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The Answer Lies in Our Humanity: Research and Methodologies that Facilitate Healing and Hope

I'm brown and I'm bright: Using collective storying to disrupt the white-centering of successful girlhood

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Abstract

What might it mean to reimagine brown-girl-as-failure to brown-girl-as-success? This article draws on findings from an empirical research study of academically successful teenage girls from Aotearoa New Zealand. In this paper we focus on what it means to be an intelligent and successful young brown woman in the context of the contemporary white-centering of meritocratic success, and the oppressive narrative that brown girls are not bright. Using a creative methodology, Laurel Richardson's collective storying and Patricia Leavy's fiction-based research, the paper engages in forms of creative analytic practice and new knowledge representation, which prioritize authentic voice and understanding of the young women participants' lived experiences. Collective stories were used in the study to challenge existing public discourses of girls and success, including the white-centering of such depictions, and to create narratives that participants could identify with, particularly those that were often unspoken but widely experienced. Using collective stories in the study offered a space of resonance with participants who could engage with the stories during the research process and contribute to their (re)storying. The interplay between the theoretic

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of methodological creativity and the symbolic violence of a colonial positioning of successful girlhood offers a novel contribution to girlhood studies. Through collective storytelling and a further interweaving of poetic voice, the disruption of the narrative of deficit offers remembering and revalidation of brown success.

KEYWORDS

brown girls, collective stories, creativity, girls, Pasifika, poetic voice, success, white-centering

1 | INTRODUCTION

This paper is a reporting and a reimagining of brown-girl-as-failure to brown-girl-as-success. It draws on findings from an empirical research study of academically successful teenage girls from Aotearoa New Zealand. The study explored what it means to be an intelligent and successful young brown woman in contemporary life. In doing so, it also inquired into what it means to disrupt the white-centering narratives of meritocratic success and the corollary narrative that brown girls are not bright. With this in mind, the study engaged Laurel Richardson's collective storytelling (1997, 2000, 2022) and Patricia Leavy's fiction-based research (2015, 2018) as a disruptive practice with the possibility of new knowledge representation. The collective story, in this paper, refers to the fictionalizing of collective experiences of a social group, in this case academically successful brown girls. The result is the rendering of a more authentic voice in this creative presentation of the young women participants' lived experiences.

Within research, the collective story writing process is organic in its utility as an analytical and interpretive act. It represents what Richardson and St. Pierre (2000) define as a creative analytic practice, which is a method of inquiry that helps researchers "learn about their topics and about themselves that which was unknowable and unimaginable using conventional analytic procedures, metaphors, and writing formats" (p. 931). Writing in diverse and evocative forms can cause researchers to relate differently to their work and can help them discover new perspectives about their topic and even transform their relationship to it (Richardson, 2000, 2022). The use of collective stories as an alternative representation of findings can transform "empirical realities into fictional realities" (Leavy, 2018, p. 194). To include collective stories in a research study means to contribute "to a sociology that [is] of and for the people" (Pringle, 2008, p. 227).

Collective stories were used in this study to challenge existing public discourses of girls and success, including the white-centering of such depictions, and to create narratives with which participants could identify. Collective stories also offered spaces to validate and voice unspoken experiences shared by many in the group. One participant termed these "silly feelings," in effect a kind of silencing. Using collective stories in the study drew on resonance with and between participants who could engage with the stories during the research process and contribute to their (re)storying. This paper is an interplay between the theoretics of methodological creativity and resistance against the symbolic violence of a colonial positioning of successful girlhood. Through collective storytelling, this paper seeks to disrupt the narrative of deficit and instead be a hopeful remembering of brown success.

