SpLD - Silent Learning Difficulties?

Factors influencing literacy learning of Māori students, as identified by teachers, SENCo, and parents

By

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Abstract

This qualitative research study, conducted in primary English-medium schools in a mid-sized, central New Zealand city, uses mixed-methods to investigate the factors that teachers, special education needs coordinators (SENCo), and parents identify as influencing Māori student literacy learning. It looks at the prevalence of discourse around specific learning difficulties (SpLD), and whether the different parties consider SpLD as a potential reason behind low literacy achievement among Māori students. The motive for the study is to begin a conversation around the possibility of SpLD being overlooked in favour of socio-cultural understandings of literacy learning. It uses a critical theory lens and touches on the potential influence of unconscious bias amongst participant teachers. Data collection methods included an online survey, sent to all of the schools in the area for teaching staff to complete, interviews conducted with teachers and SENCo, both online and in person, and focus groups with groups of parents, in neutral and welcoming environments. There are three significant findings, and the study concludes that teachers, SENCo, and parents tend to look for social and cultural causes where there is low literacy achievement amongst Māori students. The three main findings are that teachers look 'outwards', to influences on literacy learning such as socioeconomic status, transiency, home background, and oral language development. Secondly, both teacher and parent participants generally do not consider specific learning difficulties as one of the main influences on literacy learning. There seems to be a lack of confidence amongst teachers in supporting students who have been identified as having a SpLD. The final major finding was that teachers, SENCo, and parents all agreed on and promoted the importance and value of relationships between teacher and child, and whānau as underpinning the student's learning.

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Kaua e rangiruatia te hāpai o te hoe;
E kore tō tātou waka e ū ki uta.

Don't paddle out of unison;
Our waka will never reach the shore.

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Table of Contents

List of Tables

Introduction

"And he stood up in front of everyone and announced "I'm not going". And everyone was like, what?"

<div align="right">*Focus Group Participant*</div>

When a young man stood up in front of his whānau, who had gathered to celebrate and present him and his teammate with money they had raised for a World Rugby Trip, it was to inform his whānau that he would not be going. The rugby dream was halted, because the young man struggled so badly with reading and writing, that he refused to go through the airport because of the forms. It is now thought that the man has dyslexia, but it remains as yet, not formally diagnosed.

The anecdote related above emerged during one of the focus groups held with Māori parents during the course of this research study. It tells of an under-researched area, that of Māori and Specific Learning Difficulties, and it points to a possibility that too many Māori children are not receiving the support they need to successfully navigate the education system. The hypothesis that Māori students were not being helped in the most appropriate way developed into the question, what *are* the factors that teachers, SENCo, and parents identify as influencing Māori student literacy achievement? Are Specific Learning Difficulties, such as dyslexia, being thought about? The media has often referred to the "long tail of achievement", so what are the potential causes of lower Māori literacy levels?

Many of New Zealand's current education inequalities can be traced back through history. The goal of Māori education has changed as time has passed. When the European settlers first arrived, the goal was to teach Māori the Christian Bible; it was 'salvation'. As time passed, Māori education became a way to teach Māori how to be more 'civilised'; education was a way to European civilisation (Caccioppoli & Cullen, 2006). The introduction of Native Schools in 1867 was a tactic of the European settlers to encourage assimilation of Maori - modelling European behaviour and activities (Human Rights Commission, n.d.). The subjects taught were less 'academically demanding' - Māori were trained for

labour, and forced to speak English. The purpose of education then was to help Māori contribute to society, but the persistent stereotyping meant that Māori were only believed to be fit for work in factories or at the docks (Caccioppoli & Cullen, 2006). In the 1960s, 'Native Schools' were phased out, until 1969 when most were either abolished, or placed under Education Board control (Archives New Zealand, 2019). The Education Act of 1877 established free and compulsory education (state schooling) for all children up to Year 8 (about 12 years old), and developed a decentralised, locally-run education system (Ewing, 1972). For Māori, the Education Act 1877 meant that, theoretically, they would have the same chances as the European children. Unfortunately, this was not the reality, as the Native schools merely taught a simplified version of the state curriculum, and continued to train Māori for labouring jobs. The Native Schools were under the control of the Department of Native Affairs until 1880, where the responsibility of the schools was given to the Education Department. The early 1900s were a time of gradual language loss, and separation of Māori and European students.

While the segregation may have technically ended, the education system is built on these enduring inequalities. Maori (and other non-Pakeha students) face multiple systemic barriers before they can even begin to achieve academically (Reynolds, 2017). However, it is also vital to not always rely on a deficit view of Maori achievement. Though less common, within the education discourse are those studies that take a decidedly positive understanding of Maori literacy. Marshall (2012) conducted a study on the engagement of Maori readers, but focused deliberately on the students in her class that were enjoying reading a variety of texts at varying levels. In looking for what *was* working, the study shows it is possible to start finding solutions for a complex issue, without focusing solely on why students are not achieving as highly as their peers. Bishop and Berryman (2006) conducted a piece of research with Māori students that highlights treatment of Māori students in schools more recently. It outlines, through narratives of students, the repeated incidents of racism they have encountered through their schooling. The literature shows that while some progress has been made, Māori students still face many of the same challenges that they have encountered for years. The necessity of this research project then, is apparent - the conversation must continue until Māori students are provided with an education system that

suits and supports their needs effectively. In 2003, Durie wrote about the commitment Māori have to education, as demonstrated by the interest and significance of the Hui Taumata Matauranga, which wanted "better targeted support from government, but delivered by Māori organisations" (Hill, 2009, p. 203).

This thesis uses a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods to investigate the discourse of teachers, SENCo, and parents, around the topic of Māori student literacy achievement. A survey, interviews, focus groups, and literature have been drawn on to determine what is being spoken about, and what is not really being mentioned. It found that Specific Learning DIfficulties are much less likely to be blamed than factors of a more social or cultural nature, such as relationship with the teacher, or home background. Chapter One is a review of the literature, and situates the study in the literature gap. The methodological framework, and details of data collection and participants are covered in Chapter Two. Chapter Three relates the three main findings of the study; social and economic influences, a silence around specific learning difficulties, and an acknowledgement of the importance of relationships. The findings are explored further and placed in a wider context in Chapter Four, and Chapter Five discusses the conclusions and implications of the study.

Chapter One: Literature Review

The review of the literature is used to situate the study amongst the discourse of Maori achievement in literacy, in New Zealand schools. A range of literature is used to define the use of literacy, and its importance to scholarly dialogue. The study is then placed in the New Zealand context, with the review covering studies of Māori education which identify the presence of structural racism, and teacher biases. There is a tendency in the literature to focus on socio-cultural reasonings for differences in Māori achievement, especially in literacy. The focus on Māori education is also found in the literature on Māori being able to learn as Māori - the strategies that have been put in place to try combat the effects of the education systems set up by the European settlers. The New Zealand Government's attitude toward the importance of literacy is demonstrated through the National Education Goals, and a focus on New Zealand's positioning in global studies.

The review also considers literature on Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLD). Most of the SpLD literature does not focus on potential differences between cultural groups, or whether some groups are over/under-identified with SpLD. This is a major gap in the literature that this study aims to address in a small way. Although the literature search conducted was fairly extensive, it is of course possible some studies on Māori with Specific Learning Difficulties have been missed. The attitudes of parents, educators, and the Government towards literacy and its necessity, and Specific Learning Difficulties are also included, as these set the scene for how strategies are implemented, or maintained. As there are various ways to test for specific learning difficulties, the review touches on the different tests. Also included is a review of the literature on literacy teaching theories - the debate over whether whole language or a phonics based approach is better also has an impact on students, particularly those with Specific Learning Difficulties, as different methods may be better for students with SpLD. Similarly, literature on the different types of support in New Zealand are explored, with a strong consensus of the literature that implementing phonics-based learning at an early age will mitigate some (or most) of the impact a SpLD has on a student's literacy learning.

Lastly, I also explore recent developments in New Zealand as a result of the 2018 review of the education system. The review concludes by identifying the gap in the literature, and the research aims of this thesis.

1.1   What is Literacy?

In order to discuss the underachievement of English literacy, the concept of literacy must be determined. The literature has varying opinions, and a definition depends on how narrow the researcher's understanding is.

Originally, literacy was used to describe someone who was educated or familiar with literature (UNESCO, 2006). During the 19th Century, it became associated with the ability to understand and create written text (UNESCO, 2006). In recent times, literacy has become a type of social practice, with the development of plural 'literacies', in which participants need to be familiar with the social context of different types of text to fully gain understanding (e.g. posts on social media platforms) (Davies, 2012). Though an important idea, in this thesis I restrict the use of literacy as a term relating to reading and writing of the English language, though this includes interacting with different types of texts. *Effective Literacy Practice in Years 1 - 4* outlines three areas that comprise literacy; learning the code, making meaning, and thinking critically (Ministry of Education, 2016). These aspects are expanded on in the New Zealand Curriculum, which discusses students' ability to understand the English language allowing them to apply appropriate language choices, and critically evaluate texts (Ministry of Education, 2015, p. 16).

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) runs the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). The global education survey defines literacy as the "ability to understand, use and reflect on written texts in order to achieve one's goals, develop one's knowledge and potential, and to participate effectively in society" (OECD, 2003). This definition corresponds to the New Zealand Curriculum concepts of understanding and applying the code. It also highlights the perceived value of literacy as a whole - a student needs to be literate in order to participate in modern society successfully. The importance of

literacy is apparent in other explanations of literacy, such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO).

Literacy's perceived importance in New Zealand education has been well established over time, particularly in recent years. New Zealand was considered a world leader in literacy learning during the early 21st century, partly due to the global recognition Marie Clay received for her work on the Reading Recovery programme (Mowat, 1999). In 2000, the Ministry of Education set up a literacy and numeracy strategy for New Zealand schools. One result of this was a Literacy Taskforce - a group that set up a Literacy Leadership initiative in New Zealand. The initiative was an intervention study, and consisted of teachers being given extra professional development surrounding reflecting on teaching practice, and implementing initiatives specifically focused on reaching literacy goals (Tunmer et al. 2013).

The factors that teachers, SENCo, and parents link to Maori underachievement in literacy will presumably be reflective of their opinions on literacy. The National Education Goals set by the New Zealand Government require the development of high levels of competence in certain subjects, including literacy and numeracy (Ministry of Education, 2018). Science, Technology, and Physical Education are also included - these five areas are generally the 'main' or compulsory ones at schools (Ministry of Education, 2018). The emphasis on these over other subjects such as Music or History links into other criteria of the New Zealand curriculum - that students emerge from their schooling years as functional and productive members of society. Literacy is considered a vital tool in this, as "Literacy is the ability to understand, respond to, and use those forms of language required by society and valued by individuals and communities" (NZ Curriculum Update, 2012). The New Zealand Government views the ability to understand and use the English language as essential to learning (NZ Curriculum Update, 2012). This attitude influences other areas of Government interest into Education, such as a focus on Māori literacy achievement, or New Zealand's positioning in PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study) (Ministry of Education, 2017). As well as PIRLS, there have been other longitudinal studies, both international and national, into student attitudes towards literacy, including the Programme for

International Student Assessment (PISA). E-AsTTle assessments (a standardised assessment tool available free to New Zealand schools) also ask students questions about their attitude towards literacy (Ministry of Education, n.d.).

Literacy, as in much of education, has many varied approaches. While the so-called 'Reading Wars' have lessened somewhat in recent years, educators continue to differ in their preference, debating over the approaches known as Whole Language, and Phonics (Collins, 1997). Whole language proponents favour a more holistic method of teaching literacy - words are learnt in context of other language, and while sounds are given time, they are linked more to meaning and building strategies for reading as a 'whole', rather than each individual word (Collins, 1997). The phonics approach is sometimes considered as the antithesis of whole language, but supporters of the whole language approach consider this to be an unfair judgement (e.g. Manning & Kamii, 2000). Whole language, while considering a broader view of language than the phonics approach, does promote teaching students phonological awareness, phonics, and being able to blend and separate the smaller sounds within language, but also includes tasks such as shared reading or journal writing, rather than repetition of certain sounds and words (Manning & Kamii, 2000).

Phonics proponents highlight the necessity of being able to decode written language by breaking down words into their sounds, or phonemes. The understanding of phonemes is then strongly linked to the graphemes (letters) of each sound. The phonics approach begins with the development of phonemic awareness - the smallest parts of speech (Tompkins, Campbell, Green, & Smith, 2015). Phonological awareness is being aware that different sounds make up language, and being able to separate sounds of speech into their smallest parts, as well as manipulating parts of speech to create new words (Tompkins, Campbell, Green, & Smith, 2015). The following stage is the teaching of phonics - defined as the sounds associated with the written symbol of language (Law & Ghesquière, 2017). Students who struggle with identifying these parts of language are more likely to experience difficulty learning to read (Law & Ghesquière, 2017; Tompkins, Campbell, Green, & Smith, 2015). Alternatively, culture and social environment have a significant role in interpreting language so encouraging and

teaching within the text's context (as whole language does) makes it more likely to be understood (Davidson, 2010). Davidson (2010) also promotes a cognitive understanding of literacy, but within a socio-cultural context, in a blending of theories that I have adopted for the current study.

1.2 Māori in the New Zealand education system

The literature that investigates Māori achievement, both generally and literacy specifically, have tended to focus on socio-cultural solutions. For example, the work of Bishop and Berryman (2006) found that there were culturally responsive reasons for lower Māori achievement than their Pākehā peers, and developing cultural responsiveness in teachers was the solution. Drawing on the knowledge that students bring with them to the classroom - their 'funds of knowledge' - is an essential aspect of teaching (Hogg, 2011; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). However, many teachers fail to implement in their practice ways to engage students who are not from similar backgrounds to themselves (Zipin, 2009). The majority of New Zealand teachers identify as European, and are more likely to be female (Smith, Pohio, & Hoeberigs, 2018). Māori and Pasifika student populations have risen however, resulting in a mismatch of culture in the classroom (Smith, Pohio, & Hoeberigs, 2018). Teachers can be unaware of how their expectations influence their approach to planning, content, or assessment (Timperley & Robinson, 2001). The idea that teachers hold unconscious bias has been explored further, such as Fiarman (2016), and Staats (2016), in addition to teachers having lower expectations for students who identify with Māori and Pacific Island groups (Rubie-Davies, Hattie, & Hamilton, 2006). Lower expectations and unconscious bias are related to a wider societal issue; structural racism. While Pack, Tuffin and Lyons (2016) found that many studies focus on Pakeha perspectives rather than Māori, those that did speak with Māori participants argued that Māori experience assumptions of criminality, lesser intelligence, and lower educational ability (Pack, Tuffin, & Lyons, 2016). These factors relate to the stereotypes that Māori students experience in schools, such as beliefs about poor home life, lack of family interest in learning literacy, and a belief that Māori students were less capable of working at an appropriate level of difficulty (Timperley & Robinson, 2001). My own study investigates the factors that teachers, SENCo, and parents identify as contributing

to Māori literacy achievement, and presents the potential for participants to identify factors that influence achievement positively and negatively. The current discourse around Māori education suggests that in addition to ensuring suitable culturally responsive processes are carried out, it will be prudent to watch for evidence of bias, stereotyping, and racism in participant answers, without pre-determining the presence of these concepts from people's comments.

Durie (2003) also supported the idea of Māori learning as Māori, a concept that has become accepted in the Government's education strategies for supporting Māori achievement in New Zealand. Māori as Māori learners is part of a three part programme, labelled *Ka Hikitia - managing for success 2008-2012*; *accelerating success 2013-2017*, and *Ka Hikitia - realising Māori potential 2018-2022*. In 2017, a group of 10 Māori, Samoan, and Tongan students worked with Dr Ann Milne to produce and present a piece of research, focusing on the New Zealand Government's implementation of the Investing in Education Success (IES) policy. The "Warrior Researchers" discuss the impact of policies such as this on their school and lives - reflecting on how various Governmental decisions impact communities that have been marginalised, such as that of South Auckland (Kia Aroha College Warrior Researchers, 2018).

1.3   Māori students: mainstream performance, Māori as Māori learners

Māori performance in mainstream schooling has been a subject of concern for the New Zealand Government for several decades. Despite a focused approach, many Māori remain disproportionately behind Pakeha peers (Ngati Kahungunu Iwi Incorporated, 2014). *Te Kotahitanga* (discussed below) explored solutions to the identified problem of low Māori academic achievement in comparison to Pākehā students (Bishop, Berryman, Tiakiwai, & Richardson, 2003). The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), 2015 also outlined that although Māori students were represented at all levels of proficiency, there was a relatively high proportion of Māori in the lower levels of proficiency (May, Flockton, Kirkham, Comparative Education Research Unit, & Ministry of Education, 2016).
In response to these ongoing concerns, *Ka Hikitia - Managing for Success 2008 - 2012*, and its successor *Ka Hikitia - Accelerating for Success 2013-2017*

(extended to the end of 2018) were strategies announced by the New Zealand Government to promote Māori Achieving Success as Māori (Ministry of Education, 2019). *Tātaiako*, based on the principles developed in *Ka Hikitia*, is a resource document for teachers from Early Childhood, Primary, and Secondary schools, providing examples of behaviour that teachers of various experience can implement, and what the results may look like (Ministry of Education, 2011). There is a focus on developing competencies that will support and enable Māori students to learn as Māori (Ministry of Education, 2011).

