successful... If you know who you are, that's all that matters" (Year 13 student, School A, 2024)

This section has presented student perspectives on cultivating their cultural identities, their roles as influential role models, and their redefined notions of success.

This evidence of student-led to staff-led, student-owned initiatives provides a backdrop for the next section, which shifts focus to how senior staff similarly drive and sustain these culturally responsive practices at an institutional level.

4.3 Staff Leadership

Although based on a very small sample, analysis of staff leadership interviews revealed three consistent themes regarding the deliberate actions taken to support Māori students: Strategic Direction, Relational Leadership, and Barriers and Equity. These themes reflect how senior

leaders conceptualise and implement practices to foster belonging, cultural identity, and achievement for Māori boys.

4.3.1 Strategic Direction

Leaders systemically embedded Māori success in school plans: strategic focus on literacy, routine tracking of Māori performance, community and iwi input. They deliberately transitioned from superficial compliance to integrating cultural competency and pathways throughout their structures and routines.

The Headmaster from School A discussed the importance of addressing existing barriers, stating:

We've always put barriers in place... we need to remove them and be open to remove barriers". (Headmaster, School A, 2024)

This theme examines how school-level planning and embedded policies aim to shape the experiences and opportunities available to Māori students within the school environment.

4.3.1.1 Planning and Policy Development

Planning, policy adjustments, and a focus on cultural normalisation were consistent themes across the schools. This section outlines how leaders employed a data-driven and collaborative approach to integrate Māori student success into long-term institutional objectives, moving beyond superficial changes to establish a deeply ingrained cultural focus.

A crucial aspect is the involvement of students, whānau, mana whenua, and iwi in shaping strategic plans that move schools towards becoming more Māori in daily operations. This subtheme further encompasses deliberate acts of cultural normalisation, such as singing the National Anthem in Māori first, using takutaku instead of prayer in assembly, treating

pōwhiri as significant events, introducing compulsory tikanga courses for junior students, and adjusting prefect selection to reflect student diversity. It also includes initiatives like "wananga Wednesday" for staff to normalise Te Reo Māori and Te Ao Māori, aiming for "every week's Māori week" (Headmaster, School B, 2025), and the installation of pou or the naming of Houses after important geographical points to visually reflect Te Ao Māori.

Across the participating schools, there was a consistent emphasis on planning, policy adjustments, and cultural normalisation. A crucial aspect of this was a data-driven approach. However, there was also a critical awareness among these senior leaders regarding how "success" for Māori students was measured.

The Headmaster from School A explicitly stated a need to "understand our data better", acknowledging past shortcomings:

...in my short time here, I think we've been using the wrong parameters to determine success, right? And the Ministry have their own measurements, right? I've discovered in the short time that we've measured Māori success in different ways, as opposed to what we measure other boys in different parts of this school, success. So success. How do we measure it? Probably, probably not, not well. I think we haven't been truthful about what we've, how well we've done for Māori. So my role is to understand our data better. (Headmaster, School A, 2024).

By shifting the focus to more appropriate parameters, the strategic plan at School A now specifically targets "Māori literacy" and aims to "know where our kids are at" to "put in mechanisms in place to support them" (Headmaster, School A, 2024). This highlights a direct link between data analysis and tailored support, as reflected by the Headmaster at School A:

So, if you ever look at my strategic plan now, it's around focusing on Māori literacy, because once they can read and operate and write, they can do anything. I think we have to know where our kids are at... because we want to know who's failing and putting in mechanisms in place to support them (Headmaster, School A, 2024)

The School B senior leaders further illustrated this data-driven approach by using KAMAR (a student management system used ubiquitously across New Zealand) to track academic performance for all students, with a "separate graph that also includes what does [it] look like for Māori" (Senior Leader, School B, 2025). This focused tracking enables their achievement and attainment team to "share that with our staff" and "use that information to inform what we do" (Senior Leader, School B, 2025). This demonstrates a deliberate internal reporting mechanism to ensure that data directly influences pedagogical and support practices.

Beyond quantitative data, School C's Senior Leader spoke of using observation tools developed through Te Kotahitanga to "raise awareness" about classroom interactions and seating arrangements for Māori students. These observations were used to inform and establish "culturally responsive pedagogies," specifically focusing on "deliberate acts of teaching that bring out these principles". These approaches were reflected on by the senior leader at School C:

...there's an observation tool in here and which looks at more around the interactions through a lesson and you know what those interactions look like for Māori students. Like where are the Māori boys sitting in the class. Are they sitting in the back row in the corner and when you go around the class do you get to the back row in the corner? (Senior Leader, School C, 2025)

Whilst the data afforded each of the schools a foundation to develop a strategic plan, it was also the involvement of the students, their whānau, mana whenua and iwi that enabled the shaping of this plan and direction.

Collaborative forums, meetings, and cultural groups among Māori were prevalent across the three schools, albeit in differing forms. Student-led groups certainly were consistent across all the schools. The Headmaster at School A spoke of student forums:

Now I've got some student forums, and I'm a big believer in student voice and understand what our Māori boys and Pacifica. So I've got two groups. What are the needs? What are they? What do they want? And then, how do I encourage and grow leadership with our boys? (Headmaster, School A, 2024)

The Senior leader at School C commented on how the community were involved in forming the strategic plan:

[The community] were involved with that initial forming of that strategic plan. We've gone to having a tutor whānau meetings where basically every student is meant to come in with a member of the whānau to meet with a tutor teacher. Our normal report evenings, you might get 30% of the students there because just logistically hard. I think last year we had about 85. Yeah, I mean our Māori students were about 85, our others were about 80. And that has grown like when the first year we did that, the Māori was about 60. Yeah. So we've just seen an increase, and just getting them through the door is a big part of it. But what I was going to say is we also, at that time, took that opportunity to do some surveys while they're here, just get them to complete some little stuff that fed in [to the strategic plan] (Senior Leader, School C, 2025)

Armed with the student, whānau, mana whenua, and iwi voice, as well as relevant data (attendance, achievement, etc.), deliberate planning and subsequent actions were created for each school, particularly when discussing cultural normalisation in daily school life. This normalisation was based upon Te Tiriti obligations and making 'powerful' statements about each school's commitment to Te Ao Māori.

The Headmaster at School A commented on the school's Treaty obligations, breaking this down further to the commitment of each teacher:

I think the challenge is going to be for schools, is always in our strategic plan, and now in our vision and mission statements, in everything that we do we you know, it used to be our charter, right? It's changed a bit, but the Treaty was a really important part in that charter; whether we had schools understand what it meant is a different thing. I think that's going to be a real challenge in this space, given the conversation that's happening now. And my fear is that some schools will use that as an excuse to shift away from our obligations, to the Treaty because if we don't make that continue to make that normal, if we stop focusing on Māori, then we're, we're asking for some trouble until that gaps closes. So I think we, in all schools, we have to still hold teachers accountable to that conversation (Headmaster, School A, 2024)

Across the schools, cultural normalisation was achieved through a range of integrated practices and deliberate initiatives. School C, for example, changed their practices to sing the National Anthem in Māori first and use a 'takutaku' (incarnation) in assemblies instead of a prayer and introduced a compulsory tikanga course for Year 9 students. School B has installed pou and named its houses after important geographical points to visually reflect Te Ao Māori. Prefect selection processes were also changed at School C to better reflect the

student body, and non-Māori prefects were expected to perform the takutaku, breaking down stereotypes.

The senior leader at School C described this as deliberately "bringing those things into normality". Similarly, the Headmaster at School B reflected on the goal of getting "rid of Māori week" because "every week's Māori week".

Again, from a Treaty perspective, School B has undertaken to research the story of their first Māori student. It is purposefully integrated into the school's history and curriculum to discuss colonisation, perseverance, and resilience.

The strategic direction undertaken by school leadership, as identified through the reflections by senior leaders at the three schools, is not merely about adapting to Māori student needs, but about a deliberate transformation of the school environment itself. This involves systematic, intentional planning and policy development to reshape educational and vocational pathways for Māori students and to embed Te Ao Māori deeply within schools' broader structures.

This transformation began by broadening the definitions of success. For instance, the Headmaster at School A defined success as students leaving the kura with "options and opportunities," while a senior leader at School B emphasised enabling students to "take that next step forward" and gain qualifications to "have a seat at the table" to "transform society." This broader philosophical base directly informed curriculum flexibility and the removal of barriers. School leaders indicated they were proactively reviewing courses and prerequisites, recognising them as persistent impediments to Māori student access. As the senior leader at School C stated:

Things like prerequisites, they don't meet it, let's have a look at that. It's that barrier that's stopping the student from having that opportunity to succeed... [we had] those hard conversations about what we were doing in terms of our Māori boys. (Senior Leader, School C, 2025)

This proactive removal of regulatory barriers was coupled with strong efforts in vocational and career development, including leveraging partnerships with trades academies and STEM programmes. The introduction of a new Māori careers counsellor at School C, who could "tap into his connections with our community as well," ensured that clear pathways (both university and apprenticeship) were supported by an authentic Māori voice.

4.3.1.2 Normalising Te Ao Māori and Valuing Cultural Capital

Strategic planning to normalise Te Ao Māori as an inherent part of the schools' fabric enabled Māori students to "operate in schools as Māori" and validated the cultural capital they brought. This approach was a cornerstone of the leadership's efforts to move away from superficial integration towards a genuinely inclusive environment.

Beyond a focus on specific initiatives, the schools sought to explicitly act on a strategic and philosophical commitment to normalising Te Ao Māori, making it an intrinsic part of the school's fabric. This was not merely about adapting to Māori student needs, but about a deliberate transformation of the school environment itself, enabling Māori students to "operate in schools as Māori" (Headmaster, School A, 2024). The philosophy held that "what's good for Māori is good for all," fostering a pervasive sense of belonging and cultural pride. The Headmaster at School A described their vision for tikanga Māori to be "just everywhere," so that all students would develop a sense of pride in it.

This philosophy extended to valuing the cultural capital students brought with them. The schools intentionally leveraged the strengths of their students as "storytellers and knowledge keepers," with one school noting that they "don't have to go to a place just to be Māori, everywhere is our place" (Headmaster, School B, 2025) This approach was supported by non-Māori staff, who played a key role in normalising Te Ao Māori by participating in and contributing to the cultural life of the school. Cultural identity was made highly visible, not just in symbols, but in the meaning behind them. For example, the schools focused on ensuring all students understood the "why" and "intent" behind practices such as the haka and kapa haka. This ensured the actions were not simply performative but were deeply embedded with cultural meaning and respect.