For too long, young, brown women have had to battle for their place in discourses of success whilst their fairer-skinned counterparts more often experience a less obstructed path. Literature from educational research as well as those from girlhood sociologists suggest the thread of white dominance in discourses of success can be attributed to neoliberal, meritocratic ideologies and social structures that favor white, middle- and upper-class values of success such as agency, choice, freedom, autonomy and invention (Harris, 2004; Idriss et al., 2022; McCall, 2014;

Pomerantz et al., 2013; Walkerdine et al., 2001). Ambrose (2013) argues that such an ideology “harmfully distorts the purposes of social institutions and the incentives that shape the aspiration development of ... young people” (p. 99), which includes prioritizing individualistic behaviors and materialistic aspirations. The alternative, a collectivist values system aligned more with indigenous communities and ways of being, becomes deprioritised within a neoliberal structure.

Whilst much of the education system in Aotearoa New Zealand in the last decade reflected social democratic values, the reforms of the education system in 1988 to improve the quality of schooling and student achievement through decentralization reflect neoliberal ideas of increased “managerialism, privatization, accountability, standards, competition, choice” (McMaster, 2013, p. 525). Furthermore, values and attitudes to schooling, particularly in the delivery of the curriculum, the importance of individual attainment, flexibility, a performance focus, and meritocracy perpetuate this neoliberal structure (McMaster, 2013). Tupuola (2004), Iosefo (2016), and others report on young Pacific people's experiences at school in New Zealand. The journey to achieved identity is complex and contested. Pacific young people relate to “transient and multiple identities” (Tupuola, 2004, p. 100), but also experience anxiety and struggle to fit in at school (Iosefo, 2016). The experience for many young people of predominantly Pacific and Māori ancestry is an education system that does not offer a full welcome that by default perpetuates the brown-girl-as-failure discourse throughout its structure.

Engagement with research from the gifted and talented field offers further evidence of this form of violence against young, brown people. For example, streaming students based on academic achievement acts as a form of ethnic and class-based segregation. White, middle- and upper-class students are reproduced into more influential societal roles upon exiting the education system (Smith, 2014). Here colonization plays a role where systematic protection of whiteness is in place alongside concurrent marginalization of the colonized (Mayes et al., 2024; Ray, 2022). Concurrently, with the internalization of a brown-as-failure discourse, teachers presume lower expectations of students from ethnic minorities and/or those from lower socioeconomic families, and thus contribute to the conditions that invariably reinforce the expected outcome (Grantham, 2012; Milne, 2017). Education continues to serve the privileged whilst minority ethnic groups continue to be underrepresented and marginalized (Latz & Adams, 2011; Mayes et al., 2024; Ray, 2022; Reid, 2006; Smith, 2014). Several Aotearoa New Zealand scholars have identified racial bias that positions students of Pacific and Māori descent as less likely to be academically successful (Bishop & Berryman, 2006; Bishop et al., 2014; Fitzpatrick, 2013; Milne, 2017). As Bishop et al. (2014) state:

There is an ongoing issue of educational disparities that characterise indigenous peoples in many countries and continue to plague them for the rest of their lives. ... For example, the educational disparities that afflict Māori are stark. The overall academic achievement levels of Māori students are low; more leave school without any qualifications than do their non-Māori counterparts. (p. 2)

Even if academically successful brown students are suitably challenged or acknowledged for their intellectual abilities, they may still experience a phenomenon known as stereotype threat, the experience of being judged according to a set of negative perceptions (Anderson & Martin, 2018; Lucey et al., 2006; Steele & Aronson, 1995; Walkerdine et al., 2001). Stereotype threat can affect the way brown students may perceive themselves. They may experience lower expectations of success from those around them and may be judged as disinterested in academic achievement (Harris, 2004). If they do appear successful, it is within a narrative that suggests that they have struggled against the odds (Lucey et al., 2006).

bell hooks' (1994) emphasis on struggle here is pertinent. For hooks, black girls' desire to learn, expression of intelligence, and enactment of the “life of the mind” is a “counter-hegemonic act” (p. 2). Participating in the struggle – that is, the hybrid identity—both alienates a young woman from the community and creates the conditions for expectation around giving back (hooks, 1994). To enact brown-girl-as-success, these young women must navigate the isolation and disconnection of a hybrid identity (Anderson & Martin, 2018; Harris, 2004; Iosefo, 2016; Lucey

et al., 2006; Paule, 2017; Walkerdine et al., 2001). For example, in Anderson and Martin's (2018) study, the lack of representation of black girls in gifted programs increased black girls' sense of isolation and disconnection from peers in these classes who may be predominantly white (Anderson & Martin, 2018). For hooks (2009), a new sense of belonging must be envisioned, one that connects a young woman's memory of the past to a new revisioning and "commitment to the present" (p. 5).

