

Students' self-belief and goal setting study has surprising results

December 22 2015

A study of over 2000 intermediate school students has revealed surprising differences in their levels of self-belief and goal setting, depending on their cultural background.

The study, "Cultural invariance of goal orientation and self-efficacy in New Zealand: Relations with achievement", was written by Professor Christine Rubie-Davies and Dr Kane Meissel of the University of Auckland's Faculty of Education and Social Work.

Their study has now been published in the *British Journal of Educational Psychology*.

Professor Rubie-Davies and Dr Meissel analysed a survey of 2210 students aged 10 to 13 years-old from three intermediate schools: one a high decile, the other middle and one low decile school.

The study categorised the students into four main cultural groups: New Zealand European (36 percent), Maori (13 percent), Pasifika (30 percent) and Asian (19 percent).

The study was designed to explore whether student goal orientation and self-efficacy [beliefs](#) (their belief in their ability to succeed), varied among students of different cultural backgrounds in New Zealand. The study also aimed to determine whether there was an association between motivational and self-efficacy beliefs, and achievement, and whether these differed by cultural background.

The students' mastery goals and performance goals were also assessed. Students who focus on mastery goals concentrate on developing skills or increasing learning, whereas those with performance goals focus on outperforming their peers.

Most NZ European students were found to have an individualist belief system, such that success was credited to the individual, whereas Maori, Pasifika and Asian students had a collectivist culture, which meant that success was attributed to having a supportive family so that credit went to the family rather than the individual.

The students completed measures at the beginning of the academic year in relation to their goal orientation and self-efficacy in mathematics and also took a maths test at the beginning and end-of-year.

A major finding was that Māori and Pasifika students' beliefs were much more closely associated with the beliefs of the Asian students. This suggests that the responses may be related to the underlying beliefs of collectivist cultures where success in school is seen as of benefit to the family/whanau and often as a way of improving the economic situation of the family.

Overall all students endorsed mastery goals more than [performance goals](#). This probably reflects New Zealand's emphasis on skill-based learning.

However, the study also showed Māori, Pasifika, and Asian students had higher scores for both mastery and performance beliefs than NZ European students.

Further, NZ European students' self-efficacy for mathematics was at lower levels than the beliefs of the three collectivist groups. Interestingly, other western groups (e.g. US students) have been shown to have strong self-efficacy. Beliefs that NZ European students should

be humble, self-effacing, and not boastful may have led to their self-efficacy being lower than expected.

Professor Rubie-Davies says the study indicates the need for teachers to adapt their teaching methods for individual student groups and assist students to reach their full potential.

"The exploration of student motivational beliefs is important because it provides information for teachers about how best to motivate specific student cultural groups, and motivation has been closely associated with achievement."

More information: Kane Meissel et al. Cultural invariance of goal orientation and self-efficacy in New Zealand: Relations with achievement, *British Journal of Educational Psychology* (2015). [DOI: 10.1111/bjep.12103](https://doi.org/10.1111/bjep.12103)

Provided by University of Auckland

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