The planning, informed by data and the active voices of students, whānau, mana whenua, and iwi, aimed to remove historical barriers and redefine success for Māori students holistically. Ultimately, according to the interviewees, it represents an institutional commitment to Te Tiriti obligations, normalising Māori language and culture and empowering students with qualifications and cultural capital to thrive and lead.

4.3.2 Relational Leadership

Relational and collaborative leadership emerged as a strong theme among senior leaders across all three schools. According to interviewees, a consistent emphasis on culturally responsive pedagogies fostered culturally grounded relationships that enhanced Māori students' sense of belonging, supported their personal growth, and empowered their academic and leadership development.

4.3.2.1 Student Relationships

Strong, trusting relationships between staff and Māori students were consistently cited as foundational for fostering a sense of belonging and achievement. Staff demonstrated care by getting to know students individually, checking on their well-being, and creating culturally safe classroom environments. Leaders highlighted the value of culturally responsive pedagogy-promoted through frameworks such as Te Kotahitanga-and practical practices like vertical Māori tutor groups and tuakana-teina peer mentorship. This relational approach created environments where students felt seen, valued, and supported. However, the schools acknowledged a heavy reliance on key Māori staff for this work and the challenge of ensuring sustainability when staff changed. A Senior Leader at School C explicitly stated that observation tools used to raise awareness about classroom interactions and seating arrangements for Māori students were developed through Te Kotahitanga:

...just making it, I guess, an awareness for people as much as anything, also for staff to know who the Māori boys were in their class, just simple things like that, which you take for granted, but just raising that awareness of be explicit about what you're doing. And that was one of the things that we came up with in here was these deliberate acts of teaching that bring out these principles. (Senior Leader, School C, 2025)

The same senior leader also reflected on the change in the behaviour management of staff:

...it's more about okay, going back to the staff and what do you want said and done about this and working with them and working with the student, rather than to the student, if that makes sense. So, just all changes in the way we approach things (Senior Leader, School C, 2025)

Much like one of the students who spoke of schools needing a dedicated Māori kaiako, the Headmaster at School B spoke of the transformations that could take place if you did have one and, in particular, in a senior leader capacity:

...when you've got a great person that's really committed to Māori in particular, you can work absolute miracles because people will do anything, anything Interviewee 2 asks, but, you know, not all schools have that, the person that, you know...

(Headmaster, School B, 2025)

Beyond fostering strong internal student-staff relationships, schools also utilised culturally connected staff members to facilitate broader external engagement. This identifies how internal relational capital extended outward, contributing to the establishment of genuine partnerships with whānau, iwi and mana whenua for each school. Such engagement was evidenced by increased whānau attendance at school meetings and the involvement of the Māori community in shaping strategic plans.

4.3.2.2 Partnership with whānau, Mana Whenua and Iwi

Deliberate efforts were made to strengthen partnerships with whānau, recognising these relationships as crucial for student success and school transformation. Initiatives included increasing Māori representation on boards, employing whānau liaison officers, and boosting attendance at whānau hui and cultural events. These steps enhanced two-way communication, built trust, and helped families feel welcome and valued. Leaders acknowledged both the progress and the ongoing challenges, especially in sustaining consistent family engagement and deepening connections amid changing school or community circumstances. The Headmaster from School A expressed their commitment to involving the Māori community in acknowledgement that this hasn't been 'good' previously:

We haven't been good with engaging our community. So moving forward, that's a big part of what I want to open boys up more to our community. Been pretty shut shop, but I've already had groups come into school, use Te Whare, for example. So it's a big part of our boys seeing other groups coming into school. So we in our next round next year, March, we'll start our next strategic plan round, and I'll be using our Māori community to come in and say, Hey, what do you what do you want from this, from the school? What do you need from us? (Headmaster, School A, 2024)

School C similarly observed a notable increase in whānau attendance at tutor meetings, with Māori student attendance rising to "about 85" per cent. The start of the year powhiri attendance also saw significant increases in attendance:

[The] powhiri at the start of the year, you used to get two or three parents; we're now getting 40 parents coming, because they see it as part of what we do now. (Senior Leader, School C, 2025)

While challenges in sustaining consistent engagement persist, the evidence from both schools indicates that a deliberate, sustained commitment to partnership with whānau and the wider Māori community can lead to significant progress, laying the foundation for the trust that is essential for long-term Māori educational success.

4.3.2.3 Collaboration with Mana Whenua and Iwi

All three schools recognised the importance of developing genuine, ongoing partnerships with mana whenua and iwi. These collaborations took the form of shared projects that incorporated local histories and traditions into school life and involved receiving cultural koha, such as pou or mauri stones, which visibly anchored Māori identity in the school environment. Such partnerships were viewed as crucial for integrating Te Ao Māori into

school structures and fostering long-term educational outcomes. Nonetheless, leaders expressed challenges in maintaining consistent engagement from mana whenua and iwi and stressed the need for ongoing commitment and mutual benefit.

The Headmaster from School A expressed excitement about working with iwi:

I'm excited about using them in partnership, and excited about, yeah, what does successful Māori look like for them, and they're like me, that they want people to be educated. They want Māori to be self-sufficient. And be able to thrive in community.

That's what they want (Headmaster, School A, 2024)

Each of the schools also acknowledged that, despite reaching out to opportunities, their external relationships remained a challenge to sustain and deepen. School C experienced difficulties with a Māori-parent group's consistent attendance, noting it was "just hard to get people" (Senior Leader, School C, 2025) to continue attending meetings after initial interest:

Yeah, look, we do have challenges, like we had a group form, which was a Māori-parent group that we wanted to connect with and get feedback off and consult with and stuff. We ended up there was the first meeting, there was 20, the next meeting, there was 10 (Senior Leader, School C, 2025)

Despite these challenges, each school expressed its commitment to improving its partnerships and acknowledged that continued work with the Māori community was not just a necessity but a non-negotiable for the ultimate benefit of the Māori boys who walked through its gates each day.

4.3.3 Barriers and Equity

Educational success was defined across each of the three schools as Māori students thriving authentically in school, embracing their identity, and gaining robust qualifications for diverse future options. However, this aspiration was frequently challenged by entrenched barriers, including academic and curricular limitations, systemic and structural issues, ineffective pathway and tracking systems, and challenges in community engagement. Addressing these necessitates a committed focus on equity actively adapting the educational environment to meet the specific needs of Māori students, aiming to 'remove barriers' and 'level that playing field,' based on the principle that 'what's good for Māori is good for all,' and fundamentally distinct from mere equality.

4.3.3.1 Barriers and Disparities

This subtheme examines the key barriers to Māori educational success as identified by school leaders. It encompasses both macro-level systemic issues, stemming from a colonised educational system, and micro-level obstacles within schools themselves. This section highlights how these deeply entrenched barriers challenge Māori students' aspirations to thrive authentically, covering both academic and curricular issues, as well as significant disparities in student wellbeing. It also details how leaders address these challenges and work to ensure equitable outcomes for all Māori students.

Despite ongoing efforts, deeply entrenched curricular, structural, and systemic barriers persist for Māori students. These include gatekeeping practices, such as restrictive prerequisites that limit access to beneficial courses and pathways, as well as disparities in literacy and overall well-being. Leaders are aware of the ongoing 'gap' that reflects historical inequities and colonisation embedded in the educational system. There is an emphasis on removing these barriers through intentional redesign of pathways and provision of targeted support. As the

Headmaster of the School reflected, the 'starting place' of Māori boys was seen as inequitable, akin to a disadvantaged position on a race grid:

I'd love to be the first person to be to go, 'we're not going to focus on Māori anymore', because there's no gap. That'd be a celebration, but the gap exists. So until that gap doesn't exist... (Headmaster, School A, 2024)

To combat some of this disparity, a senior leader from School B spoke of the benefit of the tuakana-teina programme and how the identification of those students "on the edges" would benefit from this programme in particular:

...it's just multiple things that are supporting them, but in terms of tuakana-teina specifically, I mean, if there are students for whom there is a need, they're identified, Māori students who are identified as being a little bit on the edges, and they need to be brought into the fold in a different way. The tuakana-teina program can be bespoke for those students. So we might find a Māori student who was like, Oh, we want you to work with him. So we that might be something we do on an individual basis...

(Senior Leader, School B, 2025)

The evidence presented here shows that Māori educational success is not an end state but a dynamic, long-term commitment that requires continuous vigilance, cultural integration, and an unwavering focus on equity from school leadership.

4.3.3.2 Tokenism and Stereotypes

The data presented in this section highlights the challenges that senior staff leadership sought to overcome: student experiences of tokenism and stereotypes, which were identified as barriers to genuine cultural integration. Leaders interviewed acknowledged that students

described experiences in which they felt their cultural identity was used for external-facing purposes rather than genuinely valued.

Tokenistic practices where Māori students are primarily called upon for ceremonial roles or isolated cultural events-remain a profound challenge. Students and leaders reported feeling "used" or part of "dial-a-Māori" performances, reflecting a superficial engagement with Māori culture within the school. Additionally, persistent stereotyping places undue cultural burdens on Māori students, with expectations to embody Māori knowledge, and misconceptions about Māori capabilities academically and socially.

At School B, the Headmaster spoke extensively about the cultural intent behind practices, highlighting how the superficiality of tokenism can undermine genuine integration.

Regarding Te Wiki o Te Reo Māori (Māori Language Week), their reflection underscored the issue of isolating cultural celebrations to a single week, rather than fostering continuous integration:

...oh, it's Māori week. Because what we want to do is to get rid of Māori week, because every week's Māori week, you know. (Headmaster, School B, 2025)

The Headmaster also reflected on his questioning of the Board of Trustees regarding their appointment of him as Headmaster:

...one of the things I said to the board, are you ready for a Māori principal? [Their answer] We just want a good leader. Which is all I wanted here to appoint me, because I'm Māori. Appoint me because I'm a good leader (Headmaster, School B, 2025)

This reflection explicitly rejected the idea of being a 'token' appointment based solely on ethnicity, emphasising the importance of an appointment based on capability and genuine leadership.

Acknowledgement of stereotyping was a pressing issue identified across all schools. The analysis revealed several pervasive stereotypes that created systemic barriers for Māori students. Historically, there was a pattern of low expectations, with a senior leader from School A reflecting on how Māori students had been directed into 'nothing courses' and had faced barriers to academic success. This was evident in specific pathways, where a deficit-based view on attendance led to the stereotype that "Māori [at this school] have never been able to do trades because... [they] didn't trust them" (Headmaster, School A, 2024) This bias was also observed in academic areas, with a leader at School C questioning, "why were the numbers of student Māori boys in the science classes lower than in other classes?" (Senior Leader, School C, 2025)

Beyond academic and career pathways, stereotypes placed a cultural burden on students. One leader identified the issue of Māori students being seen as the sole repository of knowledge, describing how "everyone looks at the Māori kid in the class" (Headmaster, School B, 2025) when a question about Te Reo is asked. This created pressure, with another leader expressing a sense of whakamā due to not being fluent in Te Reo. Finally, a stereotype emerged that involvement in sport was a distraction from academic pursuits, a notion challenged by a leader who advocated viewing sport as something that supports rather than detracts from classroom learning.