The hybrid identity is not only an experience of race, but also one of class, as seen in Lucey et al.'s (2006) longitudinal study of working- and middle-class girls, where the working-class girls had a preconceived belief that attending university would be a lonely experience. Being successful in this new environment also brought an incongruence with their home identities as they would need to navigate the tension of differentiating themselves from their parents or their wider families. Walkerdine et al. (2001) highlighted that successful working-class young women were transforming into subjects who were different from their families and had been shown to "distance themselves from the painful position of being 'one of them'" (p. 40). Hybridity, according to Walkerdine et al. (2001), may be more prevalent in society, but it is not an easy subjectivity to perform, and this hybrid experience of success is not lost on working-class women. According to Harris (2004), being recognized as a successful girl is less about academic achievement and more about performing the modern, Western, white, middle-class young woman. School thus becomes an institution for white culture training and, for those outside the category of white, involves a rejection of one's ethnic identity and the adoption in its place of a glamorous, white lifestyle (Harris, 2004). This struggle is played out in Iosefo and Iosefo-William's poetic autoethnographic work: "Holy Shit I'm not White? No, we are just right...Brown Pasifika politics of resistance" (2023). Iosefo and Iosefo-Williams (2023) restory this struggle between cultures through a performative poetic script that resists and reinscribes experiences of dissonance in education as an act of decolonization.

bell hooks' work in feminism, race, and pedagogy, as mentioned, is a theoretical touchstone for this study. hooks' (1990, 1994) revolutionary identification and analysis of the white-centering structures of education and wider society is a call to engage in collective imagining of ways that productively transgress the organizing nature of the status quo. Such a move draws on a range of practices including storytelling in such a way that brown/black experiences are centered and radically opened. hooks (1994) is unstinting in her determination to destabilize the obstacles and limits set in place by the implicit demands of society and state toward the realization of change.

The classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress.

(hooks, 1994, p. 207)

In the following section we will consider collective storytelling and fictional writing as a "location of possibility" (hooks, 1994, p. 207) that has the potential to open up social science research to the practice of a transgressive and transformative ethics.

2 | COLLECTIVE STORYING AND FICTIONAL WRITING AS METHODS

In light of the above review of literature, the empirical study on which this paper is based sought to explore how academically high achieving teenage girls experienced and performed their identities. This paper reports on one of the findings from the study, in particular the ways in which brown high academic achievers made sense of their brown-girl-as-success subjectivity and how collective stories were used as part of the methodology to disrupt the more common discourse of success-as-white adjacent.

Creative inquiry via storytelling offers the researcher entree to the lived experience of brown-girl-as-success narrative via alternate ways of knowing. For Leavy (2015) the utilization of fiction writing as a creative research practice draws upon a holistic, empathetic, and reflective approach to cultural phenomena in such a way that the fuller complexity of the characters is available. This availability draws upon a layered and woven array of signification with attention to background and the ineffable elements conveyed implicitly in creative discourse. As per bell hooks (1994) and her call to imaginative and collective practices of freedom, Leavy in 2015, describes the possibility of creative writing to perform a kind of conscientization and disruption of hegemonic realities. This performance of counter-hegemonies destabilizes the typecasting properties of white-centered social structuring. Prior to Leavy (2015), Richardson (1997) presented “narrativizing” (p. 34) as an opportunity to engage ethically and morally in the social science arena. She draws attention to the ways in which creative writing can be “practical-ethical” (p. 34). For Richardson (1997) the work of collective storytelling is an interplay between the personal and the public that highlights and identifies problems and perspectives, but again drawing on hooks (1990, 1994), it is a creative act that makes possible a new sense of “collective identity and collective solutions” (Richardson, 1997, p. 34).