Prominent New Zealand scholars such as Russell Bishop and Mere Berryman write about the ways that Māori students learn and the challenges they face in school. *Te Kotahitanga* started in 2001, and was a research based professional development programme for teachers, developed and implemented in schools throughout New Zealand. Led by the Māori education research team of the University of Waikato, phase one consisted of a smaller scale test study (Bishop, Berryman, Tiakiwai, & Richardson, 2003). The research team collected data through collaborative storying from Year 9 and 10 Māori students, as well as parents of the students, finding that the quality of face-to-face relationships and interaction between the teachers and Māori students had the most impact. Data was also collected from teachers and principals of the students, and the study concluded that from the teachers' understanding, the major influences were the children, their whānau situations, and systemic/structural issues. From this initial phase, *Te Kotahitanga*, a professional development programme, was developed and implemented as a trial in schools. *Te Kotahitanga* helped teachers to critically reflect on their deficit theorising towards Māori students, and how such theorising negatively impacts Māori student learning. *Te Kotahitanga* is based around cultivating an Effective Teaching Profile - six aspects of Māori kaupapa that are strongly transferable to the education of all students. The Profile is made up of Manaakitanga, Mana Motuhake, Nga Whakapiringatanga, Wananga, Ako, and Kotahitanga, to form a Culturally Responsive Pedagogy of Relations (Bishop, Berryman, Powell, & Teddy, 2007). There are main goals of the PLD programme, but essentially these translate into building strong relationships with students, having and maintaining high expectations, and allowing and encouraging student agency. The programme also promotes the importance of allowing teachers to

experience situations in which teachers are shown, and can practice, strategies to adjust their classroom interactions (Bishop, Berryman, Tiakiwai, & Richardson, 2003)

Bishop (2017) states that socio-economic status was not a major factor at his first school, as nearly all of the families were working class, yet many of the Māori and Pacific Island students were consistently achieving at a lower level than the Pākehā students. Bishop outlines how the main reasons he was given for this phenomenon, both at the time (1970s/80s), and later in his research during the early 2000s, were persistently the same. Teachers told Bishop that Māori were culturally deprived, that they had no books in their homes, that parents and whānau were not interested in their children's learning, and that the students were not interested in gaining an education. Bishop relates how, while teaching, he found these reasons to be insufficient excuses for students that he felt were actively involved in their culture and whānau. As he grew to know the students, he found that their classroom experiences were mainly negative, and that the students were "the recipients of their teacher's 'cultural deprivation' theorizing about them" (Bishop, 2017, p. 8).

1.4   What are Specific Learning Difficulties?

General Learning Difficulties (LD), which are related to an overall developmental delay and low IQ, are slightly different to Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLD). Specific Learning Difficulties are diagnosed as present when a child's learning is significantly behind the expected achievement for their general cognitive ability, in a specific area of learning (Hall, 2008). There is also a noted difference between terms used in different countries; in Canada and the United States of America, learning disabilities can be used, while in the United Kingdom, disabilities relates more to intellectual disability (Woodcock & Hitches, 2017; Rohl & Milton, 2002).

SPELD NZ (Specific Learning Difficulties New Zealand) is a registered charity that provides resources and support to those with all Specific Learning Difficulties, though in general, dyslexia is the most commonly recognised and researched (Hall, 2008). The organisation estimates that around 10% of the population are

affected by dyslexia to a certain extent (SPELD, n.d.). The Dyslexia Foundation of New Zealand also states that a cautious estimate would be that 1 in 10 New Zealanders are dyslexic (Dyslexia Foundation of New Zealand, 2014). Studies overseas found similar numbers in Australia (10%), and the United Kingdom (6%-8%) (Firth, 2011). More broadly diagnosed Specific Learning Difficulties are estimated at 15% of the British population (Woodcock & Hitches, 2017).

Defining dyslexia is a more difficult task, with Worthy, Salmerón, Long, Lammert, and Godfrey (2018) stating that despite more than a century of research, defining, identifying, and intervention of dyslexia are yet to be made clear. Across the literature, it is commonly accepted that a difficulty in decoding phonetics and phonological processes is where the root of the problem lies, compounded by difficulty in retrieval, spelling, and comprehension, particularly of written text (Worthy et al., 2018). There is not yet a definition that suits all, nor a single way that dyslexia presents itself - which leads to the trouble that educators and specialists have in diagnosing students - as dyslexic, a mix of difficulties, or a learning disability more related to impaired intelligence.

My sister, who has been diagnosed with dyslexia, explained it as "something that makes it harder to read and write and put your ideas out. [It's] like having a wall in your brain, and a small hole" - To her, having dyslexia means that it "takes a bit longer to get through the hole" (personal communication). The understanding that having a Specific Learning Difficulty does not reflect ability or intelligence is strongly promoted throughout the literature. The New Zealand Government released a resource for educators, *About Dyslexia* which points out that across modern definitions of the term 'dyslexia', the difficulties are "unexpected and persistent", and they do not appear to match the student's cognitive function (Ministry of Education, 2008). The idea that dyslexia is not an illness, or even a learning difficulty is endorsed by the Dyslexia Foundation of New Zealand, which states that Dyslexia is, at its core, a learning preference (Dyslexia Foundation of New Zealand, 2006) The concept is taken from work by scholar Neil Mackay, who defined dyslexia as "a specific learning difference that may cause unexpected difficulties in the acquisition of certain skills" (Mackay, 2004, p. 223). This raises the question of whether teachers who understand dyslexia as a different way of

approaching work are more inclined to provide a student with the appropriate support - rather than, for example, attributing the poorer achievement to lack of effort.

The *About Dyslexia* resource also highlights the issue in the discourse of terms being used interchangeably (p. 8). The lack of clear definition across schools, researchers, and countries has resulted in multiple groups being identified collectively as either Learning Disabilities, or Specific Learning Difficulties, such as English as Second Language learners, students with intellectual disabilities, and students with learning difficulties (Firth, 2011). Without a clear understanding of what a student may have difficulty with, it is less likely they will receive the most appropriate support. For example, Firth reported that some Australian teachers were unaware that Specific Learning Difficulties are not a result of poor intelligence (2011). And a more recent publication argues that for example, legislation now means that teacher educators in Connecticut, USA, must allocate a certain amount of coursework to dyslexia (Gabriel, 2018). While dyslexia has become recognised more widely, there are still teachers that disagree with its existence, seeing it instead as an excuse for poor performance (Hall, 2008). In Ohio, United States, a group of parents worked together with a lawyer, because the Upper Arlington district was refusing to identify their children's dyslexia. The Ohio Department of Education agreed with the parents, ruling that the schools were in violation of law, and subsequently ordering them to train their staff on identifying learning disabilities (Hanford, 2018). The result was a shift in the district's teaching method - moving from whole language to phonics based instruction. In California, United States, there was also resistance to naming dyslexia, to the point where, in 2015, the federal government issued a directive to provide more support for students with the learning difficulty. In August 2017, state lobbying led parents and Decoding Dyslexia California resulted in guidelines being released for schools, explaining what dyslexia is, and how best to support student learning, a sign that the "era of denial should be coming to an end" (Adams, 2017, para. 8).

Worthy, Salmerón, Long, Lammert, and Godfrey (2018), argue that under Authoritative Discourse (AD), dyslexia can be distinguished from other decoding

difficulties. While dyslexia is a common Specific Learning Difficulty, not all students with SpLD have dyslexia. Although dyslexia is perhaps the most well-known, the term Specific Learning Difficulties includes others such as dyscalculia, dyspraxia, dysgraphia, dysnomia, auditory processing disorder, and visual perceptual difficulties (Hall, 2008). While all Specific Learning Difficulties are equally important and deserving of support (and students may also have overlaps between the different 'types'), this research does focus more on dyslexia than other learning difficulties. I have chosen to do this due to the wider focus on literacy learning that the research question takes. However, as stated by Horowitz (2004), all specific learning difficulties have an impact on all areas of a student's learning.

The Warnock Report 1978 introduced new terms for explaining student groups, beginning the move away from more medical labelling (Bowen & Ellis, 2015). In addition to a range of disabilities, learning difficulties were discussed in terms of a spectrum, from profound and multiple, to severe, followed by moderate, and specific (Norwich, Ylonen, & Gwernan-Jones, 2014). The idea of learning difficulties as being distinct from disability, as well as being seperated in severity is important, and Woodcock and Hitches (2017) also make the point to differentiate SpLD to General Learning Difficulties (GLD), which can include other reasons for student performance, such as a poor grasp of a second language, or a temporary lack of schooling. As stated, SpLD are present when students with average or above intelligence have difficulty processing specific areas of education, rather than an intellectual disability (Woodcock & Hitches, 2017).

1.5   Māori Specific Learning Difficulties

The literature on Māori with Specific Learning Difficulties is limited. New member information from SPELD (provided voluntarily by members, and many do not fill it out) shows that the ethnicity breakdown sits at around 92% Pakeha, and 4% Māori, with 1% and 2% Asian and Pacific Island groups respectively (J. Drummond, personal communication, 20 February 2018). While this cannot be considered a completely accurate picture of those diagnosed with a SpLD, it does provide an idea of who is accessing the external support available. This space in

the literature needs filling, as it is important to determine whether Māori are accessing in-school support, other organisations or types of external support, or if they are simply going without the necessary help.

1.6   Testing and Screening for Learning Difficulties

New Zealand schools have several options available for testing and screening for learning difficulties. In academic literature, a commonly used set of tests are the Woodcock Johnson III tests of Cognitive and Achievement Abilities (Bain & Gray, 2008; Cormier, McGrew, Bulut, & Funamoto, 2017). A range of Woodcock Johnson III tests are available to target different areas; Achievement, Cognitive, and Oral language are all available. The New Zealand Centre of Education Research (NZCER) recommends an Australasian version - Woodcock Johnson IV, stating that the tests are "a trusted, groundbreaking leader in individually administered assessment" (NZCER, n.d., para. 1). The tests can be used to evaluate a student's ability in various learning skills, such as oral language, cognitive ability, and achievement.

When designing tests and their interpretation, Cattell-Horn-Carroll (CHC) theory of cognitive abilities is the most commonly used (Cormier, McGrew, Bulut, & Funamoto, 2017). CHC theory provides a measure of human abilities; each ability is associated to a particular area of academic achievement (Cormier, McGrew, Bulut, & Funamoto, 2017). Some cognitive batteries have been based entirely on the CHC theory, and it is considered to be a robust and trustworthy tool for assessing student. The Kaufman assessment battery for cognitive development is one such example (Bain & Gray, 2008). Although Cormier, McGrew, Bulut, & Funamoto (2017) highlight the theory's position in the literature as an approved and extensive measurement of cognitive ability, they also emphasise that measurements such as these should not be solely relied on, as it could lead to incorrect assumptions about links between measures and areas of reading achievement.

In order to receive help, such as a reader/writer for exams, students in New Zealand must be formally diagnosed with a specific learning difficulty, and have

such support recommended for them (New Zealand Qualifications Agency, n.d.). However, there are multiple aspects that can cause difficulty in achieving this, or exclude it entirely. One of the options is a formal examination by an assessor - who should hold a Level C registration with an organisation such as NZCER (New Zealand Centre of Education Research) or LDANZ. The test is expensive, and may also require travelling out of town to meet with the assessor, and it takes several hours to complete - potentially requiring parents to take time off work, or find travel arrangements. There are various organisations outside of schools that provide support for Specific Learning Difficulties. SPELD NZ is a not-for-profit establishment that specialises in support for Specific Learning Difficulties, from diagnosis, to tuition, to training for teachers, SENCo, and whānau. Assessors are registered under the New Zealand Council of Educational Research, or NZCER (SPELD NZ, n.d.). The Learning Disabilities Association of New Zealand (LDANZ) also provides options for support, with members (both individual and companies) being able to be accredited under the LDANZ, and bringing together information about accessing support for the public (Learning Disabilities Association of New Zealand, 2019). The Dyslexia Foundation of New Zealand (DFNZ) is specifically for those with dyslexia, but they also provide information and tuition to those with other specific learning difficulties (SPELD NZ, n.d.). While SPELD, LDANZ, and DFNZ are the more prominent organisations, there are smaller companies throughout New Zealand available for diagnostic testing, learning support, and who can provide information to schools, educators, and whānau. For example, there are 15 registered assessors listed on the LDANZ site, as well as various companies, and registered teachers (Learning Disabilities Association of New Zealand, 2019).

1.7 Types of Support

If a student is diagnosed with a learning difficulty, they are usually eligible for some form of assistance, such as a reader/writer, the use of a computer, and/or extra time (NZQA, 2019). For this to be allowed during NCEA (National Certificate of Educational Achievement) exams, the New Zealand Qualifications Agency

(NZQA) requires a formal report and diagnosis from an approved assessor.[1] The student is then granted Special Academic Conditions (SACs), for use in both external and internal assessment (NZQA, 2019). These may be supported by a student's Individual Education Plan (IEP), which a school is able to provide for students who need specific help to reach academic goals, whether that is meeting curriculum criteria, or receiving extension work (Ministry of Education, 2011a). Within an IEP may be other forms of learning support. For example, a student may be assigned teacher aide hours, or attend in-school reading programmes (Ministry of Education, 2011a) such as Reading Recovery.

New Zealand gained fame for a reading support programme started by Marie Clay in the 1970s; Reading Recovery. As a country, our top reading results were amongst the best in the world (despite the persisting gap between our highest and lowest achievers), and other countries picked up the one-on-one reading accelerator (Mowat, 1999). However, some research suggests that Reading Recovery should be lauded less often; in a brief literature review, Chapman & Tunmer (2011) suggest that while Reading Recovery has been shown to have some benefits, these are lost within two years of leaving the programme. According to their research, Reading Recovery has a small impact on most children, but very few see any meaningful improvement, and it does not reduce deficiencies in phonological awareness or alphabetic coding - making it of little benefit to these students (Chapman & Tunmer, 2011). Despite these findings, which are contested, Reading Recovery continues to be funded and promoted by the New Zealand Government, with 2019 marking 40 years since its implementation (Sims, December 2018).

1.8   Recent Developments

Throughout 2018, the New Zealand government reviewed the education system. A portion of this was dedicated to SpLD, with the Education and Science Committee making an "*Inquiry into the identification and support for students with the*

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[1] NCEA is New Zealand's main qualification for High School. It consists of three levels (One, Two, and Three), which generally correspond to the three final years of secondary education. A student gains NCEA through a mixture of internal, in-school assignments, and external exams at the end of the year (nzqa.govt.nz/ncea/understanding-ncea/how-ncea-works/).

significant challenges of dyslexia, dyspraxia, and autism spectrum disorders in primary and secondary schools" (NZ Government, 2018). The committee made several recommendations, including the proposal of all students with SpLD being entered into a national database in order to better track their progress. The report found that schools are inconsistent with their support of learning needs. The 2012 Review of Special Assessment Conditions (SAC) further supports the finding that there is a lack of equity within access to Learning Support, finding that a student at a Decile 10 school was "7 times more likely to apply for SAC entitlements, compared with a student attending a decile one school" (Ministry of Education, 2014). The Review concluded that in order to benefit more students in the short term, the Ministry of Education and NZQA need to improve access to SAC. The Ministry of Education however, did not support many of the recommendations given by the Special Committee, citing reasons such as funding as being particularly prohibitive (Ministry of Education, 2016). Due to their overrepresentation in lower socioeconomic areas, it is possible that Māori are less likely to seek access to SAC, as the process is expensive.

In September 2018, the Government released a draft Disability and Learning Support Action Plan. The Select Committee Inquiry into Identification and Support for students with Dyslexia, Dyspraxia and Autism Spectrum Disorders was one of a range of sources used, as well as the 2015 Learning Support Update. The growing interest in learning support is reflective of a gradually changing attitude towards education needs such as SpLD. In November 2018, it was announced that 600 new "Learning Support Coordinator" positions would be created for New Zealand schools, starting in 2020. The role will be similar to that of a SENCo, but will be a dedicated member of staff, rather than a role that is often held as well as teaching or as deputy principal (Watkins, November 2018).

1.9   Research Aims

While there is a large body of literature on Specific Learning Difficulties, and a somewhat smaller, but still comprehensive discourse on Māori academic achievement, there is very little that overlap. This study aims to address this gap, and focuses on the dialogue that is occurring around what influences Māori

achievement in literacy. The existing literature acknowledges that there is a gap between Māori and non-Māori learners, but this is more commonly attributed to socio-cultural factors (e.g. Hall, 2008). Through a critical lens, I will investigate the factors that teachers, Special Education Needs Coordinators (SENCo), and parents identify as influencing Māori student achievement in literacy. By doing so, it will add a new layer to the discourse, beginning to establish if there are areas of support being overlooked, and which areas teachers, SENCo, and parents seem to be focusing on.