Collectively, the experiences articulated by leaders across the three schools reveal that tokenism and stereotypes are not isolated incidents but rather systemic challenges that significantly impede Māori students' success and sense of belonging to the school.

Overcoming these deeply ingrained practices necessitates a concerted effort to dismantle existing barriers, challenge underlying assumptions, and cultivate school environments where authentic cultural integration and the equitable flourishing of all Māori students are genuinely prioritised.

4.3.3.3 Sustainability and Long-Term Commitment

Addressing equity is understood as a long-term, ongoing journey requiring sustained commitment rather than quick fixes. Leaders recognise the fragility of progress, often linked to key individuals whose passion and relational work are central yet difficult to systematise. There is a collective resolve to deeply embed Māori cultural principles and equity-focused practices into school systems, ensuring that change persists beyond individual staff members.

While committed, the schools also recognised inherent challenges in sustaining their efforts. School B, for instance, grappled with creating sustainable systems beyond individuals, acknowledging the difficulty of relying too heavily on key staff members:

One challenge, and I think about this often, is that we want to always create systems and processes that are sustainable beyond the people. So when matua's gone, when I'm gone, whoever, like, how do we sustain those ways of working? And I don't know what the answer is because I think that a lot of it hinges on people that hinges on our kaiako Māori. It hinges on all this all these people who do a lot of this it's just those relationships, it takes a while to earn those to earn the stripes with the whānau's sometimes know early on in this role with our whānau was quite hard going and I guess I hear the resilience I take it home and I find it really hard to be told to my face certain things you know and it's like oh my gosh you know I need to debrief with my colleagues and go oh no I need more I need a village you know at the moment because this is quite hard heavy lifting but then after a while when you just continue

to konahi ketea here just be the known face be their all the time that trust is developed and then you are in a position. (Senior Leader, School B, 2025)

This struggle highlights the deeply relational nature of Māori-centric education and the inherent difficulty of codifying 'aroha' (earned trust) within a purely systemic framework, underscoring the critical balance between individual passion and institutionalised practice. The Headmaster at School B openly expressed concern that if a pivotal Māori staff member were to leave, it would be difficult to "replace that kind of aroha" (Headmaster, School B, 2025).

Despite these challenges, each school was clear that continuous innovation and adaptation were crucial for navigating and overcoming obstacles. As the Headmaster from School A reflected:

I've got to be innovative and creative in providing the students are changing, the world's changing, so we can't sit still. (Headmaster, School A, 2024)

School B highlighted the necessity of continuous strategic plan development:

...we don't do anything super special. We just pull them out and say how our Māori boys doing against national averages and against kids that we've got at school. You know, what is the gap that still exists? (Senior Leader, School B, 2025)

This same senior leader reflected on the school's leadership's consistent willingness to "try everything" in its whānau engagement strategies, continuously innovating to demonstrate a long-term commitment to finding practical, genuine approaches.

4.4 Conclusion

In summary, the findings presented in this chapter illustrate that educational success for Māori boys in these settings is not accidental, but the result of a deliberate interplay between student agency and institutional intent. For the students, success is constructed through a "brotherhood" that they have actively redefined through the lens of whanaungatanga. By embracing their culture as an asset rather than a deficit, student leaders operate as tuakana, using their influence to anchor younger peers in a secure cultural identity that supports rather than conflicts with academic achievement. This redefinition of success measured by service to whānau and the breaking of intergenerational cycles challenges the narrow academic metrics often prioritised by external policy.

However, student agency alone is insufficient without the enabling environment provided by senior staff. The data reveal that effective leadership in these schools goes beyond tokenistic gestures to embed Te Ao Māori values into the school's strategic and operational fabric.

While challenges regarding sustainability and the burden on specific Māori staff remain, the findings indicate that where leadership is most effective, it is highly relational, prioritising aroha and trust over rigid hierarchy.

This chapter has detailed the what and the how of these practices. The following chapter, Discussion, will now interpret these findings to propose a "Culturally Grounded Leadership Dynamic." It will argue that the superior outcomes observed in these schools stem from a reciprocal partnership where staff provide the structural legitimacy for success, and students provide the cultural authenticity to sustain it.

CHAPTER FIVE DISCUSSION

The primary purpose of this chapter is to interpret the summary findings of this study by placing them in critical dialogue with the existing literature on educational leadership and Māori success. While the previous chapter detailed the specific actions and perspectives of participants, this discussion synthesises those accounts to explore their broader theoretical implications.

The core finding to emerge is that sustained success for Māori boys is not the result of isolated initiatives, but the product of a Culturally Grounded Leadership Dynamic. This dynamic relies on the collaboration between two qualitatively different forms of leadership: the strategic and relational leadership of staff (which provides systems and foundational support) and the proactive, service-focused leadership of student leaders (which provides peer-to-peer cultural execution). While national data on University Entrance attainment triggered this inquiry, the discussion moves beyond these metrics to analyse how this leadership synergy fosters holistic development.

By examining this relationship through the theoretical frameworks established in Chapter Two, this chapter identifies specific practices that inform strategic decisions for senior leaders and Boards of Trustees. This analysis aims to provide a transferable framework for raising the success of Māori boys in any secondary institution in Aotearoa.

Following this introduction, the chapter is structured around four main interpretive sections:

5.2 Thematic Analysis and Interpretation: This section explores the dual leadership approach, beginning with the proactive leadership of students and transitioning to the strategic direction of staff (focusing on policy, the normalisation of Te Ao Māori, relational leadership, and partnerships).

5.3 Bridging the Theoretical Gap: This section examines the socio-economic dimension of success. It analyses how the schools' cultural and structural reforms promote equity, ensuring that educational achievement is accessible to Māori students across the full socio-economic spectrum.

5.4 Reconciling Definitions of Success: This section critically examines the tension between students' holistic, self-determined definition of success and the standardised academic metrics prioritised by the Ministry of Education.

5.5 Conclusion: A concise summary of the chapter's key findings, tensions, and theoretical contributions is provided.

5.2 Thematic Analysis and Interpretation

This section serves as the analytical core of the discussion. The findings cohere around a synergistic leadership approach, demonstrating that the success observed is a product of deliberate action across multiple levels.

The analysis moves beyond merely describing school activities to interpreting the organisational ethos at work, inferring the strategic intent and underlying values from the reported actions.

Crucially, the study identifies two qualitatively distinct forms of leadership:

1. **Staff Leadership:** This is typically strategic and relational, providing the foundational systems (policy, curriculum, partnerships) and structural support necessary for change.

2. Student Leadership: This is primarily proactive and cultural, focusing on role-modelling and service (tuakana-teina), which translates the staff's strategic intent into authentic, daily peer support and cultural agency.

However, the structural tension that underlies all observed practices is this. While there is clear evidence of agentic and effective leadership by staff and students, the persistence of 'dial-a-Māori' indicates a critical tension: these relational successes are operating despite the inherited school structure, rather than signalling a completed transformation of it. The analysis that follows is therefore framed by the ongoing struggle to achieve structural transformation-defined here as the shift from ad hoc cultural inclusion to the permanent institutionalisation of Māori values within the school's core operating logic.

The discussion is structured to first examine students' proactive leadership, focusing on how Māori students define, enact, and leverage leadership to foster peer support and cultural affirmation. It then transitions to the strategic and operational embedding led by staff, which details how senior leaders translate policy into practice, specifically through the normalisation of Te Ao Māori, relational leadership, and the critical challenge of addressing systemic barriers and sustainability. This thematic structure enables a comprehensive examination of the complex factors that contribute to the educational and cultural flourishing of Māori boys.

5.2.1 Student Leadership: Cultivating Identity, Mentorship, and Redefining Success

5.2.1.1 Cultural Connection and Identity

Cultural visibility and representation were central to affirming students' sense of belonging. This was particularly evident in the concept of the 'Sky Blue Brotherhood' at School C. When asked to describe the school's culture, one Year 13 student explicitly identified this concept as

a primary pillar of belonging. However, the data reveals a distinction between the 'representation' of this identity and its 'celebration'. Representation was manifested through static physical markers, such as specific Māori leadership ties and designated cultural spaces (as seen in Schools A and B), which signalled permission to be Māori. In contrast, 'celebration' was defined by active public elevation, including events such as Māori awards evenings (School A) and Kapa Haka performances at assembly (School B), where culture was not just visible but was publicly validated and enjoyed by the wider school populace.

Crucially, in this context, these elements operate beyond the level of static artefacts. While cultural buildings and uniforms can function merely as symbolic displays, the student data indicate that in these schools, they serve a functional necessity. For example, the use of karakia was described not as a performative ritual, but as a mechanism that signalled teacher engagement and cultural safety (School B). Similarly, designated spaces served as sites of tūrangawaewae (places to stand). Milne (2013) warns against the tendency of schools to merely "colour in the white spaces"—adding Indigenous symbols to an otherwise unchanged "whitestream" environment without disrupting the dominant culture. However, the findings here suggest these specific spaces resist that superficiality. For these students, the spaces are not merely decorative additions but essential sanctuaries that allow them to step out of the "whitestream" current and occupy a position of cultural centrality. Therefore, these elements transcend mere aesthetic representation because they are operationalised to create substantive belonging. They are not merely looked at; they are lived in, shifting the school's daily environment from one of observation to one of relational participation.

The findings align with the thematic analysis of Kia Eke Panuku (Ministry of Education, 2016), which identified 'having Māori culture and values celebrated at school' as a key theme. However, the data suggests that 'validation' is a more precise descriptor than 'celebration'. The

unique context of English-medium all-boys' state secondary schools presents a distinct site for Te Tiriti-led practice. The structured environment, characterised by a strong emphasis on 'brotherhood', functions as an enabling architectural framework for Māori success. Yet, it is essential to avoid conflating the school's general 'brotherhood' with authentic Māori collectivity. The organising principle for this deeper structure is the intentional application of Te Ao Māori values—specifically whanaungatanga and tuakana-teina. As Bishop and Berryman (2006) note, whanaungatanga establishes kinship-like obligations that extend beyond simple friendship, effectively bridging the school's tradition with the students' own cultural reality. Furthermore, this collective bonding mirrors Ware and Walsh-Tapiata's (2010) observations of Māori youth development, where strength is drawn from the collective rather than the individual. By reframing the 'Brotherhood' in this way, the students appear to be engaging in what Hokowhitu (2004) describes as a positive construction of Māori masculinity, utilising a shared identity to navigate the mainstream school environment.