Creative writing is not quotidian in terms of social science inquiry; however, there is a growing academic consensus around the value of research methods utilizing creative writing (Kinnunan et al., 2021; Leavy, 2015; Richardson, 1997; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2000; Schoone, 2021). This alternative way of knowing is for Richardson and St. Pierre (2000) most definitely “a *method of inquiry*, a way of finding out about yourself and your topic” (p. 923). Leavy (2012) describes fiction–nonfiction genres as blurred and a precedent for such has been extant in the academy for centuries. In describing fiction writing as research, Bruce (2014) explains that this kind of research is not facile nor does it operate according to the expected linear propositions and progressions that mark mainstream research. Instead, fiction asks the reader to engage in conceptual openness and to navigate the complex social contradictions germane to subjects' experiences in community.

Creative writing as a research methodology, for Leavy (2015, 2018), is not about telling but about “showing.” Particularly in research questioning the relationship of the powerful and disempowered in social scenarios, the value of “showing” the power differential illuminates the voice from the margins (Schoone, 2021), voices that might not necessarily speak in the language of the social sciences. Richardson and St. Pierre (2000) describe such a practice as a method that allows for exploration of worlding; that is, ways in which the participant constructs notions of self, other, and the community.

In terms of the development of social science research methodologies, one can look to the narrative turn in social research where researchers have engaged with narrative inquiry and life stories to explore relationality as well as to challenge more positivist methods in the social sciences (Goodson & Gill, 2011). There is a perceived dualism between the creative and the analytic in positivist approaches as binary opposites and therefore mutually exclusive (Richardson, 2000, 2022). However, just as the writing process and the writing product are potentially identifiable as different quantities to which can be attributed different values, Richardson and St. Pierre (2000) argue that these are “deeply intertwined” (p. 931). For Schoone (2021), these forms represent both a rendering of phenomena and a relinquishment where the author cedes control of the final output and, in particular, the reader-response to the finished piece. The story is not in and of itself, because it is the genesis of a writer, a kind of writing, a certain premise regarding socially constructed knowledge-creation and the multiplicity of the reader-response. For Richardson and St. Pierre (2000) fiction writing creates “evocative forms” (p. 931), which give birth to “cultural products” and in the very act of their interpretation of social phenomenon, open themselves up to the same interpretative potential.

Evocative representations are a striking way of seeing through and beyond social scientific naturalisms. Casting social science into evocative forms reveals the rhetoric and the underlying labor of production, as well as social science's potential as a human endeavour, because evocative writing touches us where we live, in our bodies.

(Richardson, 2000, p. 931)

For Richardson (1997) and Richardson et al. (2022) the collective story differs from the personal because it draws upon the negotiated experiences of a social group of coauthors/co-participants in such a way that the particular import of encompassing sociocultural, historical, and political realities are brought to light whilst retaining humanity. The collective story invokes a new sense of the affinities between participants leading to conscientization, “a concrete recognition of sociological bondedness with others, because such consciousness can break down isolation between people, empower them, and lead them to collective action on their behalf” (Richardson, 1997, p. 14). The collective story engages in both reasoning and representation. Through narrativization, the collective story offers insight not only into individual or anecdotal storytelling or the cultural story more broadly but making space for a representation of voice of a particular “social category” (Richardson, 1997, p. 32). Similarly, Chilton and Leavy (2014) argue that fiction-based research is a powerful portrayal of complex negotiations between individual and the collective in the representation of lived experiences. The resonant orientation in such an undertaking is compassion and empathy and a concern for social justice.