The main research question is

What factors do teachers, Special Education Needs Coordinators, and parents identify as influencing literacy achievement amongst Māori students?

To answer this question, I will use the following minor questions;

What are the levels of underachievement in literacy for Māori students in mainstream education up to Year 10?

How do teachers and SENCo describe student performance against the Literacy Learning Progressions?

What proportion of students diagnosed with learning difficulties are Māori? What kinds of literacy support are Māori students involved in, and is it school/parent initiated?

What are teachers/SENCos perceptions about learning difficulties amongst Māori students, and the type of literacy support they need?

How do teachers, SENCos, and parents describe Maori underachievement in literacy?

To what do teachers/SENCo/parents attribute Māori student underachievement in literacy?

Chapter Two: Methodology

Thoughts and opinions are often best explored through qualitative methods, which allow for a deeper explanation of a phenomenon (Johnson & Christenson, 2014). In order to investigate the conversations being held around Māori student literacy learning, it was appropriate to conduct interviews and kōrerorero with teachers, SENCo, and whānau. This qualitative study took a mixed methods approach, using aspects of both quantitative and qualitative methods. The research questions lead naturally towards a mixed methods approach, as they incorporate questions about perceptions, as well as quantitatively measurable aspects. A survey was distributed to all of the local English-medium schools, which allowed for an overview from which to base the following data collections of interviews. The interviews were a mix of individual (teachers and SENCo), and focus groups (parents and whānau).

Being aware of the history of New Zealand education is an important part of conducting education research. By having an in-depth understanding of what has occurred in the past, and how events relate to the Treaty of Waitangi, the research, and hopefully my own approach to conducting the research, becomes more authentically bicultural. Avoiding tokenistic uses of culturally responsive methods is of particular importance, as demonstrated by participant testimonies in Pack, Tuffin, & Lyons (2016).

This chapter will explain the methodological framework used, the context the study was conducted in, and the research design. The demographics of the participants are discussed, and the data collection process is detailed. The method of data analysis is outlined, and the ethical considerations are described.

2.1 Methodological framework

My research is based in Critical Theory, with an influence of Interpretivism. Interpretivism stresses that no research can be purely objective, as it is influenced by the researcher's own experiences and beliefs.

Interpretivism is often called anti-positivism, as it rejects the idea that social sciences could be approached in the same, objective manner found in the studies of natural sciences. While positivist ideas may have been part of the development of interpretivism (such as in the work of early British anthropologists, influenced by positivist Emile Durkheim), revisions began to arise, based on a new focus of appreciating the various meanings that humans give to actions (O'Reilly, 2008). A fundamental aspect of interpretivism is that it considers the actions of the individual, and the way they react to situations more strongly than how the societal structures are acting upon the individual (O'Reilly, 2008).

The researcher's understanding of concepts shapes how the social world under study is being interpreted, and is therefore important to take into account when analysing data. Interpretivism encourages this view, and subsequently helps to develop a more critical and reflexive piece of research (Green, Castanheira, & Yeager, 2011).

Critical theory is also relevant, as it encourages the critique of power imbalance and influence of social phenomena such as racial relations - bringing elements of Critical Race Theory into the data analysis (Sleeter, 2017). Critical theory involves reacting critically to the data, analysing the contextual factors, such as historical circumstances, social power and ideological and structural reasons a phenomenon may exist (Eketone, 2008). Although similar, Critical Race Theory (CRT), while useful for providing an insight into the far reaching consequences of racism, limits the research to interpretation entirely through race. There is no doubt that the impact of race and racism is present in New Zealand education, and the effects on society are huge. However, critical theory allows for a slightly wider investigation into societal factors, while still including racism and the societal consequences.

The use of both an interpretivist and a critical theory lens in this work is to enable the understanding of how individuals work within society, while also how aspects of society may influence them to respond in particular ways. A teacher's background and experience will influence them to respond to a child's need in a

certain manner, but critical theory allows for a deeper analysis of why they had that experience in the first place.

This research study takes a qualitative approach, drawing on indigenous methodologies, and using mixed methods to collect data. Indigenous methodologies such as Kaupapa Māori are considered an empowering form of research (Smith, 1999). Kaupapa Māori promotes rangatiratanga - self-determination (Berryman & Woller, 2013; Eketone, 2008; Mane, 2009). A personal belief that is backed very strongly by literature across multiple disciplines is that research involving indigenous peoples must be conducted in a manner that is culturally sensitive and appropriate. The use of a focus group for Māori parents is one way of including Māori in the research process. As a Pakeha researcher, it is necessary to ensure that the research is conducted *with* Māori, rather than *about*, and the focus group provides an opportunity for Māori parents to share their experiences. Kaupapa Māori is a methodology based in Māori concepts and approaches. It is a way of conducting research with Māori, so that the research is empowering and culturally responsive. Linda Smith refers to Kaupapa Māori as "it was what it was, it is what it is, and it will be what it will be"...a Kaupapa, rather than a methodology (Smith, 1999). Smith explores the concept as being a space within which research can be conducted, it informing all aspects of the work. She also highlights the importance of there being a positive outcome for Māori - that the research is beneficial. Kaupapa Māori has also been defined as "research by Māori, for Māori, and with Māori" (G. Smith, cited in Walker, Eketone, & Gibbs, 2006). In particular, it pushes against the treatment of Māori in research - which historically, has commonly resulted in a westernised, usually deficit comparison of Māori to non-Māori (Walker, Eketone, & Gibbs 2006). As Graham Smith explores (2004), education has been an empowering source of transformation for Māori, as the use of Kaupapa Māori has developed out of a desire to reclaim education to once again work for Māori students.

Although I draw on Kaupapa Māori ideas in this research, it does not directly use Kaupapa Māori, as I am not Māori. A major part of Kaupapa Māori is Māori taking back control over the research, and conducting it from a place of historical exploitation - an experience I cannot claim. However, culturally sensitive research,

developed from the work of Māori nurses, aims to fully respect and support the beliefs and practices of a cultural group (Walker, Eketone, & Gibbs, 2006). While there are similarities between the two methodologies, culturally sensitive research is able to be conducted by non-Māori (as well as with non-Māori groups). Also known as culturally responsive, or culturally safe research, it began as a way for Māori nurses to use their world-view in their nursing practice to better support the Māori community (Polaschek, 1998). I take it up here as a guide for my research approach and interactions.

2.2   Context of the Study

The research was conducted in a moderately sized, central North Island city, with a population between 60,000-70,000 people. This city has a high percentage of people who identify as Māori, at about 37%, compared to the national number of 15% throughout New Zealand (Statistics New Zealand, 2013). The schools involved in the study were all primary schools, with a mix of state-integrated contributing primaries, state contributing primaries, and two full primaries. The schools are described in more detail when this provides appropriate context to data, but identifying information has been withheld due to ethical concerns.

2.3   Research Design

Throughout the literature, there is a wide range of methodological theories used to conduct research. Understandably, the studies that cover similar topics are often carried out in similar ways. For example, researchers that work with Māori or other indigenous groups all tend to follow culturally sensitive methodologies, (e.g. Hindle, Savage, Meyer, Sleeter, Hynds & Penetito, 2011; Smith, Pohio, & Hoeberigs, 2018). Of course, this is a more recent development, as earlier colonial attitudes towards Māori resulted in harmful and biased research (Walker, Eketone, & Gibbs, 2006).

In her report, *Māori Pedagogies, a view from the literature*, Wharehuia Hemara (2000) links traditional Māori pedagogies to theoretical positions, such as Vygotsky. Hemara outlines the shift that occurred during the 19th century between

Pakeha and Māori - Pakeha grew to outnumber Māori, and reports of Māori life and beliefs were written by the European settlers. These reports were mostly written by men, and Hemara balances these views with the use of traditional Māori waiata, mōteatea, whakapapa, and kōrero tawhito. Establishing a mix of world-views is a vital step in helping to ensure that a piece of research provides a fair and complete understanding of a topic.

Teachers were asked to participate in the research because they spend extensive time with students, and are required to provide the necessary support for student learning. Rather than only speaking with classroom teachers, I chose to include SENCo as their role involves a more direct interaction and a potentially deeper knowledge of SpLD. It was important to include Māori parents, drawing on Kaupapa Māori and culturally responsive research methods, as discussed earlier. Participant recruitment is included in the upcoming data collection section (Section 2.5).

2.4   Demographics of Participants

All of the 44 teachers who participated in the survey had been teaching for at least five years, and 11 had been teaching between 15-24 years. There were also a fairly high proportion who had taught for 25+ years, with six having taught for between 25-34 years, and five for 35 years or more. This meant that the sample is biased more towards experienced teachers, than those who are just starting out, or have been through teacher training more recently. While outside of the scope of this study, there is potential future research looking into whether more recent training would impact discourse around factors that influence literacy learning for Māori.

Teacher participants in the survey (44 in total) were all from mainstream schools, although ten came from schools with Māori bilingual units. Two of these were teachers who work in the bilingual units, the other eight do not. The majority of participants were working in a contributing primary school (Years 0-6), with 33 participants indicating this was their current position. A further eight stated that they worked in a full primary (Years 0-8), and only two participants said they are in

an intermediate school (Years 7-8). The participants taught a range of ages within the primary school years - with a relatively even spread from new entrants to year six, although only five said they taught at Year 7 and 8. There were responses from three principals, and one teacher in a leadership team, as well as one who does Classroom Release Time (CRT) for teachers of Years 1-8, and works on a local iwi curriculum in the school.

Eight Māori parents participated. While my plan was to conduct focus groups, two parents submitted data through filling out a written question form. This approach was suggested by the parents as the method that suited them best. I spoke with another parent in a one-on-one situation, and held two focus groups with three and two parent participants respectively. All of these conversations were in comfortable environments, and were held in a relaxed conversational style, rather than a formal interview. The children of these parents attended a range of schools. All had at some point been in mainstream schooling, though one had been moved and was now at a Kura Kaupapa. Another parent had one child who attended a charter school, with a cultural focus, while his brother remained at a mainstream school. One parent said her child had moved between two mainstream schools, while another had a child in a mainstream high school, and three grandchildren - one in Kura Kaupapa, and the other two in mainstream schools. The parents had a range of employment - from not currently working, to teaching and early childcare, as well as retail. The socioeconomic status of the sample also varied, though this was not recorded data. All were mothers - I had no opportunity to speak with either both parents, or with the father of any children.

2.5   Data collection

Survey

Surveys are a useful data collection method. They allow for an overall summation of information and opinions, and can provide a starting point for later interviews. The survey was drafted and approved by the Human Ethics Committee, before I took it to one of the local high schools to pilot. This school was excluded from my main participant pool, due to ethical considerations. However, members of staff were happy to assist in the piloting of the survey. I visited the school, and several

teachers completed the survey, offering comments relating to improvement or confusion. These responses could be identified from the date of completion, and were later removed from the data.

The initial timing of the survey was not ideal with several factors meaning that the survey was ready to be sent out later than anticipated. As a result, I emailed it out in the final week of Term Two just as teachers were preparing for the school holiday. This first email was sent to the lead principals of the different Communities of Learning (CoL) within the city, as a way to engage a broader degree of interest. To access this information, I found the lead principals and their contact details listed publicly on the Education Counts website. This strategy was moderately successful, but did not achieve the response rate I hoped for, so I chose to wait until a few days into the following term (Term Three) before contacting schools again.

Throughout the project, I worked with a cultural advisor. Part of her professional role involves working with the local schools, and she was able to pass on a list of email contacts, which I used, along with emails found on school websites when necessary. The second round of school contacts was on a much larger scale. I emailed every school (43 schools) I hoped would participate, as well as following up with the CoL leaders by email. This was repeated four times over the course of two months. The fourth round of emails included a request to promote a parents evening. While responses were limited, it seemed that schools were not opposed to the idea of participating, but were either already conducting whānau hui, or were already committed to other school events. The response rate to the survey was relatively low, however, around a third of those who did respond expressed interest in participating in an interview. Of the replies from principals, all were willing to send the survey to their staff, and said they would promote the survey when they could. One sent a response only after the fourth email, explaining that they had sent the survey to their staff twice, and they believed several had completed it. Another was very supportive, but apologetic that an intense staff inquiry would be taking up much of the teachers' focus. The busy nature of teachers and schools was not unexpected, but the level to which it impacted the response rate was higher than I had anticipated. The demographic data indicates

that only no secondary school teachers completed the survey, which consequently changed the focus of the study to primary schools only. One high school principal replied, stating that their school and teachers would be too busy to participate.

<u>Interviews</u>

The surveys provided an opportunity for teachers and SENCo to volunteer for an individual interview. These were semi-structured, and the questions built on ideas covered in the survey. Participants were offered the choice of an online interview (using video conferencing programme Zoom), or an in-person interview. Each of the interviews lasted around an hour. Six interviews were conducted with teachers, one online, and five in person. Each of these were recorded and transcribed for analysis. Of the six teachers, only one held a position as SENCo. However, one was also an Across-Schools leader for their school's Community of Learning, for the Students With Additional Needs (SWANs), and another was both a syndicate leader (and was therefore leading the team's inquiry into Dyslexia), and an Across-Schools Coordinator, focusing on literacy.

<u>Kōrerorero - conversation</u>

I worked with a cultural advisor on the Kōrerorero aspect of data collection. I also had help from my Te Reo kaiako (Māori language tutor), who assisted in recruitment. Recruitment also occurred through the connections of my Aunt, and my Uncle's whānau. I was able to speak with a work colleague, who volunteered, and also organised a meeting with several of her friends and myself. Recruitment of parents was challenging, and I found it was best to work through personal contacts. Kaupapa Māori and indigenous methodology is based on groups of people working together; building and maintaining relationships is considered a foundation of Kaupapa Māori (Mane, 2009). The original plan of speaking with one group of parents was not possible, but separate groups were available at other dates. As a result, there was a mix of individual and group kōrerorero with parents.

One was held at our shared workplace, as the participant volunteered, and suggested we talked straight away. This interaction was relatively short, and was recorded and transcribed. A focus group was conducted with three mothers - two sisters and their cousin - and was held at my Aunt's house, as this was a familiar

and neutral zone for all of us. This particular informal conversation lasted just over two and a half hours, and was recorded. I was also able to work with one of the school's Whānau group. I was invited to one of their regular hui, at which I spoke about my research, and the help I was hoping to receive. It was suggested that I share the questions online, using the Whānau group's private Facebook page, and whānau could email me their responses. I did this and received two responses. Additionally, I spoke with colleagues who offered to ask their whānau and friends if anyone would either participate in a focus group, or fill out the question sheet. I was then able to hold another focus group with two more participants, again, in a neutral and relaxed environment - a cafe at a local centre.

An emphasis on being culturally sensitive throughout the research project was upheld, but particularly when interacting with Māori whānau. The meetings were informal and conversational, and were held in relaxed and familiar environments. To fit with this aim, food and drink were shared at each meeting. All meetings were recorded.

2.6 Data Analysis

In order to analyse the data, I collated the survey results into tables. I used the tools available on Qualtrics for the multiple choice questions, and created tables for the short answer questions in separate documents. Interview data were transcribed, but because the focus group data involved multiple participants (and were lengthier), I took notes while listening to the recordings multiple times, rather than transcribing. The interview transcriptions were printed, and I coded all of the data using different colours. Taking a thematic approach, I allowed the themes to emerge broadly, and naturally from the data (Swain, 2018). I also used the research questions to frame the themes I was interested in. After the first coding, I looked at which themes were similar to each other, and combined those that overlapped. I started with 20 coloured themes, and narrowed it down to five key findings, by looking across the three sources of data, and pulling out the themes that were most prominent and common. This method of triangulation increases the validity of qualitative studies (Johnson & Christenson, 2014). The five key findings identified were home background/socioeconomic status, oral language, positive

reinforcement/relationships, professional development/training, and engagement/student interest. During the planning process of drafting the findings chapter, it became evident that of these five themes, there were also overlapping areas. For example, oral language was combined with home background and socioeconomic status, as explored further on in this thesis. Using Google Sheets, I created a table with the three main findings. I sorted quotes from the interviews, focus groups, and surveys into these categories (teachers looking out, silence of SpLD, and importance of relationships), and colour coded them according to the data source. Throughout the data analysis, the findings are presented using low-inference descriptors, such as verbatim extracts. This approach promotes the reader's understanding of the participant's perspective (Johnson & Christenson, 2014).

2.7   Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations included working with participants in a safe and respectful, and culturally responsive manner. This was especially the case with parent participants. If I had not approached the parents in an appropriate way, they would not have participated. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the research at any point during the data collection process. Both names and locations have been anonymised, and any other identifying data has been left out, or replaced with a pseudonym. One of the local schools was not included in the survey invitation in case teachers felt pressured to participate due to personal connections to the school. The survey and interview questions were all considered thoroughly and approved by the Human Ethics Committee of Victoria University.