This process represents a form of cultural recontextualisation: the generic school structure is repurposed to house indigenous relational practices. By scaffolding the students' sense of community through these values, the school creates a cultural interface (Durie, 2004). Durie defines the interface as the space where indigenous realities and western systems intersect—a dynamic environment that requires navigation rather than assimilation. In the context of these schools, this interface is active rather than passive; students do not simply exist within the 'whitestream' structure, they adapt it, using the traditional 'brotherhood' as a vessel for whanaungatanga. This confirms Durie's argument that educational success relies on the capacity to walk in both worlds: engaging with the mainstream institution while remaining grounded in a secure cultural identity. Consequently, the outcome is a distinct and resilient form of Māori collectivity operating within the mainstream institution.

The intentional creation of these safe cultural spaces is a critical function of school leadership. The research of Berryman and Eley (2017) highlighted the need for students to have a strong cultural identity that is affirmed and validated. These findings align with the principles of bicultural responsiveness as postulated by Durie (2003b). Rather than claiming a total indigenisation of the school, the data reveals a shift toward systemic partnership through two core strategic shifts:

Governance Representation: The deliberate inclusion of Māori voices within existing formal governance structures (e.g., increased Māori representation on the Board of Trustees at School A).

Ritual Integration: The integration of Te Ao Māori into the school's daily habitus, moving beyond student-facing activities to include staff norms (e.g., the use of karakia in the staff room at School B, or the use of a takutaku at School C).

This process, affecting both the formal hierarchy and daily operations, confirms a strategic intent to transform the organisational ethos to reflect obligations under Te Tiriti o Waitangi. This is a direct counter to the historical context of a colonial education system, which promoted assimilationist policies (Walker, 1990; Waitangi Tribunal, 1986). However, as schools integrated these systems—specifically interventions aligned with Te Kotahitanga (Bishop et al., 2007)—this cultural embedding was consistently at risk of being perceived as ‘tokenism.’ This was evidenced by the ‘dial-a-Māori’ discourse (School A) and concerns about limiting celebration to a single week (School B). This struggle reflects a deeper “education debt” (Berryman & Eley, 2017) rooted in historical forces. Authentic integration requires a sustained commitment to decolonising practices; the ‘dial-a-Māori’ perception suggests that cultural leadership has not yet become fully systemic. True decolonisation is not

merely about incorporating practices, but about reimagining the very structures of hierarchy and decision-making.

Despite these challenges, students recognised the importance of their cultural identity to their individual growth. Confidence was promoted through kapa haka, cultural groups, and the sense of ‘giving back’ through Ngā mangai. These activities allowed students to role-model a specific identity: one of a competent, successful Māori student dedicated to service (tuakana-teina), thereby challenging low-expectation narratives. This positive self-identity is a direct outcome of collaboration between strategic staff support (resourcing spaces and time) and proactive student agency. This scaffolding provides the structural support for success, while the student's action defines agency within that framework. The result is a self-reinforcing cycle in which staff actions empower students, whose identities strengthen the 'brotherhood' and enrich the school culture. This robust ethnic identity serves as a critical 'buffer' against negative stereotypes; as Pinckney IV et al. (2011) argue, when students possess a secure racial identity, they are psychologically protected from the deleterious effects of societal prejudice. Furthermore, this foundation fosters a sense of cultural efficacy and mana motuhake. Aligning with Duckworth et al. (2021), the data suggest that when students are empowered to lead as Māori, they develop the resilience and self-determination required to navigate and succeed within the education system.

5.2.1.2 Leadership and Role Modelling

The literature review identified the importance of positive male role models for Māori boys (e.g., Berryman & Eley, 2017); however, the practices within these schools demonstrate how this is operationalised through a systemic, synergistic relationship. This dynamic represents the interpretive core of the findings, resolving the tension within the structure-agency debate. Rather than structure-determining action or agency fighting structure, this study suggests that

institutional environments can be intentionally designed to facilitate a Te Tiriti-led approach. This is achieved through top-down support (strategic and relational systems) and bottom-up agency (students embodying service and tuakana-teina).

Student pathways to leadership were shaped by a distinction between formal roles (prefects) and cultural responsibilities (kapa haka, Ngā mangai). The students' willingness to assume these roles was a critical act of shifting their presence from mere representation to active validation. While representation often confines culture to tokenistic instances—the 'dial-a-Māori' discourse rejected by students—substantive integration requires the relational embedding of cultural values. By using tuakana-teina (mentoring) as their primary mechanism, students ensured that culture was woven into the social fabric rather than merely appearing on its calendar. Leadership was thus viewed as an embedded form of service; promoting school values and influencing the next generation were the direct outcomes of this culturally defined motivation.

This commitment was prevalent across all three schools. The importance of authentic role-modelling was exemplified by a former Head Boy at School B, whose leadership was rooted in a "dual competency." He was a visible advocate for kapa haka while maintaining a consistent presence in the learning centre, tutoring younger Māori students in academic subjects. By bridging cultural strength with academic achievement, he provided a "visible horizon of possibility" for his peers. As one student noted, having "someone rooting for [them]" (Student, School A, 2024) acts as an identity anchor, confirming that 'success as Māori' is an expected norm within this environment.

These findings align with the research of Macfarlane et al. (2014) regarding the link between cultural identity and academic engagement. Drawing on the Ka Awatea framework, Macfarlane et al. argue that educational success is contingent upon Mana Ūkaipō—a sense of

belonging and cultural sustenance. In this study, the 'brotherhood' functions as this source of sustenance; because students feel culturally secure and at home, they are better positioned to engage cognitively with the curriculum. The data confirms that when the school affirms their identity, it removes the psychological burden of assimilation, allowing students to focus on achievement. This focus on relational pedagogy, consistent with *Kia Eke Panuku*, positions *whanaungatanga* as the strategic organising principle, prioritising trust and reciprocity above the formal teacher-student hierarchy. Staff intentionally mediate their authority through a relational style in which *tuakana* guide *teina*, ensuring that the hierarchy operates through support rather than coercion. A core finding is that these practices successfully mediate the rigidity of the formal hierarchy. While the institutional structure remains vertical (senior over junior), the daily practices operate horizontally (brother to brother).

However, a critical tension remains: the underrepresentation of Māori in formal leadership positions. Despite the positive initiatives, the numerical deficit of Māori prefects suggests that leadership is shared in principle but not yet fully inclusive in structure. Leadership appears to remain restricted to 'cultural spaces' (Milne, 2013)—designated zones such as the *whare* or *kapa haka* — where Māori authority is permitted, while the school's central governance structures remain largely unchanged. This compartmentalisation risks creating a 'glass ceiling' where Māori boys are recognised as cultural leaders but not necessarily as institutional leaders.

Furthermore, reported peer pressure regarding academic commitment aligns with Hokowhitu's (2004) critique of the limited "scripts" available to Māori males. Hokowhitu argues that societal narratives have historically reduced Māori masculinity to physical prowess and hyper-masculinity, often excluding intellectual pursuit from the definition of being a 'real' Māori man. Consequently, the peer pressure observed in this study may reflect

an internalised struggle where students feel they must choose between academic effort and maintaining an authentic masculine identity. This challenge is sustained by a self-perpetuating cycle of systemic barriers and the "burden of representation." At School C, where Māori represent 30% of students but only 13% of prefects, the gap between Te Ao Māori values and the formal hierarchy remains palpable.

5.2.1.3 Student Perceptions of Educational Success as Māori

The vision of achieving "educational success as Māori" remains a policy touchstone (i.e. Kia Eke Panuku), yet the phrase itself creates a conceptual dilemma by presupposing a differentiation between Māori and non-Māori outcomes. This language can imply that "educational success" is a universal, Pākehā-normed goal, with the "as Māori" component acting merely as a culturally differentiated method of attainment. Durie (2003a) critiques this framing, arguing it suggests Māori "are aiming to be as good as Pākehā when they might well aspire to be better, or different, or even markedly superior" (p. 202). Student findings in this study validate this critique; participants consistently defined success in holistic, self-determined terms—such as mana motuhake and the breaking of intergenerational cycles—that inherently challenge standardised, singular benchmarks of achievement.

For these students, success is perceived as deeply personal and inalienable. Their perspectives—ranging from "setting an example for my cousins" to the belief that "success is what you want it to be"—align with Durie's (2016) view that education must reflect a student's perception of self-identity. While students define success through these holistic values, the tangible examples they provided—such as "remaining in school" or "getting the credits"—necessarily utilise the institution as the visible platform for their achievement. Thus, the mana motuhake being enacted is a contextualised form: a process where personal

and cultural goals are realised within the specific constraints and affordances of the school structure.

A critical nuance in the data is that students do not view academic qualifications and cultural identity as competing interests; rather, they see them as mutually reinforcing elements of a single pathway. An academic credit or a University Entrance (UE) qualification is reframed as a "tool" for self-determination, providing the "options and opportunities" necessary to exercise mana motuhake in the future. In this sense, the strategic focus on cultivating student leadership bolsters agency by affirming that personal and whānau values are the accurate measure of achievement, even when navigating a standardised metric. This school-based leadership carries broader cultural weight; by engaging in kapa haka and community events, students navigate the protocols of local mana whenua, extending their sense of success beyond the school gates and into the collective responsibility of their iwi and hapū.

Furthermore, the desire to break intergenerational cycles reflects a transformative understanding of success that moves beyond the individual. By reframing their bicultural status as a strategic advantage—articulating an ability to view the world from both "a Māori viewpoint and the Pākehā viewpoint" (Student, School A, 2024)—students operationalise the capacity to navigate the global world without compromising indigenous identity (Durie, 2003). This "dual cultural competency" functions as high-value capital, aligning with Macfarlane et al.'s (2014) contention that success depends on navigating two distinct knowledge streams—indigenous and western—simultaneously.

However, the nature of these educational spaces requires careful interpretation. By providing culturally located environments and embracing the tuakana-teina model, schools validate student identity within a form of "recontextualised culture." These are indigenous pockets carved out within a mainstream institution, functioning as a necessary "cultural interface"

(Durie, 2004) that allows students to succeed across both worlds. Crucially, the definition of "Success as Māori" remained inclusive of diverse realities; rather than requiring a rigid performance of Māoritanga, success was viewed as a secure connection to whakapapa and a willingness to engage. By framing cultural identity as an inherent asset, these students unequivocally reject deficit thinking about history. Success, for these young men, is not about "catching up" to a Pākehā norm, but about leveraging their unique agency to define a holistic, value-driven pathway to personal excellence.