Collective storytelling and fictional writing cultivate narratives that do not seek to present definitive or propositional truth in the usual way. The narratives invoked are positioned to allow what Denzin (1997) describes as reader-focused generation of empathy, to allow readers to “imaginatively feel their way into the experiences that are being described” (pp. 12–13). For Bruce (2014) there is a further goal, to not only allow the reader to make meaning, but to reflect critically on their values, attitudes, and beliefs “and be moved to action” (p. 40). The kind of representation of the fictional writing is more mosaic rather than a direct or objective set of statements and challenges the reader to confront their thoughts and emotions (Bruce, 2014, p. 40). The writing of fiction can generate meaningful counter-discourses that cause transformation in the reader. Bruce (2014) describes this as a kind of reflexive mapping that resists dominant narratives and, through unification and solidarity, focuses and empowers the marginalized voice.

Many of hooks' theoretical writings, such as *Belonging* (2009) and *Yearning* (1990), start from the place of storytelling black women's subjectivity. hooks' unapologetic presentation of the black woman student's experience provides considerable inspiration for a storied presentation of young brown women's narratives as success. Her theorizing often begins with a creative representation of memories that organize her presentations of theory on race and gender. Leavy (2012, 2018) suggests that involving nonfiction tells us what we are, whereas creative writing speculates on who we can be. For hooks and Leavy, this kind of presentation of writing in the academy offers vital hope capable of holding the unreconciled grief of injustice and at the same time, “love as the ethical foundation for politics, that we are best positioned to transform society in ways that enhance the collective good” (hooks, 2015, p. 294). With the ethics of love as a defining principle, the value of the collective story that has the potential to offer solidarity and critique offers a counter to the alienation and isolation (Richardson, 1997) reported by brown-women-as-success.

3 | METHOD

This study employed a qualitative methodology drawing upon semi-structured interviews, dialog circles, and collective storytelling. 19 teenage girls identified as high academic achievers from across four diverse secondary schools within the Auckland region participated in the study. The discussion laid out in this particular paper focuses on the experiences (and thus the collective narrative) of a sub-set of six students from the above 19. These participants self-identified as Tongan, Samoan, Māori, Indian, South-East Asian, and Asian from working-class backgrounds. From the findings of this study, a collective story was written based on the commonalities of experience of these six students. The stories of the remaining 13 girls from the studies formed other findings and stories which are not part of this paper.

Stratified purposive sampling (Creswell, 2013) was used to select the schools. This ensured representation from a variety of school types (state, state-integrated, private, single-sex, and coeducational) and locations to

ensure socioeconomic and ethnic diversity. Purposive sampling strategies (Barbour, 2014; Creswell, 2013) were also used to invite the voluntary participation of students according to specific criteria (i.e., teenage girls over the age of 16 years who had achieved consistently high academic results in New Zealand's national assessment system through an National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) Level 2 Excellence endorsement).

Following university ethics protocol for research involving human participants, student participants were offered full information about the research. They were reminded that their consent to participate was voluntary and without coercion or deception. Participants were also able to withdraw from the study before a given date, and they were able to decline to answer questions during the interview and dialog circle (Barbour, 2014; C. Milne, 2005). Although full anonymity and confidentiality may not be possible in qualitative research (Christians, 2017), this study sought to protect the identities of the participants through the use of pseudonyms, selected either by the participants themselves or by the researcher.

Data gathering, iterative analysis, and developing collective stories occurred in four phases:

- Phase 1 involved semi-structured individual interviews with participants.
- Phase 2 involved researchers analyzing phase 1 data and writing collective stories.
- Phase 3 involved some participants again in dialog circles where researchers shared and discussed the collective stories.
- Phase 4 involved analysis of dialog circle data and the revision of collective stories based on participant feedback from phase 3.

The first phase involved semi-structured individual interviews with each participant. A three-step questioning approach was used in the interviews (Flick, 2022) to allow a gradual deepening of responses and critical engagement with the existing theory and research on their particular experiences. This approach begins with open questions, moves to theory or literature-driven questions to derive participant insight on existing claims, and then the interview finishes with confrontational questions to invite critique and critical encounter.