Chapter Three: Findings

The goal of the research was to investigate the factors that teachers, SENCo, and parents identify as influencing Māori student achievement in literacy. In this chapter, survey, interview, and focus group data has been collated and analysed, and divided into key findings. The majority of data around Māori student literacy achievement are related to various socio-cultural elements. While it would be false to imply that educators and parents are unaware of the impact of Specific Learning Difficulties, in these particular data, more emphasis appears to be placed on factors outside of teacher's control, such as home background, and early oral language of the students. Other areas of focus identified as factors influencing achievement include positive reinforcement and the importance of building a positive relationship with students, as well as gaining and maintaining student engagement.

Throughout the teacher data, there was a particular emphasis on socio-economic factors, and how these influence other social impacts. What a child experienced in their home was discussed as one of the most important indicators of how much a student may struggle with literacy. It was felt amongst participants that Māori students in a home that placed little value on education, or on literacy (as defined by participants) were more likely to struggle in class. There was such a focus on things such as transiency, socioeconomic status, and oral language development in the home, that there was very little said about specific learning difficulties. Despite being questioned around the topic, teachers were hesitant to talk about their confidence in identifying and working with SpLD, and were keen to explain that they were "not experts" on the issue. There was also very little discussed by parents, who, even when questioned, were reluctant to expand. Much of the reluctance related to a lack of confidence and understanding, but as with the teachers, parents were inclined to look for other explanations of learning struggles.

There is a mix of qualitative and quantitative data drawn on throughout the chapter. Survey data is used to provide contextual information around how teachers identify the level of a student's achievement, and actions they take when

the achievement is thought to be too low. Both interview and survey data discusses teacher confidence levels in various aspects of specific learning difficulties, and gives a brief overview of how teachers may perceive the students in their class based on socio-cultural factors, like ethnicity and home background. Data drawn from focus groups with parents is positioned throughout the findings in order to provide a point of view from both sides of the school gate. The main headings to be discussed follow the three major findings; Social and Economic Influences - Factors a Teacher is Unable to Control, the Silence Around Specific Learning Difficulties, and an acknowledgement of importance of relationships - a certain level of cultural responsivity.

3.1   Social and Economic Influences - Factors a Teacher is Unable to Control

"I feel a significant amount of the problem is the home. Whatever that home is, or lack of home"

-Interview participant

Home background and Socioeconomic Status

While each of the participants gave differing amounts of attention to the importance of home background, it was mentioned consistently throughout the data. The survey responses also demonstrate that teachers consider a child's home background to have one of the most significant influences on literacy learning. When asked about the impact that cultural background may have, most teachers adapted their answers to refer to home background - arguing that socio-economic status was a more accurate indicator. Socio-economic status, also referred to in relation to a school's decile[2], was linked to educators' responses about resources in homes, as well as attitudes. If a student came from a home that was believed to place little value on literacy, teachers felt that they were subsequently arriving at school with fewer of the foundation skills and experiences needed for reading. For example, one survey response stated

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[2] While the decile system is currently being phased out of New Zealand schools, some participants still used it. It is a 1-10 ranking system to determine levels of government funding a school receives, based on the SES of the intake area - 1 being the lowest status, and thus receiving the greatest amount of funding.

Some - depends a great deal on the socio-economic status of the families. Maori students from high-mid income families typically have good literacy achievement, students from other ethnic backgrounds including Maori typically have poor literacy achievement if they are from low income families. This I believe comes down to lack of books and literacy related resources within the home and lack of external experiences that these children are exposed to.

The above is an answer to whether the respondent feels there are differences in the literacy achievement of Māori and non-Māori students. It demonstrates the extent of the perceived effect of socio-economic factors on literacy achievement, and helps to highlight the finding of the ways that home background influence literacy learning. It should be noted that the importance of literacy-related resources within the home is mentioned throughout the data. Interview participants repeatedly mentioned points like "*there's a huge impact on what literacy experience they bring to school, so uh, if their parents have exposed them to books, if they're used to books, if they know how books work...the language of books*" (interview, 2018). What families' attitudes towards literacy are, and whether or not families were taking steps to ensure they were reading together were factors that came through strongly in both the survey responses, and in each of the interviews with teachers. Participants felt that one of the most telling factors of literacy achievement was whether or not a student's home was conducive to literacy, through actions such as nightly reading together, or having been exposed to books throughout early childhood.

Because a lot more of the Māori families are in the...lower decile schools, and the socio-economic things impact them hugely...it would have an impact...the way they live (interview)

As part of the student's home background, the whānau attitude towards education and literacy was also thought to be significant by teacher participants.

huge impact. a huge impact on literacy learning...how the family vision
literacy at home...their thoughts on it...what they have access to, and
everything like that, has a huge impact I think on literacy achievement and
learning" (interview)

A child spends up to six years at home before entering primary school, and in that time, are processing a huge amount of information. The first 1000 days, or three years, were referred to in the data as being especially important, particularly for language development. The time spent in the home also impacts the student's values and priorities, with family attitudes towards both literacy, and education in general coming through in the data as being a prominent factor.

Those important thousand days they talk about, and in particular when they
get to that 18 months to 3 years (interview)

Teachers spoke about the potential disadvantage students from lower income families may experience. They mentioned the differences that children grow up with, such as exposure to literacy, and the varying level of expectations from families that participants felt tend to emerge. Low socioeconomic families were expected by participants to place less value on the importance of education. While it is not possible to conclusively draw wider conclusions, the overarching trend from these data is that there is an assumption amongst many educators that less affluent families are not as supportive of education as their higher earning peers.

But they don't know how to bring their children up, they don't know how to
look after them and educate them...education holds no value for them, they
don't see the relevance or the importance of it (interview)

The idea that children from a less privileged background would not have experienced the same opportunities that more affluent families may have provided is persistent.

Some of them come from really rough backgrounds, and in fact they
haven't got all sorts of things that the kids that are at that level would have

experienced in their life and have had that help and support with (interview)

It's kind of unfair in lots of ways, from where these kids have come from, and they haven't had this literacy exposure, that crowd expectation...some other children have had (interview)

It is worth noting that although participants were conscious of making judgements about certain perceived backgrounds, some assumptions were still made. For example, one teacher talked about how they could not tell totally whether a family were reading at home, but was fairly certain that particular homes did not have books. Others stated the same, allowing that they "could be wrong" or that "you couldn't really know", yet it was difficult to reserve judgement.

It's very hard to be informed about whether Māori families have got books or not...but if I ask the children who's reading at home...I'm pretty sure of what answers I will get. And the reality is that most men don't read at home. So I think in a lot of homes where there's younger parents, I mean, some of these parents are only in their early twenties, and it's all devices (interview)

...you can't really know if they're not learning because they're not reading at home, or because...it's very hard to separate those things out, and it's very hard not to make judgements about them… (interview)

Another aspect of the home's impact on literacy learning is whether the child has been exposed to books and literacy. There is some concern over the increase in use of technology such as tablets, and a belief that it marks a loss in time spent reading.

I think families now are so busy...where we were given a book...and now you're given the ipad, or the tv, put on the games...so i think it might, that might have a factor, but that's my thoughts (interview)

Another anecdote reinforced the reluctance of teachers to make judgements, as despite their belief that students should be experiencing literacy at home, they did

not think that one set of parents were 'not as good' as another, more literary inclined family.

> *And that's the home influence - in one family books are just part of everyday life, and he's got lots of his own. In the other family, he's got toys. It doesn't mean one family is better than the other, but one is more exposed to literacy (interview)*

Having exposure to books before arriving at school is deemed a missing part of many children's early education. Participants explored the idea that if students had not been introduced to literacy at home, upon school arrival literacy learning needed to begin right back at the beginning; showing students how books work, to the point of needing to show them which way a book is held.

> *So the first experience they actually have with a book is when they come to school. And they've got no idea what this is, or which way to hold it...those would be two really major things, and that's obviously to do...value of education and I'm not saying this is cultural...there's a value of education, there's also the money in the home thing, and also there's a generational thing and if you haven't been read to and talked to… (interview)*

> *There's a huge impact on what literacy experience they bring to school, so uh, if their parents have exposed them to books, if they're used to books, if they know how books work...the language of books (interview)*

Whether the students had prior experience with reading and writing was a prominent theme throughout the interviews. However, literacy in the home took a very 'traditional' definition. As teachers spoke about preschool literacy experience, the language being used focused on 'books', and not many other examples. While books are of course a method of literary exposure, this excludes any acknowledgement of other forms of literacy that may be present. Newspapers, songs, the process of sharing stories around the dinner table are all examples of literary practices, but examples such as these tended not to be present in the teacher's responses.

Transiency

The survey brought through ideas of transience, and the impact that moving schools (often multiple schools in a short space of time) can have on a child's learning, especially their literacy learning.

> *One of the main contributing factors to overall achievement is transiency (survey)*

> *In some instances yes. Our school is extremely transient and decile 1. Our roll has had a 33% turnover this year. Transiency and poor attendance have a significant effect on achievement and progress in learning. Many of our Maori students are transient and come from low socio economic backgrounds. There are also a large number of dysfunctional families with gangs, drugs and alcohol being a factor (survey)*

Transience is associated with other factors, but its links to low socio-economic communities were particularly evident. One interview participant spoke about children who, although they were only 6 years old, had attended multiple schools.

> *There's a lot more transience...people get into trouble....CYFs get on to them, so then they take off...in a place like M-, you get children who are 6, and they might have been to 5 schools already (interview)*

The intersection of 'CYFS' (formerly Child, Youth, Family, now Oranga Tamariki[3]) and schools was not a commonly mentioned situation, but the participant who did specifically mention Oranga Tamariki spoke directly about how it was difficult to help a child when they were unaware of the difficulties at home.

Transience was also discussed as impacting interventions that may have been put in place to help struggling students. One participant expressed frustration, stating

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[3] Oranga Tamariki is a Ministry of the New Zealand Government, working to provide care and support for children in need.

some children are very transient, that's another thing, you know, they might have been to ten schools by the time they're ten. So they're way behind, because it's, you know everytime something's been put in place, they've moved (interview)

A feeling of helplessness was evident among some participants, who, when speaking about factors they could not change, seemed resigned to that fact.

This is about building up what we can do, we can't change that, so we leave that, and we change what we can, right here (interview)

I'm more than happy to help the whanau, at home with anything that I can, but...it is a tragedy... what you see, and a lot of the time they don't want help, ...some of the time they yes, yes, yes, yes and then walk away and do nothing (interview)

The necessity of school/whānau collaboration is highlighted more extensively later in the chapter, but it is also relevant to the theme of home background. When questioned about their confidence in identifying various types of influential factors, one interview participant recounted a change they had noticed working in socio-economically different schools, recollecting that

last year, the children would not share a lot of information about home...it was difficult to bring in the home factors for that (interview)

Habits of Family Members

Another aspect of home backgrounds of students were the habits of their parents and other family members.

Low decile, high Māori ratio, high of non-attendance, there was a lot of dysfunctional families in it, and so it was sort of thing of everything together. There was lots of gang families, which did come down to the children as well...it was their social life that sort of did make a big impact (interview)

If you have that child that I've described, that mum and dad are into drugs, and they've had a party last night and got no sleep, and there's domestic violence, and there's no food in the house, and they come to school, they're not going to be any good at anything (interview)

While the attitudes towards school were considered to have an impact, participants felt that equally influential were the social lives of the students and their families. If parents were hosting parties, for example, the children's routines were likely to be impacted, such as not being able to have a good night of sleep. One interview participant spoke about how a child in that situation was unlikely to then want to do much learning in class.

coming in from that home, well they're not going to want to sit there and read a book and write a story

A more physiological effect of the lifestyle is the impact of foetal alcohol syndrome, and drug addicted babies, and how these children develop.

There's increasing impact of drugs, there's increasing impact of um, methamphetamine, and that sort of thing, and I think we're starting to see those children coming through now. And so that causes you know, with foetal alcohol, that causes learning disabilities, which I think probably just from damaged little brains (interview)

Another low literacy factor, is the children who have come in who are the drug babies, and who are the foetal alcohol babies (interview)

<u>Teacher Awareness of Deficit Thinking</u>
Participants were generally wary of stereotyping all Māori families as behaving in a particular way. However, there was an acknowledgement that Māori families were possibly more predominant in the lower socioeconomic schools, and as such, may have higher representation in particular behaviours associated with low income families. For example, the following interview extract follows an anecdote about children arriving late to school following a question about the "Tail of Achievement"

...oh well mum was asleep, passed out on the couch you know. So I don't
believe that that's actually a Māori thing, even though they might have
higher representation. That's actually just a social thing. So it does impact,
but I don't think it's the Māori-ness of the culture that's a problem (interview)

Other comments support this sentiment. There is a general admission that Māori
can be overrepresented in the lower socio economic groups, and one participant
was explicit about taking care to not succumb to stereotypes.

and yup, they come from Māori back- mostly come from Māori
backgrounds...low socioeconomic, which for me is more the situation, I
don't take any notice of the fact of their ethnic group (interview)

very conscious of not having deficit thinking, and very conscious about not
being judgemental about families. I mean sometimes, you know...these
children are living in neglect, as they come in the same dirty clothes every
day, and they don't have lunch… (interview)

Despite this insistence on avoiding making calls about students and families
based on cultural or ethnic grounds, teacher participants were less hesitant to
make calls on a student's home life when focusing on the socioeconomic status of
the family.

I'd classify it as probably children from low socio-economic homes, that
possibly haven't had any sleep, there might be drugs in the house, all night
parties, domestic violence, no food, or any quality food...children who
haven't really been loved (interview)

Participants talked about how learning was affected by more than just a learning
difficulty. While there were specific themes relating to the out of school lives of
students, home background was also touted as a general factor that impacts
literacy learning. Again, participants were reluctant to attribute anything to cultural
situations, and statements tended to comment more globally, in the understanding

that all students were impacted in some manner by their home life, whether this was to their advantage or not.

> *Anywhere from between 5 and 10% of children would have something that would be a, I suppose a learning disability, or a disability or deficit through family, or circumstances and that sort of thing (interview)*

> *I know that home background really impacts but they're not necessarily Māori (interview)*

> *It's so difficult to try and educate a child who's coming from these horrific backgrounds and as I said it's not just Māori children, but as I said, they seem to be the majority (interview)*

Another comment of note came from a school with a Māori population of less than 20%. The teacher being interviewed spoke about how many of their Māori students were not obviously Māori, and that their backgrounds perhaps did not reflect the perceived image of Māori homes.

> *I think our school's interesting in that many of our Māori students, you might not recognise them as Māori. They don't look physically Māori, a lot of our Māori students come from quite affluent and educated backgrounds, um, although we still have a few children that maybe don't (interview)*

I spoke with parents from this particular primary school, which is a mid - high economic demographic. These were members of the Whānau Group, and attended one of the Whānau Hui. The parents did not suggest that there were issues at the school in relation to poor assumptions from teachers about their families. However, I also spoke with a different group of parents, whose children attend a school with a much larger percentage of families with low socioeconomic status. They discussed being stereotyped as poor, and in need of assistance, though they had not asked school staff for help. Several instances were also given of help being provided in a community context - such as the way they had been approached by local health nurses. It had been perceived as condescending and

"because they were Māori". The parents were clear about the feelings of offence and embarrassment that had arisen from being treated in a way that they believed questioned their ability to look after their children. Deficit theorising not only impacts students in a classroom, but has effects on the community, and how the education system and Māori interact.

I asked the parents if they participated in much literacy at home with their children. One said they do some writing, and "we do read, but not as much as like some parents would. Not like every night". During a focus group, one parent admitted that she often did not take her child's reading book from his bag as "that is the school's job", and she was not sure what to do. There is potentially an opportunity here for schools to provide opportunities for parents to learn about literacy in the home, which would could also help strengthen links between the school and whānau. However, these children were all engaged in other forms of literacy. Being able to communicate effectively, such as through team work in a video game, or using language to find videos online, or watching the news as a family - and then comprehend the overarching stories within these mediums are all types of literacy that do tend to be less acknowledged, even by the parents.

Oral Language Development

Another significant finding was that educators talked a lot about the importance of early development of oral language as critical to literacy development. Specifically, there were mentions of talking with children as they developed, being exposed to spoken language before the written word, and competency in conversation - whether children were able to hold a conversation, either with peers or adults. Participants were asked about whether they felt there are differences between Māori and non-Māori students, and their experiences of oral language development.

> There are some Pakeha families that are now entrenched in this ah, poverty cycle, but also this cycle of not talking to their children, and devices… (interview)

> I will say that in Pakeha families that I've seen, there's more of an

expectation to read, and my Māori whanau generally, and this is a real generalisation, don't have the same expression to read. They might have more of an expression to sing, uh but we, we haven't got which would be great, to give out song books. We're having a production at the moment, and the kids are learning words for modern songs, um, so that's giving them some incentive to read, but yeah. It's, that's, that's in a general way, but I wouldn't say that that's specific because we also have a lot of Māori whanau here who are still reading, but um, and I've had reading recovery kids who are English, Pakeha, Irish, and all of that too (interview)

The participant's unwillingness to attribute ethnicity as a factor in literacy achievement is supported by comments from other teachers, and the findings are discussed further in this chapter. The intention is not to poorly portray participants in a way that highlights generalisations or stereotyping they may have put forward. Rather, I aim to demonstrate that teachers are aware of the complexity involved in talking about Māori literacy. In many accounts, Māori are represented in situations that have more negative connotations, and teachers tended to agree with these. For example, participants talked about the low oral language of Māori students entering school.