5.2.2 Staff Leadership: Strategic Transformation and Relational Foundations

5.2.2.1 Strategic Direction

Senior staff at all three schools demonstrated a deliberate approach to addressing the challenges of a hegemonic educational landscape—a system historically created through colonial policies (Milne, 2013). Milne defines this environment as 'whitestream', arguing that mainstream schools function like a current that privileges Pākehā norms while simultaneously treating Māori identity as 'other' or culturally additive. Recognising that the school environment is not culturally neutral, their primary levers were policy and planning: a top-down strategic effort to embed Māori success systemically. This was driven by a commitment to fulfilling obligations under Te Tiriti o Waitangi, while navigating the delicate balancing act between indigenisation and preparing students for a globalised world.

In this context, transformation goes beyond a passive 'reflection' of culture; the objective is for the school structure to operationalise Māori epistemologies. Citing these values as the 'foundational organising principle' does not imply the erasure of organisational structures, but rather a re-prioritisation of values within the system. This addresses the tension between the bureaucratic rationality inherent in western schooling and the relational accountability of Te

Ao Māori. In practice, this means that where these cultural systems collide, whanaungatanga is prioritised over administrative efficiency. This negotiation aligns with Durie (2003a), who frames Māori development as requiring the retention of cultural integrity and self-determination while successfully engaging with the broader world. Consequently, while staff operate within the constraints of a standardised assessment system, the pedagogical delivery is culturally grounded, ensuring students are prepared for a globalised world by standing on a secure platform of local identity. This translates into observable strategic shifts:

Governance Partnership: Strategically mediating the formal hierarchy by integrating whānau and mana whenua into key policy and governance structures (e.g., increased Māori representation on the Board of Trustees at School A).

Pedagogical Re-Oriented: Ensuring that Māori values (e.g., whanaungatanga, tuakana-teina) function as the relational prerequisite for learning. This shifts the focus from transactional teaching to relational accountability, where connection must be established before content can be delivered.

Resource Prioritisation: Dedicating permanent resources (e.g., designated cultural spaces, budget for cultural roles) that codify Te Ao Māori as foundational to the school's function.

All three schools emphasised a commitment to a data-driven approach, though this remained complex. While measurement tools like NCEA, asTTle, and PAT testing are contextualised for New Zealand, they primarily assess academic literacy and numeracy. A tension persists between these metrics and the more holistic, culturally grounded indicators of success. This finding provides a lived context for the concerns raised by the Auditor-General (2013) regarding Ka Hikitia, which highlighted the misalignment between the strategy's intent—cultural affirmation and wellbeing—and the Ministry's performance framework, which relies almost exclusively on standardised targets. Consequently, schools face a paradox

where efforts to build mana and identity are culturally mandated but statistically invisible, as the system lacks the mechanisms to value them alongside Western academic norms.

The leaders' strategic use of data was a critical process of navigating these systemic shortcomings, informing practice while simultaneously challenging the very system from which that data originates. This top-down counterpart to student-led efforts was achieved by intentionally valuing the cultural capital Māori students brought to the community. Drawing on Bourdieu (1986), this process is best understood through the relationship between 'field' and 'capital.' Historically, the field of the English-medium school has not recognised Indigenous knowledge as valid. However, these findings indicate a deliberate restructuring of English-medium schooling: by altering organisational norms to reward mātauranga and tikanga, the school effectively converted students' pre-existing cultural attributes into institutionalised cultural capital. This moved the schools beyond superficial, event-based celebrations toward a deeply embedded, daily practice of cultural integration.

This rejection of the 'whitestream' model was guided by the philosophy that 'what's good for Māori is good for all' (Bishop et al., 2009). The systemic reforms necessary to affirm Māori identity—namely, strengthening relational practices and decentralising authority—improve the overall school culture for all students. This structural redesign fundamentally alters two core institutional mechanisms:

The Hierarchy of Value: Shifting the criteria for status so that cultural service and indigenous knowledge are formally recognised as credentials for leadership positions (e.g., Prefect selection).

Standard Operating Procedures: Embedding relational protocols (tikanga) into routine functioning, such as replacing transactional discipline with restorative conversations, ensuring whanaungatanga dictates staff-student interactions.

By recognising students as cultural authorities and knowledge holders—relying on them to lead initiatives like kapa haka and Ngā Mangai—the schools strategically utilised students' expertise to achieve goals that staff alone could not. This practice embodies mana ōrite mō te mātauranga Māori (Berryman et al., 2018)—the equal status of Māori knowledge—as it validates Māori ways of knowing within a mainstream institution.

This intentional integration was further evident in a strategic focus on broadening definitions of educational success. Leadership prioritised curriculum flexibility to ensure Māori students, as the Headmaster at School A noted, "left with options and opportunities" and "academic qualifications for life opportunities." The continued reference to qualifications should be interpreted as a strategic necessity; academic credentials serve as "navigational tools" to support diverse, self-determined pathways beyond school. This commitment to dismantling the hegemonic landscape aligns with the call for transformative leaders (Murfitt, 2019).

Murfitt argues that for leadership to be truly equitable, it must move beyond a managerial focus on accountability metrics and embrace a moral imperative to serve learners' holistic needs. By prioritising 'life opportunities' over rigid academic compliance, these Headmasters are enacting this transformative potential, refusing to let the school's pursuit of statistical targets compromise the students' actual long-term wellbeing.

5.2.2.2 Relational Leadership with Students

Staff-student relationships were foundational to fostering belonging, consistent with literature emphasising connection-building (Bishop et al., 2007; Macfarlane, 2004). The prioritisation of cultural identity and holistic well-being, framed explicitly by the Te Whare Tapa Whā model (Durie, 1985), was central. By drawing on the model's tenets, schools are implicitly or explicitly committed to the student's whole, multidimensional self (physical, mental, spiritual, and family health). The quality of these relationships directly correlates with a positive sense

of cultural identity, contributing to improved attendance and engagement. However, a critical finding was the heavy reliance on key Māori staff to be the primary facilitators of these relationships. This mirrors Milne's (2013) critique that in 'whitestream' schools, Māori staff often carry the weight of providing cultural legitimacy while the system remains largely unchanged. Students recognised this dynamic, noting the profound impact of specific kaiako who understood them at a deeper cultural level compared to the general staff body. Senior staff acknowledged that this centrality poses a challenge to sustainability, underscoring the need for relational leadership to be embedded throughout the entire school community to ensure a systemic approach.

Deliberate efforts were also made to strengthen partnerships with whānau, iwi, and mana whenua. These partnerships were a direct response to Māori communities calling for rangatiratanga—self-determination and self-leadership (Berryman et al., 2017). Initiatives included establishing dedicated whānau liaison officers and co-developing local history curricula with iwi. This collaborative model embodies a distributed leadership approach in which school leaders become students of the community and whānau members become leaders in the educational space, thereby enhancing the tuakana-teina model (Clarkin-Phillips, 2009). While the benefits are profound, senior staff termed the sustainability of these relationships "challenging," highlighting the risk of tokenism if partnerships were not reciprocal and deeply embedded into the long-term operational framework.

5.2.2.3 Barriers and Equity

Despite proactive strategies in relational practice and planning, all three schools recognised they still operated within a broader system marked by historical inequality and colonisation. These barriers are rooted in the enduring legacy of the New Zealand educational system, which has often been perpetuated by deficit-thinking discourse (Bishop et al., 2009). A key

finding in this study was the identification and deliberate removal of "gatekeeping practices"—institutional impediments, such as strict curriculum prerequisites, historically restricting Māori access to university pathways. Senior leadership demonstrated a critical awareness of these systemic flaws, moving beyond deficit thinking by systematically dismantling these regulatory barriers and challenging the 'whitestream' norms that position Māori students as less academically capable.

To mitigate existing achievement gaps, schools utilised a distributed leadership approach (Spillane, 2006), leveraging robust data monitoring to identify students at risk of disengagement. They subsequently utilised the tuakana-teina model to address these disparities through peer-led intervention. However, an inherent systemic tension remains: the collision between emerging bicultural strategies and inherited colonial structures. This tension is most acute in the student experience, where Māori students are often called upon primarily for ceremonial roles. This superficial engagement, as perceived by students, amounted to cultural capital being exploited rather than genuinely valued—a performative cultural labour that risks undermining structural success. Senior leaders identified that the pervasive stereotypes fueling these issues fell into three primary categories:

Low Expectations and Academic Channelling: This was manifest in "nothing courses" that Māori students had been traditionally directed towards. One leader noted that even trades academies were initially inaccessible due to an implicit lack of institutional trust among staff, while others noted that course prerequisites systematically channelled Māori students away from the sciences. These disparities were not merely outcomes of external social factors but were actively reinforced by institutional structures that, although appearing neutral, operated as gatekeeping mechanisms.

Cultural Bias and Whakamā: Staff noted the damaging practice of viewing Māori students as the sole repository of cultural knowledge—the "everyone looks at the Māori kid" phenomenon when a Te Reo question is asked. This singular expectation leads to isolation and whakamā. This aligns with the findings of the Office of the Children's Commissioner (2018), which reported that Māori students frequently identify 'teacher racism'—often manifested as ignorance or the spotlighting of students to fill knowledge gaps—as a primary barrier to their education. The report highlights that when the burden of cultural expertise is shifted onto the student, the classroom becomes a site of anxiety rather than learning. Instead of feeling validated, the student is forced to navigate feelings of shame for either not knowing the answer or being made hyper-visible against their will. Consequently, culture is acknowledged only through tokenistic expectations of expertise rather than systemic staff competence.

The Sport Stereotype: The perception that Māori talent is confined to athletics functions as a harmful distraction from academic endeavours. As Webber (2022) notes, this limiting perception—where success in sport is used to diminish academic aspiration—undermines the holistic identity development necessary for educational success.

The rejection of tokenism is thus seen as a transformative act by senior leaders. The Headmaster at School B powerfully illustrated this when he commented, "Appoint me because I'm a good leader." This statement is a cornerstone of transformative leadership in this context and a deliberate assertion of mana motuhake. He was not suggesting that professional competence is a-cultural; rather, he was rejecting the reductive gaze of tokenism, which views Māori identity as a passive diversity statistic. Instead, he demanded that his cultural identity be recognised as a professional asset—a specific form of expertise that constitutes a holistic leadership competency. By refusing to be siloed as a 'cultural hire,' he

asserts that true professional excellence in Aotearoa requires integrating both organisational and cultural capabilities. This stance normalises Māori success and sets a standard for students, demonstrating that Indigenous relational skills function as high-value leadership traits that distinguish them in the global marketplace.