Phase two involved the writing of collective stories, which required a preliminary analysis of the participants' experiences and insights from the interviews using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis process. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting repeated patterns of meanings across a data set. In Braun and Clarke's process, the first step (familiarization with the data) supported the second phase of the research, requiring researchers to immerse themselves in the data (multiple readings of interview transcripts and repeatedly listening to audio recordings of the interviews, researcher journaling, and mapping) to search for patterns. As a result of this preliminary analysis, four collective stories were written by the researcher to synthesize and represent the experiences of the participants according to four themes, which loosely corresponded to four sub-groups of participants. For this article, readers will engage with one of the collective stories entitled "Nia's Story." This story focuses on the theme of being a minoritized academic high achiever and draws from the experiences of six of the participants who identified as Māori, Pacific, Indian, and/or from a low socioeconomic family background.

The third phase of the study involved a dialog circle, a collection technique similar to focus groups and group discussions (Flick, 2022; Madriz, 2000), but employing a less-structured approach to discussion. Madriz (2000) suggests that group dialogs offer participants, especially women, an opportunity to share and thus feel validated in any expressed experiences of marginalization. Such circles can be empowering. In this study, the dialog circle was an optional phase after the interviews. Only four participants participated in the dialog circle. However, seven other participants offered written feedback of the stories via email. This dialog circle offered the four participants (including two from the sub-group reflecting *Nia's Story*) an opportunity to openly discuss their responses to all the collective stories, including critiques, character discussions, overall verisimilitude of the four stories, and opportunities to rewrite them for resonance. Discussions about the preliminary themes occurred throughout the dialog as participants deconstructed the collective stories and their responses to them.

In the fourth phase, the outcomes from the dialog circle conversations, as well as the written feedback, supported amendments to the collective stories. A second iteration of thematic data analysis was undertaken to include the dialog circle discussion.

In the following section of this article, readers will engage with one of the stories from the study. The story's main character is a teenage girl, Nia. Hers is a story of success that is usually omitted from the more white-centered, middle-class discourses of successful girlhood. The protagonist and her story collectivizes the experiences of the subset of six participants in this study. Whilst the overall story arc and characters in this story are fictional, important moments, experiences, interiorities, relational dynamics, and beliefs are reflective of each of the six participants' individual stories and have been woven into a single collective narrative written by the principal researcher and edited in collaboration with the participants.

4 | NIA'S STORY

Nia awoke from another rubbish night's sleep. Rubbing her bleary eyes, she got up from the sagging couch in the living room. She used to share a room with her younger 15-year-old sister, Jen, who spent most of the night either blasting hip hop music about twerking and big butts or posting selfies on Instagram. Nia couldn't work or sleep or relax in her room when Jen was home so she spent most of the time camped out in the lounge. She also couldn't understand how she and Jen could be so different when they were raised by the same mother and went to the same Samoan Church, hearing the exact same sermons about not squandering the goodness of God. As the eldest child in the family, Nia took her responsibilities seriously but Jen seemed like she didn't care about anything except herself ... and her phone. So because Nia needed the space to do her homework, the only place was in the lounge once everyone had fallen asleep.

Nehemiah and Jacob, were Nia's little twin brothers. They went to bed past 10 o'clock even though she tried her best to get them to sleep much earlier. Nia had read somewhere that seven-year-olds needed something like 10 hours sleep. But they wouldn't listen to her. She was, after all, just a teenager herself, playing mum half the time. They hadn't seen their dad in at least 5 years when the twins were about 2 years old. Nia remembered it like it was yesterday. It was White Sunday. She, her mum and her siblings had just arrived home from Church. He was gone. He had left most of his stuff though. And the place still kind of smelled like him. They never knew where he went and he never bothered to stay in touch. Just up and abandoned the family. So it was just the four kids and Mum.