Pacific or Māori kids, is that they don't necessarily get the chance to speak, but they get a lot of listening (interview)

Many of our NE Maori students come in with lower oral language ability and this affects their early reading and writing achievement (survey)

A significant aspect of developing oral language was considered to be the exposure a child received to spoken language, before they began to learn to read. Comments related mainly to how children were unable to speak, or hold conversations. It was a common belief amongst participants that if a child had not experienced much spoken language, their language knowledge and ability to communicate would be compromised.

exposure to talking...verbal interaction before you get to books (interview)

There was a definite negative view amongst participants - students were referred to as having very low oral language, or limited experiences.

> *Students who have little or limited exposure to different experiences have a more limited range of vocabulary, so often can't express themselves or read words that they have never seen before (survey)*

None of the participants spoke about the students with high levels of oral language as being particularly ahead - while the questions were about things that influence literacy learning (and whether this was different for Māori students), participants tended to think about the negative effects. For example, I was provided with anecdotes about especially low language children, but no teachers spoke about early oral language as being the reason a certain child was excelling, which one might expect if it were such a vital factor. It is possible that the focus on Māori tended to move teachers toward more negative factors, as this would be supported by previously discussed literature on deficit theorising in New Zealand.

> *I would say those are the two biggest impacts - not having books...and especially the not being talk[ed] to, not having explained things (interview)*

> *So some of these children who are behind because of not being talked to and listened to and talked at, and listened with, you know, they're hearing things, and going oh yeah.... (interview)*

Participants felt that oral language needed to come before any written language. Knowing the alphabet for example, was brought up as a skill that many students no longer possess before starting school. For example, one interview participant expressed

> *You could sing your alphabet when you were at kindergarten...now I have kids starting who do not know one letter of the alphabet, cannot read, or know one single letter of the alphabet (interview)*

The theme of oral language links strongly to the previously discussed concept of home background. Parents are regarded as the main source of oral language development in those pre-school years, and the data from the teacher participants supports this. If parents have a differing value placed on their role in development, it could lead to situations such as those reported by some participants. One spoke about the questioning phase children go through at about two years old.

> *Some children are given no answer, and some children are not given a satisfactory answer, and so that's the beginning of their oral language development...a lot of children coming into school at 5, who have an oral language of two and a half, or three (interview)*

Family life also linked to oral language through survey comments. The following is from a teacher speaking about the differences in literacy achievement between Māori and non-Māori students. Expressing their belief that reading at home was not often happening, the teacher stated *"also value placed on literacy, lower levels of oral language and experiences perhaps"*. The implication is that some families are less inclined, or perhaps less knowledgeable about the different ways to develop literacy in their children.

Another aspect of developing oral language is the emergent ability to discern the sounds that make up language. Phonological awareness, and the progression into understanding how phonics work eventually work to help a student learn to read. Participants acknowledged this, one suggesting that *"...they have to know about sounds. and they have to recognise what sounds are the same, ...be able to hear words that are the same 'cause that's a really important skill in reading."* Another followed a similar vein when discussing ways to improve a student's reading ability, explaining that if a child could not read, it was important to return to the basic parts of language - *"so key cards, if that's too hard, go back to alphabet sounds, and bring the sounding in"*. The same participant also mentioned the underlying need of sound awareness, so that students become aware of tone and expression, so that they are

... reading like we're talking. So we're not robots and reading. a. book. like.
this...through that they're picking up they have to read like they're talking.
So I model a lot more expression into it (interview)

3.2   Silence Around Specific Learning Difficulties

There is a distinct lack of discourse from both parents and educators about specific learning difficulties. This section outlines that silence, noting where it begins and the form it takes collectively amongst teaching participants. The thoughts of the teachers are strengthened by comments made by parents during the focus groups, which may indicate that parents are not focusing on SpLD either.

Most teacher participants had experienced some form of professional development (PLD) on specific learning difficulties. However, this tended to be restricted to dyslexia. There were very few mentions of other SpLD being made as more than a passing comment acknowledging their existence. Teachers were not confident to either diagnose or support specific learning difficulties, as they collectively felt that they were not qualified to do so. Additionally, although support from schools, SENCo, and Resource Teachers of Learning and Behaviour (RTLB) was available (and used), sometimes the reports or advice received - especially from an RTLB - was not considered that useful or practical.

When questioned about the prevalence of specific learning difficulties, one interview participant was unsure if Māori students were more highly represented. She suggested that there is information available that states Māori are more highly represented in learning difficulty statistics, but that it was not the case personally.

...for me at the moment it's not, but...the readings I've done and things like
that it is...previously it has been, so it really, as I say again, is depending on
the, I'd say the outside environment (interview)

Again, specific learning difficulties were linked back to the environment outside of school. The lack of discussion around specific learning difficulties resulted in participants instead talking about other potential factors.

The survey data presents a wider view of where teachers may stand on the issue of SpLD. As these questions were more structured than the interviews, participants were asked to identify their level of confidence at certain things, and to indicate their agreement on other points. One set of questions pertained to SpLD, and where the participant sat on a scale from *Very Confident* to *Not At All Confident*. The breakdown of results are shown in the table below (table 1).

	Very confident		Somewhat confident		Not confident		Not at all confident		Total
Identifying SpLD?	31.82%	14	56.82%	25	11.36%	5	0.00%	0	44
Talking about SpLD to a colleague?	40.91%	18	40.91%	18	13.64%	6	4.55%	2	44
Explaining SpLD to parents?	25.00%	11	43.18%	19	25.00%	11	6.82%	3	44
Recognising signs of a potential SpLD?	20.45%	9	59.09%	26	15.91%	7	4.55%	2	44

Table 1: Results From Question 2 of Survey

The majority of teachers in this sample generally establish themselves as being somewhat confident (56% and very confident (31%) at identifying Specific Learning Difficulties. Only 11% were not confident. However, when asked about their confidence in recognising signs of a potential SpLD, the participants were more equally distributed. While 59% were somewhat confident, 15% felt not confident, and 4% answered not at all confident. 20% felt very confident at recognising signs.

The difference in confidence between questions one and four is interesting in that it is asking about a fairly similar part of teaching. Why are teachers less confident at recognising signs of a potential specific learning difficulty than they are at actually identifying a specific learning difficulty? The cross tabulation table (Table 2) demonstrates the relationship between recognising signs of, and identifying SpLD.

Recognising signs of a potential SpLD?		Identifying Specific Learning Difficulties?				
	Very confident	8	1	0	0	9
	Somewhat confident	6	18	2	0	26
	Not confident	0	4	3	0	7
	Not at all confident	0	2	0	0	2
	Total	14	25	5	0	44

Table 2: Cross-Tabulation of Question 2 of Survey; part 1 and 4

The connection between the two elements indicates that teachers are more able to identify a SpLD, in that a student may be struggling, and they are able to work through the school process to diagnose and find support. The lack of confidence in recognising signs of a potential SpLD may be reflective of a less detailed knowledge of how SpLD present in different children.

Participants felt more confident in identifying student literacy levels. As this is more likely to involve making a judgement about a student's progress, it is perhaps not a surprising result, as teachers are required to make these judgements throughout the year, for each child. There is a range of tools to help them do so, and most teachers are familiar with the resources. For example, although survey responses indicated a huge selection of tests and methods, there were some that were mentioned by most of the participants (particularly PATs, E-AsTTle, Running

Records)[4]. Observations made by teachers during class-time was also a significant factor, as were holding discussions/conferences with students, including both with and without whānau. The ability to recognise when and how students are struggling or excelling in their literacy learning is connected to SpLD - as a potential cause for an unexpected lack of progress from a student. Most teachers are confident to identify student literacy levels, with 65% stating they were very confident to do so. One teacher felt they were not confident, although this data is perhaps submitted in error, as the teacher is SPELD trained, has been teaching for 33 years, and is very/somewhat confident in all other areas. Overall, teachers participating in the survey are confident that they can identify a student's literacy levels.

Very confident	65.91%	29
Somewhat confident	31.82%	14
Not confident	2.27%	1
Not at all confident	0.00%	0
Total		44

Table 3: Survey Results for Confidence Levels in Identifying Student Literacy Levels

Participants in the survey were more confident to speak about SpLD to a colleague than they were to explain SpLD to parents. In addition, explaining SpLD to parents received the highest proportion of '*Not Confident*' or '*Not At All Confident*' of the four options. Anecdotal evidence suggests that this may be because it requires less detailed explanation, as a colleague is more likely to either know the child, or understand what is meant by terms such as 'dyslexia'. Further research is needed to confirm this hypothesis. There is potentially a disconnect between how thoroughly teachers (in this sample) understand SpLD.

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[4] See Appendix 2 for further details

The survey also asked about the prevalence of Specific Learning Difficulties amongst the students in participant's classes. There were two questions that aimed to provide an indication of how participants may think about SpLD and Māori students. SpLD were thought to be '*Somewhat Common*' by the majority of survey participants. 67% of the teachers indicated that Specific Learning Difficulties are somewhat common amongst all students, while 23% felt they were somewhat uncommon. Another 4 teachers (9%) found them very common. This data implies that Specific Learning Difficulties are relatively present among the sample schools, although due to anonymity of data, I can not confirm the spread of SpLD across the schools.

Very confident	9.30%	4
Somewhat confident	67.44%	29
Not confident	23.26%	10
Not at all confident	0.00%	0
Total		43

Table 4: Survey Responses to Prevalence of SpLD Amongst All Students

There was a very similar distribution of responses about prevalence of SpLD among all students and Māori students. The only difference is that there were three more respondents who felt that SpLD amongst Māori students were slightly uncommon than those who felt SpLD were uncommon among all students. The sample size is too small to draw any real conclusion, and there are only three answers to judge on. However, this could perhaps indicate that Māori are less likely to be diagnosed with Specific Learning Difficulties. There is also the potential of unconscious cultural bias of the teachers, possibly linking to earlier findings around perceptions of Māori students.

Very confident	9.30%	4
Somewhat confident	60.47%	26
Not confident	30.23%	13
Not at all confident	0.00%	0
Total		43

Table 5: Survey Responses to Prevalence of SpLD Amongst Māori Students

Survey participants were also asked about the action they would take if they suspected a student had a Specific Learning Difficulty. Options included referrals to an RTLB, Resource Teacher of Literacy (RTLit), or SENCo, recommendations to Outside Support (eg Kip McGrath), In-School Support (e.g. Reading Recovery), or Other. Participants were asked to provide more information if they selected '*Other*', which generated a mix of answers. There were commonalities nonetheless, one recurring answer related to speaking with parents - discussing what parents could do in the home, what parents felt could be done differently, topics their child might be interested in, or directing parents to their GP, an action especially suggested if there is suspected ASD (on the Autism Spectrum).

Refer to an RTLB	20.14%	28
Refer to an RTLit	13.67%	19
Refer to SENCo	25.90%	36
Recommend outside support (eg Speld, Numberworks, Kip McGrath)	4.32%	6
Recommend in school support (eg literacy groups, Reading Recovery)	27.34%	38
Other (please specify)	8.63%	12

Table 6: Survey Responses Describing Actions Taken When a SpLD is Suspected

While teachers commonly referred students on to further help (such as RTLB), they were less likely to encourage students to use an external programme such as SPELD, or Kip McGrath. 31% of participants said that they had recommended such a programme, reasoning that it would provide both extra and ongoing support. It was also felt that there would potentially be more specific knowledge available from the tutors than could be received in a school. However, 68% of participants reported that they had not suggested that a student use an external support programme. The most common reason for not making this suggestion was the cost. Most teachers felt that programmes like SPELD were too expensive for families, especially for families who may already be disadvantaged. Related to the expense were issues around transport, and concerns that families would be unable to travel to sessions. Some participants felt that there was no need to seek outside help, as the school was, or should, be able to provide enough help, and of a better quality. Two survey participants felt that it was not relevant to the children, without specifying why not. Other common reasons included that they had not seen a need for external support, or felt that it was better to try through the school first.

When speaking to parent participants, several spoke about how they had sent their children (or whānau members) to Kip McGrath for support in English. One of the local iwi has a trust, with funds allocated to subsidise extra tutoring for whānau belonging to the iwi.

> *Children usually from families who may not have the time or income for this (survey)*

There is a very obvious contradiction here, between the parent and teacher participants. It suggests there is a disconnect between the teacher perceptions of Māori whānau and homes, and the reality.

Most teachers (of this sample) refer students to the SENCo of the school. The SENCo is then responsible for providing external support. However, when taking previous answers into account, many teachers would prefer to not suggest

external support - much of the reasoning being that it is prohibitively expensive for whānau. One teacher felt it was hard to comment as they were not the SENCo, others mentioned it would require discussions with family/whānau, or collaboration amongst staff members.

3.3 Acknowledgement of Importance of Relationships - A Certain Level of Cultural Responsivity

"I see it as essential for Māori learners to feel purpose and connection, and to feel valued"

(interview)

The third major finding was the perceived influence of relationships on literacy achievement. Both teacher and parent participants felt strongly that building a relationship between the student and teacher, as well as the school, teacher, and whānau, was a vital aspect of a student's success.

<u>Positive Reinforcement/Relationship with the Students</u>
Throughout the data, there were numerous references to the impact the teacher's relationship with the student has on their literacy learning. While it was agreed that this mattered for all students, participants tended to highlight that it was particularly important for Māori students to have a strong relationship with their teachers and school, and that their whanau were included in this relationship. One interview participant spoke about how relationships were in fact the "*number one thing*".

<u>Relationship with child</u>
The main relationship discussed was that of the teacher and child. Participants spoke about how if students feel that they were valued, and have a place within the classroom, they are more likely to be connected to their learning.

> *young children need to have a relationship with their teacher or teacher aide. The relationship that the kids have with the nanas are fantastic. The nanas just give time, love and positive praise (survey)*

The relationship was felt to be important across the class - not only for struggling learners. As one teacher discussed, it was possible to give every child a voice and a link to the teacher, even in a whole-class context.

> *We're all going to learn, we're all learners, but we are also all teachers. So immediately, there's a little bit of mana given to every child. So that's...really important*
> *You've written these wonderful speeches, I mean, some were better than others in content, but this is about the delivery of it, so...that way, that decision making then involves every child (interview)*

The relationships each student has with the teacher also allowed the students to connect with each other - for example one teacher related an anecdote about celebrating individual achievements together. Progress of students was collectively appreciated, but the teacher combined this with building continual expectations of their students.

> *So the moment they go onto blue the whole class claps and they do all this fun stuff (laughing). And then I go 'what colour are you going to next?'. So the moment they- I talk about the next step. So it's about letting them know I expect change and progress, and really celebrating it when they do (interview)*

Parents also felt that building a relationship with the child was particularly essential for Māori children. One parent spoke about how the teachers and child had not formed a relationship conducive to learning, so she had chosen to move her child to a kura kaupapa instead, stating "*that's just how I find that our Māori kids learn, is in a family environment, and they're very family orientated there*".

Child's Confidence

Participants also spoke about how helping grow a child's confidence could be the difference between them improving in reading or not. There was a common theme running through responses, of students finding that their literacy would improve if

they were more confident in their own ability. The idea of "if they don't believe they can, then they can't" encompasses this attitude, with one teacher declaring their agreement with *"...a saying I heard a long time ago, 'if you think you can't read, then you can't'"*.

> *Sometimes it's that attitude thing, because they've got themselves into thinking that they can not do this (interview)*

While participants did not state that a child's confidence was the sole or main impact on achievement, it was nonetheless considered to be significant. One participant stated that *"sometimes it's around building that self-efficacy and belief that they can, and then once you've got the attitude shift, you're halfway there"*. There were many comments relating to making the students feel comfortable and happy, *"a lot of positive reinforcement, and Yay! Hi-5s, you got it right, and really boost them up with their confidence...if they don't have the confidence to read, then that breaks them up for everything else"*. Helping students to make that move was considered to be one of the very first steps to make.

> *Using confidence, knowing where they're confident, taking them back to the basics, working out...you might need a challenge (interview)*

> *It's a pedagogical shift...it's getting their self image up (interview)*

When speaking about low literacy achievers particularly, teachers were quick to talk about how as students grew older, they became more aware of where their achievement sat in relation to their peers. According to several participants, these gradual moments of realising their peers were doing things that they could not had an increasing impact on the student's self esteem. By the time a student is able to receive funding for extra help, their literacy levels are often several years behind their peers.

> *A lot of it too is around self esteem, because by the time they've got to year 2, year 3, they're starting to notice that they're falling behind their peers (interview)*

An issue particularly present with the older students was encouraging them to work against their history -

> *Because they have not achieved for so long, or have not done well, they give up so easy, and just want to stop, and their behaviour comes in, the, dislike of books and writing and that, because they see it, see themselves as not achieving (interview)*

Helping students to succeed at first was discussed as being a key tactic to help ensure further progress. Once a students starts experiencing more success in their learning, it was felt that they were then more likely to continue successfully - helped by the boost in self confidence that came with finally being able to do something.