However, the sustainability of these transformative systems remains a critical challenge. The over-reliance on key Māori staff leads to a phenomenon known as "cultural taxation" (Bishop, 2019). Because these individuals hold the bulk of the relational load, their departure poses a systemic risk. Sustainability, in this sense, requires shifting the responsibility for cultural care from a few "experts" to the collective staff body. This discussion leads to the central tension of this study: the need for institutionalised change versus the reliance on individual relational capital. As Murfitt (2019) argues, transformative leaders must move from managing successful individuals to institutionalising those successes. This involves embedding effective practices into the school's structural fabric—through policy, budget, and staff induction—so they persist beyond the tenure of individual champions. This process includes Codifying Practices (writing tuakana-teina into policy), Resource Allocation (securing permanent budget lines), and Structural Normalisation (ensuring mana motuhake is a universal institutional expectation). By securing these mandates, the school ensures that the conditions for relational success are preserved, shifting Māori success from an extraordinary individual achievement to a predictable, normative systemic outcome.

5.3 Socio-economic Context and Success

While the primary focus of this study has been on deliberate cultural and relational leadership, a comprehensive interpretation must also acknowledge the socio-economic context. The literature review identified a relative absence of explicit class-based analysis in the discourse on Māori educational success. However, this is not necessarily an oversight;

rather, it reflects a stance within indigenous scholarship which posits that cultural recognition is a necessary prerequisite for addressing the material and redistributive injustices that dominate class analysis (Durie, 2003). Therefore, when interpreting academic outcomes such as increased University Entrance attainment, it is critical to understand that these schools are not ignoring class factors. Instead, they appear to be leveraging cultural affirmation as the primary vehicle for socio-economic mobility, operating on the premise that a secure identity provides the foundation required to overcome material disadvantage.

The success observed in this research—the high levels of student agency, cultural affirmation, and aspirational pathways—is clearly linked to the intentional cultural work and transformative leadership discussed throughout this chapter. However, the capacity of these schools to foster such environments is also inextricably linked to their operational commitment to equity of access. Rather than assuming a universal experience of economic hardship among Māori learners, who represent a diverse socio-economic spectrum, the schools adopted a 'barrier-free' approach. Strategic efforts to broaden definitions of success, remove financial prerequisites, and prioritise vocational development function as structural mechanisms to democratise opportunity. By actively dismantling 'gatekeeping practices,' such as course costs, the schools ensure that material circumstances do not dictate educational pathways. Therefore, the improved holistic success is likely a product of cultural affirmation working in tandem with a deliberate commitment to internal structural equity.

This interpretation is strictly limited to the internal transformation of the school culture and system. While the schools successfully addressed institutional impediments (e.g., curriculum prerequisites), it is recognised that schools cannot directly manipulate broader socio-economic structures outside their gates. Analysing this through Fraser's (2009) framework of justice, a crucial distinction must be made between 'affirmative' and

‘transformative’ remedies. The strategies observed in these schools go beyond mere affirmative action (which would simply support students to survive an unchanged system). Instead, they function as ‘localised transformation’: the schools have fundamentally restructured their internal environment to validate Māori success, even though they lack the power to transform the macro-economic inequities that exist in wider society.

This interpretation also suggests that for these practices to be successfully replicated, the focus cannot rest solely on cultural responsiveness as a pastoral care strategy. It must include a robust, leadership-driven mandate to address the academic realities of success. While cultural affirmation is the foundation, it must be coupled with uncompromising academic expectations. This ensures that Māori students leave school not only with a secure cultural identity but with the formal qualifications necessary for professional equity. By guaranteeing access to both cultural strength and academic currency, the school equips students to navigate the global environment without compromising their local identity.

5.4 Reconciling Definitions of Success

The findings of this study reveal a significant tension between the holistic, self-determined definition of success articulated by the Māori students and the standardised metrics used by the Ministry of Education to measure "educational success as Māori."

Consequently, a tension persists between these standard academic metrics and the more holistic, culturally grounded indicators of success valued by the schools. In this context, students consistently defined success not by NCEA credits but in terms of personal values, effort, breaking intergenerational cycles, and mana motuhake. Their success is about leveraging a "cultural advantage" and knowing who they are, not about "catching up" to a Pākehā standard. This disconnect highlights a critical flaw in the policy's measurement: by

prioritising Pākehā-normed academic data, the system risks devaluing the very forms of success that Māori students value most. In this study, the Headmaster of School A's aspiration to provide students with "options and opportunities" and "academic qualifications for life opportunities", rather than just high NCEA scores, demonstrates a local, transformative leadership effort to reconcile these definitions. Ultimately, embodying 'educational success as Māori' necessitates a shift from neoliberal 'accountability' (measurement) to reciprocal responsibility (relational evidence). Rather than attempting to quantify culture, the system must validate relational narratives—such as agency and whānau engagement—as robust indicators of success. In this model, efficacy is not 'measured' by data points, but evidenced by the sustained quality of relationships alongside academic achievement.

This necessity directly addresses the inherent policy contradiction. The academic success (University Entrance attainment) that prompted this inquiry is merely evidence that the broader, culturally-driven support is working. It is not, however, the primary measure of success itself. The holistic success observed in these schools—including academic results—is shown to be a predictable outcome of this broader, culturally driven support. The students' definitions offer a blueprint for refining policy to be truly reflective of Māori aspirations and self-determination. This requires correcting the current policy flaw of attempting to 'measure' qualitative success through quantitative metrics. Instead, policy frameworks must be recalibrated to accept qualitative evidence—such as student narratives and relational health—as legitimate indicators of efficacy in their own right. This shift acknowledges that cultural success is not a variable to be counted, but a lived reality to be validated.

5.5 Conclusion

The findings and discussion in this chapter converge around three essential elements: the Culturally Grounded Leadership Dynamic, the strategic embedding of this model, and the critical tensions regarding barriers and sustainability.

5.5.1 The Culturally Grounded Leadership Dynamic

This study proposes a Culturally Grounded Leadership Dynamic to describe the specific synergy observed in these schools. This dynamic is defined by a reciprocal partnership: staff provide the structural legitimacy (top-down resources and policy), while students provide the cultural authenticity (bottom-up peer influence and service).

Unlike generic distributed leadership, which typically delegates tasks (administrative function), this model distributes mana (cultural responsibility). Student leaders do not simply execute school policy; they operationalise whanaungatanga and tuakana-teina, filling the structural "container" created by staff with genuine relational security. Driven by an ethical imperative to dismantle colonial systems, this dynamic repurposes mainstream school structures to serve Indigenous ends, measuring success not just by academic output, but by the strength of identity and Te Whare Tapa Whā.

5.5.2 Strategic and Operational Embedding

To enable this dynamic, senior leaders actively repurposed generic administrative levers to challenge the "whitestream" environment. Strategically, this involved engaging iwi and whānau to legitimise the school's direction. Operationally, it shifted the focus from sporadic cultural celebration to systemic normalisation—ensuring "every week is Māori week." By embedding these values into planning and curriculum, leaders moved beyond tokenism

toward mana ōrite mō te mātauranga Māori, creating an environment where cultural identity is an asset rather than an anomaly.

5.5.3 Critical Tension: Barriers and Sustainability

Despite these advances, significant tensions remain. Internally, schools grapple with "gatekeeping practices" (such as curriculum prerequisites) and the "burden of representation", which threatens the sustainability of Māori staff. The reliance on individual passion rather than codified policy poses a risk to long-term resilience.

Theoretically, this research bridges the gap between Culturally Responsive Pedagogy and Critical Policy Reform. The data demonstrate that cultural affirmation (relational) and the removal of structural barriers (political) are interdependent; neither can succeed without the other. The Culturally Grounded Leadership Dynamic operationalises this bridge by demanding that policy reform (such as removing prerequisites) is not enacted in a vacuum, but is explicitly designed to create safe spaces for culturally responsive pedagogy (such as tuakana-teina) to flourish. In this way, structural policy changes provide the institutional 'container,' while culturally grounded relationships provide the relational 'content,' proving that systemic equity requires both forces to be functioning simultaneously.

Finally, the students' holistic definition of success challenges the Ministry of Education's narrow academic metrics. This study concludes that in these settings, academic achievement is not the sole goal but the natural consequence of a broader, culturally grounded leadership practice.

CHAPTER SIX CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Research Overview

This thesis investigated the relationship between leadership action and sustained success for male Māori learners in English-medium state secondary boys' schools. While national statistics indicate that these schools achieve higher University Entrance outcomes for Māori boys compared to co-educational settings, the specific leadership practices driving this success have remained largely undocumented. The study set out to answer the central research question:

What deliberate actions do the leadership of English-Medium State Secondary Boys' Schools take to promote a sense of belonging, language, culture, and cultural identity among Māori students, and how do these actions influence their educational achievement and pathways?

To answer this, the thesis developed the Culturally Grounded Leadership Dynamic as a central interpretive model. This dynamic is defined not merely as collaboration, but as a symbiotic reciprocal relationship: top-down strategic staff support provides the structural opportunity, while bottom-up student agency provides the cultural vitality.

6.2 Conclusions

The findings of this study lead to three primary conclusions regarding the mechanisms of Māori success in these environments.

6.2.1 The Mechanism: A Reciprocal Leadership Dynamic

The study concludes that "leadership" in this context is not a unilateral action by staff, but a reciprocal exchange. Staff leadership was found to be the enabler, while student leadership was the activator.

Staff Action: The primary role of staff leadership was to actively reject the "whitestream" model (Milne, 2013) by normalising Te Ao Māori in daily operations. This was achieved through policy planning, relational leadership, and the leveraging of partnerships with iwi.

Student Action: Student leadership provided the vital cultural translation of these actions. Defining their leadership as service (tuakana-teina), senior students used formal and informal roles to operationalise the school's cultural values, ensuring they were relatable and genuine for younger peers.

Crucially, the success of the schools was not found in these actions in isolation, but in their intersection. Top-down policies were only effective because students empowered themselves to translate them into genuine peer accountability.

6.2.2 The Influence on Identity: From Barrier to Advantage

The Culturally Grounded Leadership Dynamic successfully shifts cultural identity from a perceived barrier into a definitive advantage. By promoting mana motuhake, the schools created a counter-narrative to the deficit thinking often described in the literature. This influence was primarily driven by the tuakana-teina model, in which senior students served as "identity anchors" for younger peers. This visible commitment to "give back" created safe

spaces for belonging, positioning the students' heritage as a source of strength and competence. Consequently, the study concludes that cultural affirmation is not an "add-on" to the school environment but the prerequisite for student engagement.