Nia's mum worked shifts, sometimes double shifts at different factories. Boy, she was a hard worker. Nia could see this and did everything she could to help at home, to make sure everything was okay for her mum. If Nia got everything sorted then Mum would not have to worry about anything except getting enough sleep before having to get up again. Her shifts were almost always in the afternoon and through the night so it was up to Nia to get the twins sorted with dinner, homework, cleaning them up, then cleaning the house up. It is no surprise she could only get to her own school work after 10 o'clock at night. Nia would sometimes have a fleeting thought about being like her sister Jen or her other friends. *Why bother? Why care? No matter how hard we work, this is our lot in life. Doing what our parents do day in day out. Why fight it?* But, unlike some of her other friends, Nia did not buy it. She would not buy it. Nia's mum worked so damn hard. Her parents had immigrated from the Islands when Nia was still little because they wanted to give the family a better life. "Go to New Zealand," people said. "It's the land of opportunity. You'll get good jobs and the kids will get a good education. You'll be able to buy a house and have money to send back home."

Ten years later and they still got shifted from rental to rental. They were good tenants, paid their rent on time and kept the house clean. Nia did her part to make sure of that. But no matter how hard her mum worked, it was like they were stuck on a treadmill, getting to the end of each day just able to pay the bills and have food on the table. Nothing more. They were always at the whim of the landlords and the rent just seemed to be going up even though Nia's mum could not make any more money except through working more hours. At one point, they even

had to bunk up in their aunt's garage until another rental came up. At least now they were in a house big enough for the five of them. One bedroom for the boys, one bedroom for the girls, and the lounge for Mum. Nia hated seeing her mum work so hard without any reward, except for the possibility of happiness and success of her own children.

Nia's grandparents and mum had told her that if she worked hard at school, listened to her teachers and did well, she would be able to live a better life than what her parents could ever give her. So that is what she did and she was the only person in her entire extended family to make it to Year 13, let alone to average NCEA with Excellence. She remembered when her mum posted a photo of her on Facebook from last year's prize-giving with certificates for the top academic scholar in four subjects as well as overall top in her year. Although she was proud of her achievements, a sense of in-built shame still enveloped her. Yup, several of her cousins fell prey to the typical stereotype of teenage Islanders getting pregnant or wreaking havoc as young thugs on the streets of suburban Auckland, leaving school before Year 12. It looked like Jen was going down that road too. The truth is the more Nia succeeded, the less connected she felt to her family. Yet, she was determined not to let that, along with the condescending looks and the patronizing voices from all around her saying, "You won't amount to anything" or labeling her as "Destined to fail," stop her from making a better life for her family.

Nia's friends teased her about being a nerd and for being such a smart-ass. If they came across online IQ tests on their Facebook feeds or memes about nerds, they would often tag her in the comments or share them with her. Even though she knew her friends were just teasing her, she hated being labeled the nerd of the group. But, she didn't want to cause any trouble and sometimes, she would send something back to her friends to keep the joke going.

Deep down, Nia didn't think she was a nerd or smart or gifted or whatever. She worked hard. She did her homework. She asked for help. She showed up. It wasn't any special gift or talent she was born with. It was the determination that she wouldn't accept what society was expecting of her. She had a burning desire to help her mum when she was able to finally work. But most of all, it was her faith in a heavenly Father, a faith instilled in her by her mother and grandparents, that drove her to work as hard as she did.

The house was so quiet at 6.45 a.m. in the morning. Nia was tempted to check her phone. She noticed she had 49 Facebook notifications, 61 Instagram notifications, eight Snapchats and 22 new text messages. It must have been a busy night on social. But, she had promised herself that she would not check her phone until she had done her morning Bible reading, which she checked off on her Streaks App. Actually, it was Nia's favorite time of day—no surly teenage sister, no annoying little brothers fighting over the PS3. She picked up her Bible and sat back on the couch with her milk and cornflakes. She opened to the Book of Matthew and happened to read the Parable of the Talents.

