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An Investigation into Māori students' academic disengagement
from the Mainstream Education system and re-engagement in
the Alternative Education system

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to understand the academic disengagement and re-engagement process from the perspective of Māori students enrolled in New Zealand Alternative Education (AE). Specifically, this study focused on students' perceptions of the factors that influenced their lack of success in the mainstream school setting, the motivational and engaging factors that lead to them enrolling in an alternative education school, and the factors that are maintaining their success either in the Alternative Education setting or back in mainstream education. Six Māori students participated in semi-structured interviews. The criteria for selection were that the students had shown positive re-engagement to their academic learning. The main barriers to student success in mainstream education were their poor attendance along with disruptive behaviour. Students did not feel that teachers and peers in mainstream believed they could do the work and they lacked self-efficacy while attending mainstream in that they could not perceive themselves achieving academically. The findings from this study confirm what the literature suggests, in that becoming academically disengaged is a process taking place over a period of several years and not a one off event. Interpreting the 'voices' of the students strongly suggested that early intervention in addressing issues of academic engagement could reduce the number of students disengaging from mainstream education. Students interviewed in this study retrospectively became aware of the negative effect of their behaviour on their learning in mainstream after experiencing the Alternative Education. Students developed a new sense of self belief and determination and the new engagement with their academic work seemed to directly fuel even further motivation to succeed at their schoolwork. The Alternative Education system was highly beneficial and directly responsible for the students re-engaging in their academic learning.

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Glossary

Coding: The process of examining data, identifying and noting aspects that relate to the research question.

Contextualism: A theoretical approach informing some qualitative research, which assumes that meaning is related to the context in which it is produced.

Critical Realism: A research paradigm that recognizes an obdurate reality of fixed structures juxtaposed with the individuals' ability to construct their own reality and influence change.

Data (raw): Material generated and collected through student interviews.

Data Analysis: The application of techniques in the treatment of generated and collected data for achieving research outcomes.

Epistemology: A branch of philosophy concerned with the study of knowledge.

Hermeneutics: The theory and practice of interpretation.

Idiographic: An approach to knowledge production which is based on the specific and the individual, rather than the shared and generalizable.

Interpretation: A process of making sense of, and theorizing the meanings in, data; goes beyond summarizing the obvious semantic content of data and puts an interpretive framework around it.

Ontology: The study of the being, concerned with concepts of existence and reality.

Paradigm: Frameworks that represent a shared way of thinking in respect of how the world is viewed and how knowledge is generated from that perspective.

Phenomenology: The careful and systematic reflective study of lived experience.

Positivism: The underpinning paradigm for scientific research that asserts the existence of a single reality that is there to be discovered.

Postmodernism: A paradigm for the conduct of research that posits that the reality of a phenomenon is subjectively relevant to those who experience it.

Post positivism: A paradigm that rejects the concept of a measurable reality that exists in isolation of the observer.

Pseudonym: A fake name used in the place of a real name, to protect a participants' Anonymity.

Qualitative Research: A research tradition that relies primarily on inductive approaches to the treatment of data, usually in the form of words, to explicate an understanding of phenomena of interest from the perspective of those who experience it.

Realism: An ontological and epistemological position which assumes that the world has a true nature which is knowable and real, discovered through the experience and research; that we 'know' an object because there are inherent facts about it that we can perceive and understand.

Reflexivity: An active systematic process used by the researcher in order to gain insight into their work that will guide future actions and interpretations.

Relativism: A theoretical position that holds that there are multiple, constructed realities, rather than a single, knowable reality; holds that all we have is representations of accounts of what reality is and that at least epistemologically all accounts are of equal theoretical values, there is no foundation on which to claim some version of reality as more true and right than another version.

Rich Data: Data which provides detailed complex and contradictory accounts about the research subject.

Rigour: Control of the process employed in a study in order to accommodate or explain all factors that can impact on, and thereby potentially erode, the value of research outcomes.

Semantic Code: This refers to the data-driven code. For example, the succinct account of participant interviews.

Subjectivity: Peoples' sense of themselves; their way of being in, and relating to, the world.

Thematic Analysis: A form of analysis which has the theme as its unit of analysis, and which looks across the data from many different sources to identify them

Transcription: The process of turning audio data into written text, so that data can be systematically coded and analysed.