6.2.3 The Influence on Achievement: Success as a By-product

A definitive conclusion of this study is that high academic attainment (such as University Entrance) is achieved most effectively when it is treated as a by-product of holistic support rather than the primary goal. The schools achieved this through a dual mechanism of Barrier Removal (dismantling gatekeeping practices and prerequisites) and Structural Intervention (proactively scaffolding vocational and STEM pathways). This confirms that educational equity is achieved when leaders not only celebrate culture but also actively remove systemic barriers to access. When students feel they belong and their pathway is clear of structural impediments, academic achievement follows as a natural consequence.

6.3 The Central Tension

While the leadership dynamic drives immediate success, the study identifies a critical systemic vulnerability: the model is currently 'people-dependent' rather than 'system-secure'. The reliance on relational trust and the specific cultural labour of key staff presents an existential risk. The progress observed is fragile because it relies on *aroha* (compassion) and individual goodwill, which are difficult to codify within a bureaucratic framework. The departure of a single key *kaiako* or leader could compromise the entire system of cultural affirmation. Therefore, the study concludes that a mandate for transformative leadership is insufficient if it remains bound to individual agency. True equity requires the transition from managing effective individuals to institutionalising successful practices—codifying the

tuakana-teina model and relational expectations into permanent policy, resourcing, and organisational structure.

6.4 Contributions to Knowledge

This study makes three theoretical contributions by building on existing knowledge and scholarship on leadership in education and equity.

6.4.1 Culturally Grounded Leadership Dynamic

The primary contribution is an exploratory and provisional empirical validation of the Culturally Grounded Leadership Dynamic. The findings from these three schools demonstrate that equity is not achieved by cultural affirmation alone, nor by structural changes alone. Instead, success arises from a triadic interdependence:

- Structural Mitigation (Staff removing barriers)
- Cultural Affirmation (Staff valuing identity)
- Student Agency (Students operationalising culture)

This finding bridges the theoretical gap identified by Fraser (2009), providing evidence that structural transformation for equity necessitates a dual commitment to both recognition (cultural value) and redistribution (access to pathways).

6.4.2 Reconciling Success and Accountability

The study challenges the prevailing deficit metrics used in New Zealand education. It provides empirical evidence that academic achievement is a downstream outcome of culturally affirmed identity. This reframes the debate on accountability: to genuinely reflect

Māori aspirations, systemic evaluation must shift from solely counting quantitative outputs to validating qualitative indicators of cultural efficacy and whanaungatanga (Durie, 2003).

6.4.3 Advancing Leadership and Cultural Capital Theory

The research refines the application of Bourdieu's (1986) theories of capital within an indigenous context. It provides evidence that these schools were actively restructuring their institutional value hierarchy to convert Māori knowledge (mātauranga) and custom (tikanga) into legitimate social and academic capital. This validates the concept that schools can function as sites of cultural regeneration rather than assimilation, provided leadership is willing to cede space to student agency.

6.5 Methodological Reflections and Limitations

6.5.1 Reflections

The multi-site qualitative case study design proved useful in identifying the Culturally Grounded Leadership Dynamic as a cross-cutting phenomenon, enhancing the transferability of the findings. The use of thematic analysis allowed the interpretation to move beyond description to a conceptual synthesis of the relationship between culture and structure.

Ethically, adopting a Te Tiriti-led research framework was effective for a non-Māori researcher. It prioritised partnership and *kanohi ki te kanohi* (face-to-face) engagement. However, the analysis remains a relational critique by an ally rather than an assertion of indigenous sovereignty; future research led by Māori practitioners could explore these themes entirely from within a Kaupapa Māori epistemological worldview.

6.5.2 Limitations

- **Participant Scope:** A key limitation was the inability to secure interviews with Board members and Kaumātua. Consequently, the findings are weighted toward operational and pedagogical implementation rather than governance and spiritual direction.
- **Demographics:** One of the three schools had a Māori population of only 11%, below the representative target of 20%. While this offered insight into minority dynamics, the findings may not fully represent schools with higher-density Māori populations.
- **Depth of Inquiry:** The single-interview format limited the ability to explore complex political decisions with leaders in an iterative manner. Future research would benefit from a longitudinal approach to track the sustainability of these leadership practices over time.

6.6 Recommendations

Recommendations for Practice

1. For School Leaders and Boards of Trustees
 - **Codify Relational Practices:** Move beyond reliance on individual goodwill. Formalise whanaungatanga and tuakana-teina roles into the school's operating procedures, job descriptions, and curriculum design to ensure sustainability.
 - **Dismantle Gatekeeping:** Conduct a systematic audit of curriculum prerequisites and costs. Proactively remove these barriers to ensure that subject selection is driven by aspiration, not financial or regulatory restriction.
 - **Formalise Partnership:** Elevate whānau and iwi engagement from consultation to governance. Boards should formalise strategic partnerships with mana whenua to ensure the school's strategic direction reflects local Māori aspirations.

2. For Teachers

- Legitimise Cultural Capital: Actively value students' cultural expertise as genuine academic and social assets. Use this expertise to create reciprocal learning environments where students can lead.
- Counteract Tokenism: Avoid performative cultural labour. Ensure that Māori student leaders are supported by visible staff commitment and resources, and that they actively work to remove peer stereotyping that can undermine their leadership.

3. For Policy Makers (Ministry of Education and Education Review Office) Shift

Measurement Focus: Align accountability frameworks with the finding that academic success is a by-product of wellbeing. Metrics should assess the "health of the system" (cultural efficacy, agency, belonging) as the primary indicator of school quality, rather than relying solely on academic outcome data.

6.7 Recommendations for Future Research

- Sustainability Studies: Longitudinal research is required to determine if the "people-dependent" model described here can successfully transition into a "system-secure" model after key leaders depart.
- The Governance Gap: Future studies must specifically target Board members and Kaumātua to understand how statutory obligations under Te Tiriti are interpreted at the strategic governance level.

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APPENDIX 1: Thematic Analysis Audit Trails

Table 1: Student Participant Coding

This table provides the complete audit trail for data collected from Year 13 Māori students. It categorises raw narratives into themes concerning identity, leadership, and institutional experience.

Theme	Code	Participant Quote
Cultural Identity & Normalisation	Cultural Identity	“I'd say my connection to my culture has pretty much led me to this position, Deputy Head Prefect, you know, through kapa haka, and speaking the reo, embracing the reo, I've been able to show my leadership in ways that a lot of the school's population can't so makes me a stand out.”
	Cultural Identity	“And when it comes to leadership, it's really helped, but this year's of being like one of the leaders in our whānau groups helping with our whakamoemati, that's like where all of our Māori tutor groups come together like one day a week and we do karakia, sing songs, spread news, positively about just the Māori world and [The School].”

	Cultural Identity	“In all my classes at the start and at the end of each class we've got a karakia and stuff like that. So small things like that help make us feel more comfortable in school as Māori.”
	Cultural Identity	“I think this year has been a big step up. So this year we introduced the whakamoemati, where all of our tutor groups come together, as well as our Pacifica tutor groups. And that's just a space where we can just be us, you know?”
	Cultural Identity	“When I was in Year 9, I didn't even know I was Māori, you know? Like I knew I was, but I didn't say I was. I was too scared to say anything. But coming to this school, I've found that side of me.”
Institutional Mechanisms	Safe Places	“As soon as we got that whare ako, all the Māori boys came there knowing that, you know, this is our place. We can go there and just be us and talk and just hang out and do our mahi.”
	Safe Places	“Having that room [Whare] just for us... it's like a home away from home. You walk in and you see the

		carvings and you hear the reo and you just feel like you belong.”
	Initiatives	“We have the Te Reo Māori speech competitions, we have the kapa haka... it’s all those things that the school puts on that makes it feel like it’s okay to be Māori here.”
	Representation	“Seeing the Māori flag flying at the front of the school... that was a big moment for us. It showed that we are part of this school, not just a side thing.”
	Traditions	“The haka is a big part of the school tradition. Everyone does it, but when we lead it, you feel that mana. It’s a tradition that we own.”
Leadership & Mentoring	Leadership	“just pretty much my job is just to be a good face for the youngest students, set good examples high standards, for in the school, and it's just about, you know, being someone that you can look up to.”
	Leadership	“And that's sort of run by the younger boys, so we always pick two Year 12 students to be the heads of Tu

		tamatoa, just to give the younger boys a chance to show their leadership skills instead of just the prefects.”
	Leadership	“And I remember him telling me like, it's not like being a prefects isn't about you. Year 13 running it every year, you know? Just so those boys can get a step up.”
	Tuakana Teina	“It’s about the older boys looking after the younger boys. Like in the whānau groups, we help them with their mahi and we just talk to them, see how they’re doing.”
	Role Modelling	“Seeing the Head Boy doing the right things... persuaded me to do better... and showed you can break those stereotypes that people label us with.”
Relationality	Brotherhood	“Honestly like brotherhood... it's like a family. We all got each other's backs. Especially the Māori and Pacifica boys, we’re tight.”
	Brotherhood	“I think of us at school as a brotherhood... it’s about that connection and keeping each other accountable.”

	Sense of Belonging	“I feel like I belong here now. In Year 9 I wasn’t sure, but now I know I’ve got my place and my people.”
	whānau Support	“My whānau are proud that I’m here and doing well. They come to the kapa haka and they see me leading and it makes them happy.”
	Teacher Support	“Some teachers really make an effort. They try to say the names right and they ask about your culture. It makes a difference.”
Navigational Capital & Success	Success as Māori	“Success is personal... I want to leave here with the credits I need for Uni, but also knowing who I am. I want to be successful in both worlds.”
	Success as Māori	“Success is seeing my cousins and the younger ones coming through and doing better than me.”
	Academic Achievement	“Getting University Entrance is the goal. I want to show that Māori boys can be top of the class too.”

	Opportunities	“Being at this school has given me opportunities I wouldn't have got elsewhere. Like the leadership roles and the trips.”
Systemic Tensions	Barriers	“Teachers won't make an effort to pronounce words properly... if the teachers are not pushing it, it's hard to spread to the students.”
	Tokenism	“Sometimes it feels like that [tokenism]... some of the school kind of looks down on kapa haka group, but then when they need us, that's when they want us.”

Table 2: Staff Participant Coding

This table provides the audit trail for data collected from senior leadership and teaching staff.