> *The key for me is building up their confidence. So building up the person...I never put them into anything that's too hard to start with, because that can stop them in their tracks (interview)*

> *Probably before anything else it's building confidence because if you're learning a new language like English, it's really hard, and then being surrounded by kids...they know they can't do the same as them. That really knocks their confidence, so it's about building their confidence up, and then starting with something that they can do, and completely building on with that (interview)*

Another participant spoke about building confidence particularly in Māori students, when asked if there were differences in literacy teaching for students of different cultural backgrounds.

> *There is sometimes but I find if you talk them up with their achievement their mindset changes (interview)*

One participant expanded on this point, relating low self-esteem amongst Māori students to the coverage of the 'Tail of Achievement' in the media.

> *So I feel as though we've got to take away that stereotype of them being underachievers... to build up their self esteem, build up their beliefs, and understand them to help them achieve, change it from underachieve to achieve (interview)*

There was also one teacher who talked about a new approach their team had been testing in order to try boost confidence in group work situations. Having participated in some professional development around front-loading learning for mathematics, the year 5 and 6 teachers decided to try it with some of their low readers. It was particularly for group work scenarios, as *"their confidence within a group was quite low and they needed a huge amount of support within that group"*. The participant found that approaching the group task became easier for several of the children, as they had an idea of what would be discussed.

> *They were confident about what the story was about and things like that, and then we did a guided session, and it made a big difference to their reading ability, and confidence with talking, I know (child's name) was very shy, um to speak up her ideas, I think she was concerned about being wrong, or not quite on the mark, um so, yeah she would, sort of just clam up and not say anything. And it gave her just that little bit more confidence to be able to speak (interview)*

Parents/Whanau Connections

It was not only building connections with students that participants thought was important. Especially when thinking about supporting Māori learners in their literacy, including the parents and wider whānau was considered a valuable and highly utilised resource.

> *However, I have seen huge growth and development in children who they've been supported at school, felt good about themselves, and they've moved (interview)*

> *So it's about accommodating (pause) so that they feel successful and it goes on from there and the parent is involved at each step along the way. I mean, they know their child the best, and they see things at home, and we might not know that they have this passion about something because they haven't told us, and so they go, oh that's a way in (interview)*

By involving the parents in the students' learning process, teachers felt that they were able to build a better relationship with their students. One survey response stated their belief that *"...to properly engage Māori students specifically we need to build a relationship with them and their whanau..."*. It was also an understanding supported by other participants, that by having a developed relationship with whānau, the teacher's role could be supported in the homes of students.

> *Because I had a relationship with them, they work...I'd see them in the street, go up and talk to them, face to face, it's all of those contacts, keeping it up...they'd know in the supermarket, ooh better do the reading, so it's contact in any shape or form,...keep a connection going and they appreciate it...ooh that teacher has a relationship with that child, so it supports the child (interview)*

Taking a multi-faceted approach to boosting children's literacy learning through whānau support was mentioned by many participants.

> *If they actually give their kid, or their child, 10 minutes per night of looking at reading...regardless of whether they're Māori, Pakeha or Pacific, building a relationship with the parents is a key thing (interview)*

This took multiple forms, from simply ensuring that parents were aware of how students were doing - *"obviously you're working with parents and that sort of thing, and saying to parents where their children are at* - to teachers working with parents to check that supporting activities were being completed at home.

> *I don't like to overwhelm parents, but often they're really keen just to do one thing - I'll say you can just do this one thing each night, it'll be really helpful (interview)*

Encouraging parents to work with both their children and the school was considered a useful step by most participants. *"I'm a teacher who asks for support from the the parents. So we're all working together...It may be that my parents may not realise that their child needs a lot more help, it may be that they might not acknowledge their child as a special needs child..."*. Another also spoke of the necessity of being able to *"encourage parents to work with their child at home and encourage them"*.

One teacher even related that some parents had developed such a strong connection to the school, they were traveling an extra distance so their children could continue their education there.

> *Over time, and getting to know me, and getting to know the school, they're much more willing. So those relationships, relationship building...they come specifically to the school...they travel purposefully to come to the school to give their child that consistency*

An additional concern was that some parents were reluctant to interfere with what could be considered the school's area of expertise.

> *So sometimes you hear parents say 'oh I don't have to read with them, that's the school's job' but it's not about that, it's about them making a connection and supporting and encouraging and (pause) you know, rewarding the child for what they're doing well (interview)*

Helping parents to understand that their role was also thought to be an influencing factor was demonstrated through comments such as *"I'm now texting parents...a lot of parents aren't aware...they're just assuming that their kids are fine"*. One teacher thought that *"as a parent we all like to put our trust into the school, that the*

school is going to do the best for the child", but acknowledged that the main goal for both teachers and whānau was that the students were able to achieve.

> *I'd definitely be in contact with the family, we do that with all our children that are priority learners, um, but I think it's more important um, so. So I still work with parents, um, but I think that whanau connection for Māori children and the families, the families take- I mean, all parents want their children to achieve, I don't think I've ever come across a parent that doesn't want to help their child achieve at school. The effort that they put into that is not always what you would hope it is, but I think at the end of the day, all parents, yeah they want their kids to achieve (interview)*

The partnership of whānau and school was one that teachers wanted to be successful. If teachers were able to work collectively with the whānau, particularly for things like reading together in the evenings, it was thought there would almost certainly be an improvement in the student's literacy. It did not have to only be Māori families, as one participant stated; "*I wouldn't say it's specifically Māori, um, but when you can get your whanau on board to listen to your child read, you will see an improvement*". However, several of the teachers spoke about engaging Māori students through building whānau connections.

> *I believe to properly engage Māori students specifically we need to build a relationship with them and their whanau (survey)*
> *Māori people and having a relationship...even things like talking to them about what's going on at home (interview)*

> *Meet with whanau to look at what we can do differently and get to know more about what the student loves in life (survey)*

If they were able to develop this link, whānau would support their children through ways suggested by the school, and some teachers felt this would have a significant impact on the child's learning.

I am confident with making connections with families and have a heightened awareness of how these may affect children's learning at school, their attitude towards learning and behaviour (interview)

Educating the whanau as well, getting them on board (interview)

A fruitful relationship between school, student, and whānau resulted in one interview participant relating their school's rewarding Matariki celebration.

We invited in our whanau, and we got nearly every single family, and I couldn't believe it. I was deeply moved. It was a really beautiful celebration, I couldn't believe the effort that people had gone to, to come, so that was really great (interview)

As several parent participants related, the connection to the school and community is an important step in both them and their children feeling valued and welcome, a factor they thought led to a better education.

All of the parents spoke about how important it was to feel as though they and the school were communicating well. Two parents (with children at the same school) declared that they felt happy to speak with the teachers and other staff about their children's learning - whether in person, via email, or even text. Alternatively, one parent with a different school had been experiencing miscommunication from her son's teachers. She had been told different things about the level the child was at in reading, and was spending time and energy being called into the school to deal with his behaviour. Despite a concerted effort from both sides, no progress with the child's behaviour appeared to have happened. There was a level of resentment, and a feeling that the school had not helped her or her son enough. The parents also said they felt the child's learning was being put aside because the school assumed he would misbehave. This led to an interesting conversation about expectations. After speaking about how the child was "*labelled as the naughty kid*", the group talked about other experiences where assumptions had been made about them, often because they were Māori. One anecdote related to being given a plate of fried potatoes that the children had made at daycare. It is

important to note the use of language when speaking about the incident; "*I was the one who got targeted to take those potatoes home*". The use of the word "targeted" supports the sentiment that it is unwelcome help. Another parent agreed, stating "*I think teachers jump to a lot of these conclusions too*". There was an agreement amongst all three of the parents present that they had at some point found either themselves or their child the recipient of poorly made assumptions. Another mother brought up a story about her child, when he was in intermediate schooling.

> *This teacher wasn't even looking at his work - because he had finished it so fast, she naturally assumed 'you're not doing it, you're not listening' - she didn't even look at his book (focus group)*

If this teacher had looked in the student's book, as a Ministry of Education third party later did, she would have found all of the work to have been complete. "*He lost 6 months of his education through her not being the teacher she is supposed to be*". The general consensus was that it was because the child is Māori that he experienced this, particularly as the teacher reported him to be "*standing over her. But he said to me, 'Mum, she's taller than I am, how could I be?'*". A relationship between the child and teacher was not present, and this impacted the whānau's opinion of the school. The student was eventually moved into the enrichment class, but his mother believed there had been a lingering effect.

The thought that teachers were biased against Māori students also emerged when speaking more generally. One of the mothers stated "*the way they view some of the Māori kids as well, has a lot to do with it*". The group was discussing the difference between Kura Kaupapa and Mainstream schooling - and how "*it's about that connection with the kids...you can't do it with all of them...but it's a lot to do with the teachers*". A separate parent also discussed during our conversation that a teacher needed to be able to connect with the children. "*Just be at their level. The teachers just need to be at their level, that's all*". The issue of connecting with children emerged particularly strongly from those parents who had moved their children from mainstream schooling to Kura Kaupapa - because they felt that was a significant part missing from mainstream.

3.4   Conclusion

The findings of this research are as much about what was not said, as what was. Participants spoke at length about the drastic influence of home background on Māori student literacy learning, and how various socio-cultural factors impact a child's literacy success. Points such as transiency, parental habits, socioeconomic status were related to other factors, including development of oral language prior to school attendance, and exposure to traditional types of literacy out of school. These were the main concerns of both teacher and parent participants. Much less was said about Specific Learning Difficulties. The lack of discourse, even when questioned, being entered into by both parent and teacher participants demonstrates a potentially missing portion of an explanation. The survey data showed that teachers are less confident discussing Specific Learning Difficulties than they are with identifying and working with student literacy levels - essentially teachers feel they can tell when something is not quite right, but not always diagnose the cause. Parents and teachers both agreed on the fact that building strong relationships are essential for a student, particularly a Māori child, to succeed in literacy, and school in general. This is not a new discovery, but when looking at Māori achievement, it is important to consider as a factor. When combined with the lack of SpLD discussion, how can educators and whānau identify what may be causing their child to not achieve at their highest potential.

Chapter Four: Discussion

The findings of this research study have demonstrated an ongoing propensity for teachers and parents of Māori students to identify a range of socio-cultural factors as influencing literacy achievement, such as home background, socio-economic status, and building strong relationships. By doing so, there is a potential risk of missing other influencing factors. In particular, the focus of this study was Specific Learning Difficulties, with the concern that teachers may not be considering whether SpLD were present in their classroom. The main conclusion from this study is that although teachers and parents are aware of Specific Learning Difficulties, there is a strong focus on the socio-cultural influences on education, which means that reasons given for underachievement tend not to include SpLD. While there is very little existing literature investigating the link between Māori students and SpLD, there is much more discourse on the effect of relationships, resourcing, or socioeconomic impacts. Cognitive influences, such as SpLD, are not prominent. In order to position this study, this wider body of literature has also been used.

There was a tendency for teachers to use a traditional definition of literacy when speaking about whānau attitudes. A relatively narrow definition of literacy was admittedly used to frame this research study, yet teachers tended to take an even narrower view. Earlier in this thesis, I defined literacy as

a term relating to reading and writing of the English language, though this includes interacting with different types of texts

It is noteworthy that teachers often overlooked the "different types of texts", tending to focus on books, with very few mentions of newspaper, video texts, everyday reading and writing around the home (eg shopping lists), and digital texts? Functional literacy is a term that researchers in Adult Education often make use of to explain the base level of literacy an adult requires to be able to fully participate in societal processes (Özenç & Doğan, 2014). While less common in the literature for children's education, the concept of Functional Literacy remains pertinent. Literacy takes many forms - in this study the main understanding from participants has been that of more formal reading and writing of the English language. However, the ability to read and fill out forms, or read and gather

information from a newspaper, or communicating through social media are all types of literacy that families often participate in - everyday literacies. The concept of defining literacy is discussed further in relation to data from the study below.

One of the most important factors influencing literacy achievement amongst Māori students, according to all participants in the study, is the relationship between the student and the teacher. This extends into relationships between the school and whānau, and wider community, but the personal links within the classroom were felt by both teachers and parents to have a far reaching effect on a child's learning success. The influence of relationships was one of the main findings from the study, and is explored in depth in the third section of this chapter.

The following discussion explores the perceptions of parents and teachers on Specific Learning Difficulties, and the literacy achievement of Māori students. A critical lens informs the analysis, which weaves theories of structural racism, definitions of literacy, and culturally responsive pedagogy through the examination of the three main findings; teachers looking out, the silence around SpLD, and the importance of relationships. Pulling together the data and the literature, the discussion demonstrates how there is a strong potential that Specific Learning Difficulties are simply being missed amongst some Māori students - despite the best efforts of their educators.

4.1   Teachers Looking Out

The extent to which structural racism influences the education system, both in New Zealand and globally, has been well documented in the literature, in far more depth than possible here (see for example Bishop & Berryman, 2006; Pack, Tuffin, & Lyons, 2016; Timperley & Robinson, 2001). However, the link between structural racism and the topic of study - Specific Learning Difficulties amongst Māori students - has been less explored. There was an overwhelming amount of data from teachers and parents focusing on the impact of social and cultural factors on Māori student literacy learning, and very little about specific learning needs or difficulties. Using a critical lens to analyse these findings, it is necessary to look first at the power and societal structures that could be influencing this

result. In New Zealand, the dominant educational discourse is socio-cultural, and teacher education programmes reflect this (Chapman, Prochrow, and Arrow, 2015). Approaches to teaching focus on the social and cultural aspects, often at the expense of psycho-cognitive theories. New Zealand educators therefore are working within a context that focuses on socio-cultural causes and methods for teaching and learning.

Throughout data collected from teachers, factors such as transiency, lack of resources, and a low rate of exposure to books and oral language in early childhood were strongly linked to low socio-economic homes and families. There exists an assumption that students from low income families are more likely to struggle in school, which I suggest may have an impact on the way that teachers approach the learning of these students. While Māori are not guaranteed to be in a low socioeconomic position, nor are all low income families Māori, there is a disproportionately high likelihood of this being so (Marriott & Sim, 2014; Perry, 2018). Structural racism has an effect on job status, health care, accomodation stability, and education, amongst others (Bishop, Berryman, Cavanagh, & Teddy, 2009). The impact on education emerges in a multitude of ways - but the attitude of teachers is particularly salient when thinking about the identification of Specific Learning Difficulties. There is a large body of education literature dedicated to unconscious bias and stereotyping by teachers. It is not usually a deliberate judgement, but has an effect on how students experience school. By stereotyping, teachers are then more likely to have low academic expectations of their students, often spend less time interacting with them - especially in a positive way, and can tend to punish them for behaviour that is common from all students (e.g. Kramer-Dahl & Kwek, 2011; Matthews, Kizzie, Rowley & Cortina, 2010; Sleeter, 2017). For example, a Pākehā student may not be in trouble for talking, while a Māori student is (Bishop & Berryman, 2006). As teachers continue to search outwards for influencing factors on student achievement, it becomes more possible that they are missing the existence of SpLD as a reason for underachievement. While the students still receive support if they are struggling, the help they get could potentially be more tailored to their actual learning issue instead of general low achievement. The point in question is not whether social factors influence how successfully a Māori child achieves in literacy learning. Rather, it is important to

not lose sight of the fact that other causes *may* be at play, *such as* SpLD, and as a result of the interest in social factors, other, more cognitive points may be missed. While this study is unable to determine conclusively whether or not students learning difficulties are being missed, the data sample suggests that teachers will not always think of SpLD before they blame socio-cultural influences.

Part of the issue is caused by a lack of a collective definition of literacy. Teachers, scholars, governments and organisations often take slightly different interpretations of the term 'literacy' (Özenç & Doğan, 2014). Although teachers in the study tend to take a traditional view of reading and writing being limited to books, in reality, literacy develops in homes via a range of kinds of texts. For example being able to navigate the internet and video games require reading and writing skills. Video games and internet content such as Youtube videos also develop the ability to keep track of an overarching idea, as well as comprehension of language, both of which are vital skills in improving literacy achievement. Theories of Functional Literacy include a range of purposes and types of texts - looking at literacy as a tool for functioning successfully in modern society. If students are able to develop and make use of skills that transcend curricular subjects, they are more able to make sense of their social, personal, economic, and cultural worlds (Özenç & Doğan, 2014). Literacy therefore benefits from being understood within a cross-curricular model, as functional literacy theories place language and literacy into the context of different curriculum areas.

