

Belonging at School in New Zealand: Do Gender and Ethnic-Racial Identity Matter?

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Introduction

Attitudes toward ethnic and racial identity have been linked to both wellbeing and maladaptive outcomes that affect belonging at school. Affirmative feelings towards school have resulted in positive subjective wellbeing and more optimistic thoughts of the future. Further, improved academic achievement and fewer negative behaviours, such as discipline issues, truancy, and dropping out have been associated with students' liking for school.

Health and life satisfaction have also been found to be positively associated with feelings toward school, and the correlations are stronger for females than males. Students who have a more positive attitude toward school have been found to be more concerned with the welfare of their peers. Affirmative school feelings have also been associated with improved school climates per se and linked to belongingness and connection to school.

Study

Cluster analysis was used for the 2,707 adolescent responses from four NZ secondary schools. Cluster analysis is a person-centred technique aimed at grouping participants based on common patterns in their responses. Responses to a series of questions were reported on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). The groups or clusters in this study pertained to how students viewed their ethnic-racial identity in relation to the six attitudes listed in the first column below:

Clusters ▶ ▼ Patterns	Assimilationist	Alienated	Low-Race Salience	Ambivalent	Multiculturalist	Conflicted
Assimilation (A)	High	Slightly below	Well below	Slightly below	Well below	High
Miseducation (M)	Slightly below	Average	Well below	Above average	Well below	High
Self-Hatred (SH)	Well below	Above average	Slightly below	Above average	Well below	High
Anti-Dominant (AD)	Well below	Above average	Slightly below	Above average	Well below	High
Ethnocentricity (E)	Slightly below	Slightly below	Well below	Above average	Above average	High
Multiculturalist (MI)	Above average	Well below	Well below	Above average	High	High

■ High ■ Above average ■ Average ■ Slightly below ■ Well below

Six clusters were found, shown in Columns 2 to 7, with level of ethnic-racial identity attitude indicated by colour. For example, the Alienated cluster was below average on five attitudes whereas the Conflicted cluster was high on all six attitudes. Differences among the six clusters were examined in a series of questions that pertained to measuring relatedness, feelings towards school, and feelings towards teachers.

Overall Findings

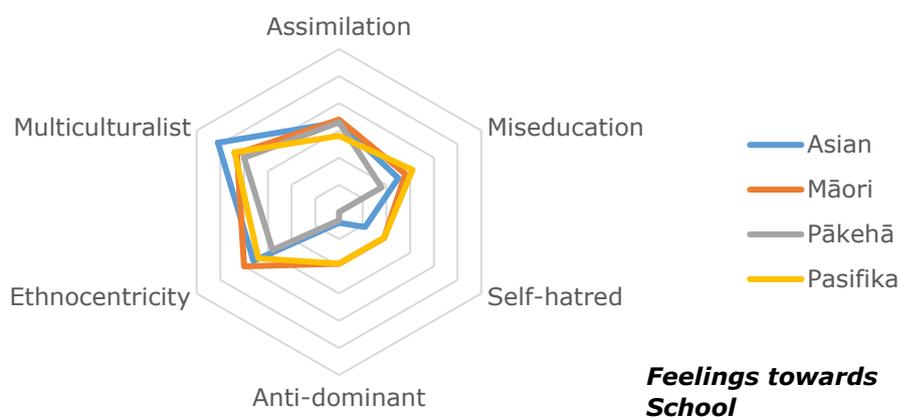
Scores for all three belonging variables-Relatedness (R), Feelings toward School (FtS), Feelings toward Teachers (FtT), were highest for adolescents in the Multiculturalist, Assimilated, Conflicted, and Ambivalent clusters and lowest for those in the Alienated and Low Race Salience clusters (with Alienated individuals scoring the lowest for Relatedness, and those in the Low Race Salience cluster scoring lowest for feelings toward school and teachers).

Thus, in terms of school belonging, adolescents in the Multiculturalist, Assimilated, Conflicted, and Ambivalent clusters had the strongest sense of belonging at school, when measured by relatedness, and feelings toward school and teachers. In contrast, those in the Low Race Salience and Alienated clusters could be considered to have much less advantage with regard to a sense of belonging at school, particularly when compared to the Multiculturalists.

No gender differences were demonstrated *among* the profile clusters for the three school belonging variables. Nevertheless, gender differences *within* profile clusters were indicated. These were only meaningful, however, for adolescents in the Low Race Salience cluster, where boys were found to be at a statistically significant disadvantage when compared to girls.

Differences in Belonging by Cluster

Differences among the current profile clusters overall and the three school belongingness variables (relatedness, feelings toward school, and feelings toward teachers), further supported previous findings. Overall, the Multiculturalist profile cluster appeared to be advantaged in terms of adaptive associations with all three variables. Conversely, other profile clusters (Low Race Salience and Alienated) demonstrated very much less adaptive relations with the three school belongingness variables.



Differences in Belonging by Gender

Although no meaningful gender differences were found between the clusters, males in the Low Race Salience group were found to have a markedly lower sense of school belonging than females in that cluster.

Intersectionality between gender and ethnicity within cluster profiles

Intersectionality between gender and ethnicity can complicate school belonging, and interestingly, females were found to be particularly susceptible to diminished health and life satisfaction when feelings toward school were compromised. The current data, however, suggested that males in the Low Race Salience (who have rejected a sense of ethnic-racial identity) were the participants most likely to be adversely impacted.

Key Policy Implications:

- These findings endorse the idea that **belonging to at least one ethnic-racial group buffers against maladaptive relatedness attitudes**, and that this scenario is amplified by association with further ethnic-racial identities and acceptance of multiple cultural outlooks
- Given New Zealand boys' persisting underachievement, and the potential impact of ability-based stereotype threat for Māori students, **educational strategies aimed at supporting the engagement of Māori boys at risk of falling into in the Low Race Salience group**, seem particularly warranted.

To find out more about this research, please visit: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1474746419000046>

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