It focuses on strategic direction, policy, and institutional barriers.

Theme	Code	Participant Quote
Defining Success	Educational Success	“Students who leave our institutions with options and opportunity... producing good people who can operate freely and happily in the world.”
	Educational Success	“It is academic qualifications for life opportunities... we want them to have the choice of what they do next. That's what success looks like.”
	Māori Educational Success	“Being secure and confident about who you are and gaining some qualifications along the way... our kids need a seat at the table.”
	Māori Educational Success	“I’m always saying to the boys, it's okay to be Māori and it's okay to be smart. You can be both. We want them to excel as Māori.”

	Measurement of Success	“The Ministry wants numbers, but the whānau wants to know: is my boy safe? Is he proud? Is he coming home happy?”
	Measurement of Success	“How do you measure the mana of a boy who leads the haka? NCEA doesn't show that, but we know it's success in our context.”
	Academic Achievement	“We can't ignore the credits. They need those to get through the door. But it shouldn't be the only thing we look at.”
Systemic Critique	Barriers	“Even our curriculum prerequisites would deny students pathways. Uh, barriers, right? Remove barriers. Be open to remove barriers.”
	Barriers	“The data shows we are failing our Māori boys in University Entrance... we have to look at the system, not the boys. The system is the problem.”

	Barriers	“Institutional racism is a thing, we have to call it what it is and dismantle those prerequisites that stop our boys from getting into the top classes.”
	Gaps	“There’s a gap between what we say we want for Māori and what the system allows us to do. We’re fighting against a whitestream structure.”
Strategic Leadership	Leadership Action	“Part of our plan is to normalise what we do for Māori... what's good for Māori is good for all. Russell Bishop was on to it.”
	Leadership Action	“Appoint me because I’m a good leader... I really felt that from the board that they just wanted a good leader [who is Māori].”
	Leadership Action	“We want to always create systems and processes that are sustainable beyond the people... how do we sustain those ways of working?”

	Program / Pathways	“We’ve looked at our pathways. Are we just funneling Māori boys into trades? We need to make sure the academic pathway is just as clear.”
Relational Infrastructure	whānau Support	“It’s about bringing the whānau in, not just for the bad stuff, but for the celebration... that trust takes years to build.”
	whānau Support	“When the parents see themselves reflected in the school, the attendance goes up. They feel like they have a voice here.”
	Student/whānau Voice	“We have to listen. We can’t just assume we know what they want. The whānau voice has to drive our strategic plan.”
	Tuakana Teina	“The other big thing... has been a significant move from having horizontal tutor groups through to having vertical and that sense of belonging... and tukana teina, older boys supporting the younger boys.”

	Sense of Belonging	“So that all plays into their whole thing of trying to find ways to help make them feel they belong to this place.”
	Sense of Belonging	“It's our traditional things like boys lining up before they go to class, just those things that settle boys... boys thrive on competition... they can find their connections.”

APPENDIX 2: Letter to Schools

The Principal

School

Date

Dear

Thank you for agreeing in principle to participate in my research project. This letter is an invitation seeking your formal permission to invite volunteer participants from: a member of the school's Board, a member of your Senior Leadership Team, Kaumatua and a small group of Year 13 Māori students in leadership positions in your school. Please find included with this letter an information sheet and the consent forms that must be completed by those who wish to participate before I can begin collecting the data either through face-to-face interviews. Once the consent forms have been signed, I will be free to conduct the research as set out in the information sheet.

The working title of my research project is 'Educational Success of Māori Boys in English-Medium State New Zealand Boys' Schools. The main objectives of this research are to:

1. Understand the specific leadership practices employed in boys' state English Medium schools with the aim of promoting Māori student success.
2. Determine how these practices impact the educational success, cultural identity, and sense of belonging for Māori students.
3. Identify successful strategies and challenges faced by schools in achieving educational success for Māori students.

I am more than happy to meet with you and your Board to outline the rationale of my research or answer any queries you may have.

This project has been evaluated by peer review and judged to be low risk. Consequently, it has not been reviewed by one of the University's Human Ethics Committees. The researcher(s) named in this document are responsible for the ethical conduct of this research.

If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research that you want to raise with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact the Human Ethics Department at Massey University, email humanethics@massey.ac.nz.

Once again, thank you for your willingness to participate, and I look forward to meeting with you.

Yours sincerely

Greg Haines

APPENDIX 3: Consent Form

‘Educational Success of Māori Boys in English-Medium State New Zealand Boys' Schools’

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM – INDIVIDUAL

This consent form will be held for a period of five (5) years.

I have read the Information Sheet and have had the details of the study explained to me. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time. I understand that I have the right to withdraw from the study at any time and to decline to answer any particular questions. I agree to provide information to the researcher on the understanding that my name and the name of my school will not be used without my permission.

I wish/do not wish to have my recordings returned to me.

I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.

Signature:

Date:.....

Full Name - printed

APPENDIX 4: Information Sheet for Participants

‘Educational Success of Māori Boys in English-Medium State New Zealand Boys' Schools’

Information Sheet for Participants

Personal Introduction

Tena Koe, my name is Greg Haines. I am studying extramurally through Massey University for the Master of Education (Educational Administration and Leadership) degree. I was born in Napier and received my primary and secondary education. I am Pākehā, currently employed as Director of Boarding at St Peter’s Cambridge, having taught there since 2017. I have held this position as well as Deputy Principal, Operations and Curriculum. I also teach Mathematics and Economics to Year 13 in NCEA and the International Baccalaureate. Having been educated at Napier Boys’ High School and taught at Wellington College, boys' schools have been an essential part of my life. Coupled with the fact that I have two boys and my wife, who is also from Napier, Ngati Kahungunu, I feel obligated to give back to my community. Hence the rationale for this research into boys' education, specifically regarding Māori educational success as Māori.

Participant Identification and Recruitment

My assumption is that leadership is enacted by many people in many ways in the school community. For this reason, the Chair of the Board of Trustees, a member of the Senior Leadership Team, Kaumatua, and Year 13 Māori students in leadership positions of the three state and state-integrated English Medium secondary all-boys schools have been invited to participate in this project.

What is my involvement?

If you agree to participate in the research project, you will participate in one interview with me.

I will also gather some background information from the Senior Leadership and the Ministry of Education website to help describe the context in which the research is being carried out. This information will not be used in any way that allows your name or the school's exact location to be identified.

Interviews will be digitally recorded at a time and place you select.. The interview is expected to take between 45 and 60 minutes. You may request to review your transcript and are at liberty to edit this as you see fit.

What do I need to do next?

If you agree that you would like to take part, please sign the consent form and return to me prior to the start of the interview. The names of participants and their schools will not be identifiable in the thesis or reports and papers that may result from the research.

Participant's Rights

You are under no obligation to accept this invitation. If you decide to participate, you have the right to:

- decline to answer any particular question;
- ask any questions about the study at any time during participation;
- provide information on the understanding that your name will not be used unless you give permission to the researcher;
- access to a summary of the project findings when it is concluded.

This project has been evaluated by peer review and is considered low risk. Consequently, it has yet to be reviewed by one of the University's Human Ethics Committees. The researcher(s) named in this document are responsible for the ethical conduct of this research. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research that you wish to raise with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact the Massey University Human Ethics Department at humanethics@massey.ac.nz.

APPENDIX 5: Interview Schedules

‘Educational Success of Māori Boys in English-Medium State New Zealand Boys' Schools’

Interview Schedule

Student Leadership

1. Introduction:

As I said in the Information Sheet, the research aims to contribute to a broader understanding of leadership practices through several layers of leadership at boys' state English Medium schools undertaken to raise and promote educational success, leadership, and achievement for Māori students.

I am talking to the leadership of three boys' schools, including key leadership members: The Board, Senior Leadership, Kaumatua and, of course, yourselves. Before we start, do you have any questions?

2. Background/Context

2.1 Tell me about your connection to culture or te Ao Māori. How has this connection developed while you have been at this school?

2.2 Can you describe your role as a student leader?

2.3 What motivated you to take on this leadership role?

2.4 Give me three words to describe:

- How do you feel/what you like about school?
- Is there anything you don't like about school?

3. Promoting Culture, Cultural Identity and a Sense of Belonging

As part of this research, I am interested in learning how the school promotes a sense of culture, cultural identity, and belonging and how that might impact student academic success.

3.1 How do you and your fellow student leaders promote a sense of belonging and cultural identity for Māori students at the school?

3.2 Are there any specific initiatives or events you've been involved in supporting Māori culture?

4. Impact on Student Achievement:

4.1 How do you think the actions of student leaders or your school's leadership can influence the academic achievement of Māori students?

4.2 Can you share any examples of how student leadership has made a positive impact on your peers?

4.3 What is the importance of gaining a Level 3 and UE qualification to you? How did you formulate this view?

5. Challenges & Support:

5.1 What challenges do you face in promoting Māori culture and identity among students?

5.2 How supported do you feel by the school's staff and leadership in your role?

Senior Leadership Team (SLT)

1. Introduction:

As I have said in the Information Sheet, the purpose of the research is to understand better how the leadership of boys' schools impact Māori boys' culture, cultural identity

and sense of belonging. I am talking to the leadership of three boys' schools, including key members of leadership: The Board, Senior Leadership, Kaumatua and, of course, yourselves. Before we start, do you have any questions?

2. Background/Context

2.1 Can you describe your role within the SLT?

2.2 How long have you been in this position?

2.3 What is your definition of educational success? How do you describe 'educational success'?

2.4 What is your definition of Māori educational success as Māori'?

How do you describe educational success as Māori'?

2.5 Describe how 'educational success' is measured and reported on in your school?

What are the criteria against which success is measured and reported?

3. Leadership/School Practices:

3.1 Describe how 'educational success' is measured an[d] reported...

3.2 How does the SLT actively support and promote the educational success of Māori students?

3.3 What specific strategies or plans does the SLT have in place to improve the educational success of Māori students?

How are Māori involved in the development and setting of these strategies and plans?

3.4 Describe what educational success as Māori looks like in your school and how is this measured?

How are Māori involved in deciding what success as Māori looks like?

How are Māori involved in deciding how this success is recorded and reported?

Can you share any examples of successful initiatives or programs that have contributed to this success?

What are the criteria against which success is measured and reported?.

3.5 What specific leadership actions have the SLT implemented to enhance the sense of belonging and cultural identity among Māori students?

3.6 What specific strategic plans and goals does the school have in place related to Māori students achieving educational success as Māori?

How are Māori involved in the development and setting of these goals and plans?

3.7 What other specific strategic goals and plans does the school have around educational success in gene...