What is interesting to note, is the way that culture may influence these definitions of literacy. While one interview participant spoke about how it would be beneficial if they were able to teach waiata (songs) as a form of literacy, there are often different understandings along cultural and economic lines. For example, the classical literature is often regarded as the pinnacle of literature, or authority on certain topics, usually by white, upper and middle class communities (Jackson, 2016). Academic authority and sense of elitism has been shown in scholarship to be part of a larger bias that contributes to the Westernisation of academia (Jackson, 2016). In New Zealand, there has been a push for "Māori to learn as Māori", but the historical effects of exclusion of Te Reo Māori in education are still evident today (Bishop, Berryman, Cavanagh, & Teddy, 2009). The various cultural

interpretations of what constitutes literacy may also impact how teachers identify how students are achieving. Being able to see themselves as connected to the school in a local sense is an important aspect for many Māori students in them feeling welcomed and comfortable in the school (Ministry of Education, 2011). Culturally responsive pedagogies play a key role in helping students to feel accepted in their classroom, and the New Zealand Government encourages teachers to make use of them. Resources such as *Tātaiako* and *Tapasā* promote and detail the ways that teachers can meet the cultural competencies required of them. While culturally responsive pedagogies are significant for successful multicultural education, the focus remains on the social and cultural aspects of these pedagogies, at the expense of psycho-cognitive frameworks for learning. The need for strong cultural support in school was also present in the parent focus group data. As mentioned earlier, recruitment of parents was difficult, as many parents had one or more of their children in kura kaupapa, rather than mainstream schools. When speaking with parents, kura kaupapa were generally considered to be superior to English-medium schools in terms of their cultural grounding.

Types of learning are also privileged towards traditional European knowledge. As Ann Milne (2018) writes, the racism is embedded "in our [Pākehā] belief we have a monopoly on advanced, scholarly ("academic") learning", among other aspects of the education system. The New Zealand Curriculum document is constructed in such a way that supports the inclusivity and diversity that schools require in order to best teach their students. Its values and principles make reference to developing students who will work to create and acknowledge a New Zealand in which Māori and Pākehā are recognised as full Treaty (of Waitangi) partners, as well as the valuing of cultural diversity (Ministry of Education, 2015). The Treaty Principles (*partnership, participation,* and *protection*) are embedded in New Zealand's bicultural foundations, and will often be represented through a socio-cultural lens, adding to the wider influences on the teachers in this study.

Although understanding about, and focus on, the importance of including culturally diverse content (especially Māori tikanga) has grown in recent years, there were reports of racism released throughout 2018 from students currently in the system. While many teachers and academics did not express surprise, a large number of

teachers and members of the general public were disbelieving (Office of the Children's Commissioner, 2018). It is this lack of realisation which contributes most to continued structural racism, the symptoms of which can be seen in low expectations, deficit, and biased views of students. It is equally important to make clear that this is not a situation that all schools and teachers are perpetuating. However, the unconscious bias of teachers in this study may be a contributing cause to the attribution of literacy concerns to socio-economic status, and other social and cultural factors.

In relation to the teaching of literacy to Māori students in mainstream schools, it seems apparent that many teachers from this study are falling into the trap of 'looking out', and minimising the fact that there are many potential factors that contribute to how well a student is achieving. In arguing for the necessity of taking a holistic view, teachers are not being asked to ignore the home factors - it has been proven that poverty, parental influence, or issues such as transience do have a significant impact on student learning (e.g. Hattie, 2018). However, by placing an emphasis on these factors, teachers are running the risk of missing opportunities for supports that they *could* be providing in the classroom - which would have the secondary benefit of helping relieve some of the stress that teachers spoke about during interviews. The despair about not being able to help the students as much as they wished they could was mentioned by several participants - statements about how it is "incredibly heartbreaking" indicate the depth of care that teachers have for their students.

One participant (who is both a classroom teacher and holds the SENCo position for her school) spoke in more depth than the other teachers about Specific Learning Difficulties. Her concern was that while children with dyslexia would struggle, it was the students who have dyscalculia that would encounter the most trouble. Her interview demonstrated that much professional development had been undertaken at the school (under her guidance), and dyslexia and other specific learning difficulties were a topic of focus. The interview supports the idea that there is not a total absence of Specific Learning Difficulty awareness amongst schools. The interview data collectively indicates that professional development is taking place for teachers, and often focuses on dyslexia. Another participant

outlined the dyslexia-focused inquiry the Year 5 and 6 teachers had participated in over the previous year, prompted by a number of students being identified as having literacy needs. It reiterates the fact that teachers are generally responsive to their student's learning requirements, and are participating in both self- and school-directed learning. The interview data also suggests that there has been a growing awareness of SpLD in recent times. In each of the interviews with teachers, I asked about Specific Learning Difficulties. One teacher of junior children, at a state primary school, had the opportunity to work with researchers from Waikato University in developing a literacy inquiry within the school. My argument is that while teachers are conscious of SpLD, and (in this data sample) were generally confident about noticing signs of a potential SpLD - they still maintain a much stronger focus on the external, socio-cultural factors, particularly from the classroom teachers without extra leadership positions.

Teachers are influenced by unconscious bias

The work drawn on in the literature review explores the clashing of cultures that often seems to occur in New Zealand schools (e.g. Smith, Pohio, & Hoeberigs, 2018). If teachers are unaware of their biases, a failure to connect with students from cultures other than the teacher's own will be perpetuated in the classrooms. Teachers in the study seemed aware of the potential for bias, with both several interview comments, and survey answers relating explicitly to avoiding stereotyping. However, other answers seemed to contradict the caution employed, as teachers continued to talk about the social and cultural influences on education, particularly socio-economic status. In comparison, data from parents indicates that Māori parents and students are aware of when they are being stereotyped, and suggests that it was a common experience for Māori across the study. It seems clear that teachers make judgements about resources and experiences available at home - for example, one teacher commented on the difficulty in separating reasons students might not be learning, and in not making judgements about the students. While teachers acknowledge that unconscious bias exists, they appear less able to prevent their own biases from influencing their teaching. While I agree that it is necessary to think about all of the factors involved (including socio-cultural), it seems a somewhat narrow approach to assume that all the problems are caused by poverty, to the exclusion of targeting the more easily changeable in-

school concerns. In November, 2018, Unicef released a report placing New Zealand among the worst in the European Union/OECD in terms of equality between students, a difference that shows up particularly between gender (UNICEF Office of Research, 2018). While New Zealand's achievement gap[5] has reduced in recent years, it is simply because the scores of our top achievers have gone down, although the lowest achievement scores have improved slightly (May et al., 2016).

It is prudent to keep in mind the fact that while teachers and parents in the current sample are more focused on concepts such as the influence of home life, that generally, schools are using what they believe is the best way to support students. This study does not ignore the work that teachers are doing well, rather the findings indicate there is a need for schools to look more broadly at multiple factors.

The findings of this study are strengthened by those of other New Zealand scholars. As explored in the literature review, Bishop (2017) consistently found that deficit theorising about Māori students was present among teachers. These findings are repeated in the data presented within this thesis. In his research, Bishop found that teachers would discuss how they had high expectations for their Māori students, and that much of the difficulty was in the factors they could not control. The teachers he interviewed discussed being stuck with societal issues that could not be fought against in the classroom - a feeling of isolation and expectation. While on a much smaller scale, the sample of teachers from the current research followed a similar pattern of passing on the causes of low achievement, while simultaneously professing they held high expectations, and were outwardly conscious of not taking a deficit view.

An additional impact of deficit thinking was also present in the data - especially the survey data from teachers. Teachers were reluctant to recommend that parents made use of support services, such as SPELD or Kip Mcgrath. 68% of participants, for a variety of reasons (as discussed in the findings section) said that

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[5] The achievement gap referred to here is the difference between our top performers and lowest performers in reading, as measured by data from PIRLS, and Unicef.

they had not suggested external support. Across the survey data, teachers judged that the cost of these external programmes would be prohibitive for their families. While it is true that expense is a barrier to accessing support, when compared to data gathered during focus groups with parents, it seems a potentially damaging idea. The focus group conversation related in the findings section demonstrates the way in which intent can be misinterpreted across various perspectives - parents understood teacher actions as deficit assumptions about the parents. The way in which teachers refrained from proposing external support implies a belief that there is a lack of resourcing in most homes. As the survey was anonymous however, it is not possible in this study to confirm that teachers are more likely to think that Māori parents are less able to finance external support than other ethnic groups, or whether it differs across socio-economic areas. It is an area for consideration though, as it could help to explain the phenomenon noted in the data provided by SPELD. Māori made up a much smaller percentage of SPELD users than, for example, Pākehā, provoking questions for future research.

One of the interview participants related an anecdote about a single parent who was going to send her child to Kip Mcgrath. When the teacher questioned why, the mother responded angrily, taking offence what she saw as being called poor.

Deficit thinking is also a prominent theme in multicultural education literature. Non-majority students are often subjected to assumptions made by educators, a phenomenon not limited to New Zealand schools. Kramer-Dahl and Kwek (2011) explored a similar attitude among teachers in Singapore - *"The issue with deficit beliefs and thinking is the insidious way in which they seek to provide the obvious, often visible or measurable, reasons for learning difficulties while pointing the arrow of blame away from the methods and materials we use in classrooms that give rise to them in the first place…"* (p 159). The study involved the observation and intervention of two high school teachers, both of whom saw their students in a particular way. By not understanding that the students in their classes were in fact able to complete work at a higher level than they were being given, and by enforcing certain strict rules around how students were to learn English, neither teacher was able to successfully teach the children. Their attitudes resulted in a

ongoing belief of the teachers not realising that the students could most likely do the work.

4.2   Silence about Specific Learning Difficulties

The enduring focus on social factors has left a gap in the literature around the cognitive functioning that occurs in literacy learning. The decoding and comprehension skills that are required to be literate are discussed somewhat, with mention made of learning aspects such as phonological awareness. There are constant debates over the best method for teaching children to read. However, the importance of cognitive factors in literacy achievement is not reflected in the data from parents and teachers. Specific learning difficulties have a direct impact of the cognitive ability of a student to decode, yet SpLD are treated throughout the data as more of an unknown entity than a factor in children's literacy outcomes. Teachers in the study appear to lack a sense of being comfortable with SpLD. They know some basic information, and many have gone through some professional development on dyslexia, yet they remain less confident to speak about SpLD than other aspects of literacy education.

As Specific Learning Difficulties are linked to cognitive functions, it is important to point out the difference between the teachers' confidence and knowledge about cognitive factors , and social or cultural factors. There was a tendency among the participants to remain focused on social aspects, even when discussing SpLD, which seems to indicate a lack of willingness to explore SpLD as a factor. This is not to say that teachers do not understand what causes SpLD. Rather, the data reflects a wider issue of not taking the full range of possible factors into account.

The New Zealand Government has pushed for improvements in Māori achievement in education for several decades, with little change. As mentioned earlier, Māori achievement levels are not equivalent to those of Pākehā students. However, the focus on Māori achievement has centred on cultural aspects, and while these are incredibly important, it may be that other factors, such as having a SpLD, have become neglected. The data in this research study supports the argument that Specific Learning Difficulties are being overlooked in favour of more

abstract socio-cultural concepts. Culturally responsive teaching and schools make a huge difference for students (Ministry of Education, 2011; Ministry of Education, 2015; Office of the Children's Commissioner, 2018). This study does not challenge those findings - taking steps to ensure students feel welcomed in schools, and are catered for is an essential aspect of education. However, the potential harm is in the ignorance and ignoring of other factors. If a student is not doing well, it may be because they have no food at home, or it may be because they have dyslexia, or both. The issue arises when the dyslexia is ignored in favour of a breakfast programme for the student to attend. By ignoring one set of problems in favour of another, students are potentially being left with not enough, or not targeted necessary support.

The survey asked teachers how prevalent they felt Specific Learning Difficulties were in their classrooms. Fitting with data from SPELD and the Dyslexia Foundation of New Zealand, teachers participating in the interviews felt about 10% of their students should be diagnosed with a SpLD, usually dyslexia. 67% of survey participants responded that SpLD are 'somewhat common', while only 23% felt they were 'somewhat uncommon'. The data both indicates that SpLD are present in classrooms, and supports the argument of this study that teachers are not unaware of SpLD.

Some interview participants, having an opportunity to expand on their answer, mentioned that rates were higher than 10%. One teacher spoke about how although there were two identified cases in her classroom, there were probably another 4 children that required extra support, but were not officially diagnosed. An interview participant stated that between 5 and 10% of children in a classroom would have "*a learning disability, or a disability or deficit through family, or circumstances and that sort of thing*". When questioned about being able to tell the difference between a learning difficulty, or impact from something like family circumstances, the teacher felt it was "*absolutely*" difficult.

Within the data, the sense of confusion persisted amongst teachers. One participant related a story about a Māori child in her classroom who had been tested for, and scored low in a variety of learning aspects, but because the tests

were unfamiliar to her, and his report came back with such a number of suggestions, she was finding it difficult to implement any of the strategies effectively - especially since the child had no teacher aide funding. Since the various influences on literacy learning are so complex and interlinked, teachers struggle to differentiate between potential causes. Other teachers agreed that suggestions and information from RTLBs could be overwhelming, especially in terms of time required. Teachers reported feeling inundated with information, but there were mentions of how they wanted different sorts of support. Rather than being given theories, teachers want tools and more specific ways to approach literacy learning issues. Although much of the silence around SpLD seems to be due to a focus on other aspects of a child's life, it is possible that part of the issue could be related to an influx of information but a lack of support in implementation. The idea that teachers need more support in helping students with learning difficulties was present in several of the interviews conducted. Teachers felt that there was support available, through people such as RTLBs, or RTLits. However, mentions of available support were often tempered with comments regarding the frustrations in the workload these personnel deal with, the instructions that would result from their meetings, and needing to understand the different sets of results coming from the educational psychologists. The sheer number of intervention programmes available also potentially impacts the level of success schools can have when attempting to support their students. The survey asked about tools and resources used (see Appendix 2), and even the brief comments from participants demonstrated a significant selection. Information from teacher resource sites (such as TKI) also promote a range, and there are still other programmes available (e.g. Agility with Sound, Quick 60, Early Words). Schools are often advised by RTLBs about which programme to use, and each intervention can often cost considerable amounts. Funding for children is not always included - the above example shows how a child needs extra strategies, but the teacher felt that she could not provide the extent of help as he did not qualify for teacher aide hours. In my own work as a teacher aide, I was often helping students who did not have funded hours, but did have RTLB recommendations for interventions (personal communication, 2018).

Chapman, Prochnow, and Arrow (2015) highlighted 11 "myths" about literacy education in New Zealand. The myths are based on an opposition of belief in the current theoretical underpinnings of New Zealand's literacy programme. The authors argue that New Zealand's constructivist based literacy teaching is harming children who start school with reduced literate cultural capital. Teachers are focused on the the "conditions and context of learning", but the issues with pedagogical constructivism are not being considered (p. 224). The chapter supports the findings of this study - showing how teachers in New Zealand are working within a socio-cultural and constructivist context, promoted by the Ministry of Education. As mentioned, PIRLs data shows that reading scores of New Zealand students have not improved over the course of at least a decade, despite targeted efforts by the New Zealand Government (Tunmer, Chapman, Greaney, Prochnow, & Arrow, 2013). New Zealand's contextual teaching allows for a strong influence of culturally responsive teaching and texts (Ministry of Education, 2007). However, as Chapman et al. (2015) point out, between 15% and 20% of 6 year olds over the last decade have been placed in the Reading Recovery programme, and this has been shown to work less effectively for Māori, Pasifika, and low Socio-Economic Status students, although they make up the largest proportion of Reading Recovery participants. Research has shown that for students with SpLD, notably dyslexia, early intervention with explicit phonics teaching will help counter some of the impact the SpLD has (e.g. *About Dyslexia* - Ministry of Education, 2008). Chapman et al. use this example to refute the idea the New Zealand's constructivist approach is theoretically sound. New Zealand's approach to education is predominantly socio-cultural and constructivist, but is this preventing teachers from exploring all potential influences on literacy learning for Māori students?

Language acquisition and literacy learning both sit on similar continuums of theoretical standpoints, moving from purely psycholinguistic interpretations, to a social belief that literacy is a process of creating meaning (National Research Council & Institute of Medicine, 1997). It is important to highlight the different ends of such a continuum, and explore how it relates to SpLD in Māori students. With psycholinguistic theories, literacy is taught through definitive teaching of the parts of language (e.g. phonological awareness, letter recognition), (Davidson, 2010).

The other end of the continuum is where New Zealand teachers' approach to literacy learning generally sits - aligned with whole language theories. Although phonics are still addressed in classrooms, teaching focuses more on decoding language through contextual keys, and multiple cues to help guess the word meanings (Krägeloh & Neha, 2010). The data in this study shows that SpLD are not looked for as often as factors that are external to schools, yet as discussed above, Māori are referred to Reading Recovery at a disproportionately high rate. Although Māori students are among the highest participants in Reading Recovery programs, and disproportionately represented amongst low achievement rates in literacy, they remain less likely to be referred for a SpLD diagnosis. The silence around SpLD may be reinforcing deficit thinking about Māori underachievement, and leaving unconscious biases to exist unchallenged.

4.3   Importance of Relationships

Although teacher and parent participants provided different points of view throughout the data, there is no question that there is an agreement on the importance and value to be found in having a strong relationship between the student and the teacher. This relationship can then extend to the school, and whānau, but teaching, at its core, is about the teacher and the student working together. In the data, there is a distinct cultural aspect to this understanding, from both parties. While having an authentic relationship is thought to improve learning for every child, it is particularly evident that teachers and parents feel for Māori students, the relationship is absolutely key. Building a strong relationship, especially with Māori students, can be helped enormously through the use of culturally responsive pedagogy (Ministry of Education, 2011). New Zealand is committed to bicultural education, through the Treaty of Waitangi, and promoting culturally responsive pedagogy is one of the ways that schools can support the learning of Māori students.

Culturally responsive teaching has been explored by scholars such as Bishop, Berryman, and Macfarlane. The educultural wheel model, developed by Macfarlane, has been reworked for the New Zealand curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2015). The wheel promotes whakawhanaungatanga, a framework that

is supported by the work of Glynn and Bishop (Macfarlane, Glynn, Cavanagh, & Bateman, 2007). Within whakawhanaungatanga are concepts of whanaungatanga, rangatiratanga, manaakitanga, kotahitanga, and pumanawatanga - each a foundational notion to the connectedness inherent in Māori culture. The parent data related to the concept of whakawhanaungatanga, with some parents talking about how the relationships were a particularly important reason for them sending their children to kura kaupapa. Others spoke about how they had noticed a difference between whānau members who had attended kura kaupapa Māori and those who had been educated in English-medium schools. Throughout the research process, it became apparent that part of the difficulty in recruiting Māori parents to speak with stemmed from the fact that many Māori parents are choosing kura kaupapa over mainstream schooling for their children. The parents I spoke to agreed, and explored the benefits of the relationship building in their answers. The findings demonstrate the similar perception of all three participant groups - that if a Māori student does in fact have a strong relationship with their teacher, and the school and whānau are also connected, their learning progress will be accelerated. Because relationships are so important within Māori culture, the concept of ako - reciprocity - is an effective base from which to build a pedagogy that suits Māori students. Critically, it should be noted that although this thesis promotes the consideration of a more cognitive view of educational factors, it should not occur at the expense of acknowledging social or cultural influences. Culturally responsive pedagogy is still the best way to support Māori students, but this support could be enhanced if educators are more aware of the possibility that they are missing signs of Specific Learning Difficulties, due to placing blame on external factors.

As described in the literature review, Milne recently completed working with a group of senior high school students, known as the 'Warrior researchers'. This group of 10 Māori, Samoan, and Tongan students produced a piece of research focusing on racism in New Zealand schools, and how certain governmental policies impacted their learning. The research drew on Freire's work, and is an example of the level of critical thinking students are able to produce, when taught in an appropriate way. The group of students were shown that there are structures in place that affect them in ways that the education system may not impact those

of a different ethnicity (particularly when compared to the advantages a Pākehā student experiences). Using the work of Graham Smith, the Warrior Scholars focused on the concept of self-determination, a core tenet of Kaupapa Māori, as it is a cycle of conscientising, resisting, and transforming. Importantly, the group's work stems from the school's insistence on the necessity of building strong and powerful classroom relationships. Building an environment in which Māori can be Māori is essential to student learning, and is a main feature of Ka Hikitia - the Government's strategy for Māori education. However, despite the focus on relationship building, it does often not manifest in classrooms.

The following quote comes from one of the Warrior Researchers - Jasmine Bellamy. Referring to alternative ways to spend the funding currently being put into Communities of Learning, students suggested ideas such as compulsory teaching of Māori tīkanga and New Zealand history. Bellamy stated *"I think those are all great ideas that might actually help our learning – **as Māori**, as who we are – more than this intense focus on our reading and writing, which doesn't seem to be making very much difference"* (2018)*.* Her argument is that the Ministry of Education is focusing on the symptoms when creating policies, and as a result, are failing to meet either *with* the community, or *the needs of* the community. By teaching to the child, and getting to know them and their interests, the relationship between the student and teacher can be strengthened. Doing so encourages students to take an interest in their learning, resulting in much higher, better engagement. This style of learning fits well with the more modern pedagogy that has emerged over the last few years. Collaborative, student-led learning is directly built on the teacher having a good relationship with the students, and being able to trust and direct their learning, rather than teacher-led, content driven learning.

The *Te Kotahitanga* research defines clearly that Māori students find the in-class relationships with their teacher to be the most influential aspect of their learning. The theories behind *Te Kotahitanga* are strongly relevant to the findings of this study. Initiatives such as *Te Kotahitanga* are noted within New Zealand education and as a result, teachers are aware that relationships are important. The data from this study supports the literature in this. It is logical to assume that if a teacher is

teaching well, using the values of *Te Kotahitanga*, and has a good working relationship with their Māori students, they are more likely to notice a student who is struggling in literacy, or is not achieving as highly as could be expected, and less likely to attribute underachievement to cultural factors and more likely to consider a wider range of possible causes.

John Hattie's prominent work in education, a meta-analysis of the measured level of impact that various factors have, is also reflective of how important relationships are. Of all 256 current rated influences, teacher-student relationships has an effect size of 0.52 (Hattie, 2017). If a relationship is not strong enough, it is possible that teachers will misinterpret behavioural and learning signs from a student. Teachers in this situation are then more likely to miss the signs of a Specific Learning Difficulty, potentially due to focusing on behavioural or socio-cultural issues instead. The possibility of such a situation was raised during one of the focus groups, with one of the parents talking about the trouble she and the school were having with her son's behaviour. The communication between her and the school has broken down, and it has reached a point where the child's learning is being adversely affected. The focus on behaviour rather than reasons behind the child's behaviour, such as potential frustration due to a SpLD, was due to a breakdown in the relationship between the child, parent, and school.

The anecdote referred to in the introduction of this thesis is from the same focus group. The fact that a young Māori boy was able to make his way through school without really being able to read and write - and nobody noticed - indicates a much larger problem than perhaps educators would like to believe. The whānau present at the group spoke about how he was always well liked at school, teachers would "just do things for him". The relationship may have been strong, but it indicates another potential challenge for teachers - overcompensating for a child's SpLD without realising. The wider work on high expectations is potentially relevant here, since while a teacher can build relationships based on trust and respect with students, they must remain in a position where they promote successful learning. It was felt that the child had learnt to hide his difficulty in reading and writing, because it was not until several years later that anybody noticed the different avoidant techniques he had built up over time. It is not clear whether this particular

case was a result of blame being placed on other factors - the family related that they had not grown up with much money - or perhaps negligent teaching, an overworked system, or any number of other factors.

The point remains however, that one young Māori boy felt so ashamed of his troubles in literacy that he gave up his dream chance to play rugby as a career, and still told nobody. It begs the question, how did none of his teachers realise? Perhaps more importantly, is this still happening in our schools? How many other students have slipped through the cracks unnoticed, undiagnosed, and unsupported?

Chapter Five: Conclusion and Implications

Although perhaps best considered as a starting point for further research, this study has implications for the education sector. The most important finding of this study is that the focus on social and cultural influences on Māori student literacy learning are potentially impacting teacher's ability to identify and support SpLD. This thesis addresses the literature gap, by investigating the links between potential SpLD, and Māori literacy achievement. The area of Māori students with SpLD is extremely limited, and this study adds to the literature by pointing out the possibility of SpLD being missed in Māori students.

Consequently, the study concludes that teachers should make sure they are considering multiple factors for Māori low achievement, rather than mainly looking to external influences. Teachers should ensure they are doing their best to continue learning about SpLD, through methods such as participating fully in PLD, or taking SpLD as an inquiry topic. While not a new idea, this study also supports the concept that it is important that teachers are developing strong relationships with their students and whānau. If schools were able to offer more targeted professional development, teacher's confidence may also increase.

SENCo should also make sure they are providing opportunities for their schools to develop skills related to identifying and working with SpLD. The knowledge of one of the interview participants exceeded that of other teachers due to her role as SENCo, so there is a continued need for SENCo to educate their colleagues. Many survey responses spoke about simply referring students to SENCo who know more about the processes and supports available - which suggests that possibly there is an opportunity for SENCo and other staff to work more collaboratively within schools to support students.

For parents, it is also important that they are building strong relationships with their children's teachers. Whakawhanaungatanga is not successful if it is entirely one-sided, so whānau also need to work with teachers in identifying why their child may not be achieving as highly as their other attributes suggest they could be. A

broader awareness in the community about SpLD could also be beneficial - for example, schools and community groups could promote information evenings, or presentations at school whānau hui.

Major limitations of the study:
This research project is limited in that it only consists of data from a small number of teachers, SENCo, and parents. Due to no high schools being willing to participate, the study is also limited to primary and intermediate teachers, although the children of the parent participants covered a range of ages. Results are also particular to the city the study is based in, and may not be able to be translated to other teachers in New Zealand. Similarly, the opinions of parents in the data are likely not representative of many Māori, as there was also a limited number of participants. Parents also tended to be supportive of kura kaupapa, so there is a potential bias in the data. Another limitation related to further application of the findings was that although there were teachers interviewed who held similar roles, there was minimal SENCo participation.

Areas for future research:
Further research could investigate the possibility that teachers are missing SpLD amongst Māori students. One way of approaching this could be through more targeted screening of children, an action that was not possible within the scope and timeframe of this study.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, due to the anonymity of the survey, differences in responses across socio-economic areas was not achievable. Future research could address whether teachers are more likely to think that Māori parents are less able to finance external support than other ethnic groups, or whether it differs across socio-economic areas. Research could also explore further whether the lack of take-up of external support by Māori is due to less Māori being referred, or if Māori whānau find the expense or other factors to be prohibitive.

Additionally, there is a gap in the research in terms of examining potential differences between Māori student literacy learning in Māori medium/English

medium schools. Other research studies could look into the prevalence of SpLD in each medium, and look into whether there are different influencing factors of literacy being identified by teachers of kura kaupapa.

Final Conclusions

Teachers are aware of the impact that Specific Learning Difficulties have on student learning, and are relatively confident in recognising signs of an SpLD. Despite the acknowledgement of SpLD, factors that are outside of a teacher's control, such as oral language development prior to formal education, are still the most commonly considered factors when discussing the literacy learning of Māori students. Therein lies the question of the effect of really good teaching on potentially more negative factors, such as fewer resources being available. A teacher must consider the impact of any biases they may hold - even if it is not intentional, studies making use of student voice show that students pick up what a teacher believes of them. SpLD are not mentioned often throughout the data, suggesting that teachers may not be considering SpLD as impacting literacy learning. The importance of relationships did come through strongly in the data - it was very prominent in the answers given by both survey and interview participants, as well as from data collected from parents. It is evident that teachers in the study care deeply about their students and want them to succeed. However, it is possible that teachers are overlooking the existence of some SpLD, by assuming lower achievement is caused by other, unchangeable aspects of student's lives. Future research could further confirm this hypothesis, perhaps involving SpLD screening of children. The main research question this thesis investigates was "What are the factors that teachers, SENCo, and parents identify as influencing Māori student literacy learning?" Socio-cultural factors and classroom relationships were the main points identified, linking to other similar literature. It remains for teachers to be continually reflective, judging whether they have missed certain characteristics of SpLD - not through poor teaching necessarily, but as influenced by the social, cultural, and political environment of their context. Building a critical understanding of teaching practice should therefore be considered essential in order to provide students with the best possible support for learning.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Survey - given to teacher and SENCo participants

What are the factors that teachers, Special Education Needs Coordinators, and parents identify as influencing Māori student literacy achievement?

For this survey, the acronym SpLD is used to refer to Specific Learning Difficulties

How confident are you at recognising various factors that impact achievement in literacy?

	Very confident (9)	Somewhat confident (10)	Not confident (11)	Not at all confident (12)
behavioural factors? (1)	○	○	○	○
home factors? (2)	○	○	○	○
cultural factors? (3)	○	○	○	○
student attitude? (4)	○	○	○	○

How confident do you feel about...

	Very confident (12)	Somewhat confident (13)	Not confident (14)	Not at all confident (15)
identifying Specific Learning Difficulties? (1)	○	○	○	○
talking about SpLD to a colleague? (2)	○	○	○	○
explaining SpLD to parents? (3)	○	○	○	○
recognising signs of a potential SpLD? (4)	○	○	○	○

How confident are you at identifying student literacy levels?

- ○ very confident (1)
- ○ somewhat confident (2)
- ○ not confident (3)
- ○ not at all confident (4)

What are the tools and resources used by you and/or your school to identify the reasons why a student is underachieving? (e.g. tests, programmes, teaching approach).

In your experience, are there differences in the literacy achievement of Māori and non-Māori students?' If so, why?

How do you and/or your school identify students who are struggling in literacy?

Māori students I teach often come from homes where reading and writing activities are seen as ____

- ○ very important (1)
- ○ somewhat important (2)
- ○ somewhat unimportant (3)
- ○ not important (4)
- ○ I'm not sure (5)

The next question asks how strongly you agree with a broad statement. These are general, so your answer should reflect how you usually feel about the statement.

How strongly do you agree that Māori students in your class

	Strongly agree (1)	Agree (2)	Disagree (3)	Strongly disagree (4)
have access to books at home (1)	○	○	○	○
see people at home reading or enjoying reading (2)	○	○	○	○
read out of class (3)	○	○	○	○

are usually enthusiastic about learning literacy (5)	○	○	○	○
have parents who are involved in their children's literacy learning (4)	○	○	○	○

Enter any other comments you may have relating to literacy support that Māori students receive at home

_____

For the following questions, please fill in the gap with the statement that most reflects your views regarding literacy in your discipline.

Māori students are engaged in classroom literacy activities _____ than their non-Māori peers

- ○ Much more (1)
- ○ Somewhat more (2)
- ○ About the same (3)
- ○ Somewhat less (4)
- ○ Much less (5)

Māori students in my classroom find literacy _____ than other students

- ○ much easier (1)
- ○ somewhat easier (2)
- ○ about the same (3)
- ○ somewhat harder (4)
- ○ much harder (5)

How prevalent do you feel specific learning difficulties are amongst your students?

- ○ very common (1)
- ○ somewhat common (2)
- ○ somewhat uncommon (3)
- ○ very uncommon (4)

How prevalent are specific learning difficulties amongst your Māori students?

- ○ very common (1)
- ○ somewhat common (2)
- ○ somewhat uncommon (3)
- ○ very uncommon (4)

If you suspect a student has a specific learning difficulty, what action would you take? Please select all that apply.

- ☐ Refer to an RTLB
- ☐ Refer to an RTLit
- ☐ Refer to SENCo
- ☐ Recommend outside support (eg SPELD, Numberworks, Kip Mcgrath)
- ☐ Recommend In school support (eg literacy groups, Reading Recovery)
- ☐ Other (please specify)

Have you encouraged a student to use an external support programme (e.g. SPELD, Numberworks'n'words)?

- ○ Yes. Why? Did the family follow up with the support programme?
- ○ No. Please explain why not

What are your school's processes for referring students to external support?

Appendix B: Table showing survey responses identifying reasons for underachievement

Q33 - What are the tools and resources used by you and/or your school to identify the reasons why a student is underachieving? (e.g. tests, programmes, teaching approach).

Testing Results in tests Assessments School testing	10
Observations One on one observation Teacher observations	12
Parent Teacher interviews Communication with families/whanau Conferencing with parents Whanau conversations parent/student/teacher meetings	9
Discussion with colleagues Professional discussions Teacher knowledge of students - shared as children change classes Previous years report	4
Individual help	
Reading recovery	
Reading groups Group teaching tasks/programmes Mixed ability and same ability groups Learning partners	6
Individual assessment	
Differentiated instruction Individual instruction	3
Running records	19
Reading rockets	
Moderated writing samples	3
probe	8
e-AsTTle Astle Asstle	12

Record of oral language	
JOST	
Observation survey	5
Quick 60 Tuakana/Teina programme Withdrawal programme	2
exemplars	
Progressions LLP Strong teacher pedagogy in knowledge of LLPs	2
experience	
KLST2 Oral language testing Oral language screening tests by SLT	4
PATs (comprehension and vocab) Standardised tests	8
Sight and hearing analyses	3
Irlens testing	5
Dyslexia screening Lucid Rapid Dyslexia screening	4
Concrete image abstract	
Listening Student voice	3
STAR	3
PaCT Teacher knowledge and use of information gathered from PaCT reading/writing	5
School systems with resources including Alpha to Omega	
Oral discussions Conferencing with students	5
School entry assessment	2
6 year net	4
Junior assessment in maths Basic facts tests	3

GLoSS	4
Social worker in schools	
Community relationships	
CoL data	
CRT in depth time with students	
assessments	
Book work Student work	4
attitudes	
Learning programmes Support learning programmes	2
Observations from multiple professionals	
Lexia	
Individualised goal setting	
Sharing of results	
Overall teacher judgements	3
RTLB, RTLit Contact with outside specialist teachers Referral to outside agencies	6
SENCo referrals Talking to SENCo	2
LLI funding Learning Language Initiative	2
SLT support	
Early words Yolanda Sorlly Early words and phonics	2
PEPs	
IEPs	
Schonell spelling tests	
JAM	
Deliberate acts of teaching	
Class placement discussions	

Researching and reading relevant websites	
Regular monitoring of progress	
Intervention reading experience	
Steps programme	2
ESOL	2
Growing teacher knowledge and implementation of Visible Learning	
Response to special ed programmes	