"Heavenly father," Nia prayed, "Thank you for all your blessings over me, over my family. Thank you for what you have given us, this roof over our heads. We are never hungry. Thank you for Ma's job. Thank you for my school, my friends. Father, please help me with my studies. Please help me to do well. I want to use wisely all the talents you have given me so I can help others, so I can help my family and—" *SLAM!* And like clockwork, the boys were rampaging down the hallway. After what seemed like a two-minute tornado in the kitchen, Nehemiah and Jacob were seated on the lounge room floor at the coffee table, crunching on their cereal. Nia returned to her bedroom only to find Jen still sleeping, phone in hand. *Honestly, I don't know what's going to happen to this girl. She is on the road to only God knows what.*

'Jen,' Nia gently shook her sister, whose makeup had stained her pillowcase, Jen, get up, sis. We'll be late for school.

'Piss off, Nia.' Jen was getting stroppier as she got older.

Jen, get up. We'll be late for school.

I don't want to. I'm not going to school today. Can't be bothered.

Hurry up. Mum will be back from her shift soon and she'll be mad if she sees you still in bed.

So? Who gives a shit?

Mum does! I do! Get up.

'Piss off, Nia. Not everyone's perfect like you,' and with that, Jen rolled over in bed and pulled the cover over her face to drown out the sound.

Nia sighed. 'I am *not* perfect. I just want to do something with my life. You should too. Be grateful for what you have.'

"Stop preaching at me like you're the parent or something. Why can't you be normal and just lighten up?!" Jen muttered as she shuffled deeper under the blankets, "Just go and leave me alone. You're not my mother."

Nia knew there was no point in trying anymore. She replaced her house clothes with her school uniform and hustled the boys to get ready. It took an hour to walk to school so by 7.30 in the morning, Nia and the boys were off. They did not mind the walk. They were used to it. It was good exercise and it was good family time too. She dropped the boys off at the primary school, not far down the road from the high school, and gave each one a big hug and kiss, something a parent should really be doing, but right now, their mum would be on the way home from work on the bus. Nia was the stand-in. In fact, she really had been a caregiver for the boys since she was 14 and allowed to be left alone in the house. If only "being a surrogate mother" and "household manager" could be seen as worthy activities to have on a curriculum vitae for trying to get into courses next year.

'Bye boys!' Nia yelled as the boys raced into the school grounds, 'Don't get into any trouble aye? Don't pick any fights or you'll be fighting with me after school!'

'Nah, sis! We won't pick any fights!' replied Nehemiah. 'We'll just pick our noses!' And with that, the boys were in hysterics and, naturally, started picking their noses. This put a smile on Nia's face. *They're good boys*, she thought to herself, as she walked down the road to her school.

She arrived just as the bell rang, her friends, ever so loyal, waiting for her by the gate.

Hey, gurrri. On time today... Just!

Hey.

The girls gave each other side cheek kisses as was the norm as they continued sauntering to their homeroom class.

'No Jen?' they asked.

No, I swear she's gonna get kicked out of school, aye?

What are you gonna do?

I don't know. Alls I can do is pray to the good Lord above to save that girl's butt. Seriously.

Yeah, from getting a hiding from your mum.

'Exactly!' Nia agreed. The girls laughed as they took their seats at homeroom.

Nia loved school. She loved her friends and teachers, and they loved her back. They all believed in her, even when she didn't believe in herself. They saw something in her, some spark, some potential, and they spoke that over her, even though Nia felt the judgmental gaze of wider society didn't inspire much hope for her future. It was as if being brown meant she couldn't have the same dreams that the white girls from rich families were encouraged to have.

When she was in class doing group work, everyone wanted to be in her group.

"It's cos we don't have to do any work! You do it all for us!" they joked.

"Yeah, cos youse are just lazy!" Nia jested back.

It was kind of true but Nia really didn't mind. Some of the other "smart girls" didn't like it because they didn't think it was fair they had to do most of the work and they spent most of class time either waiting for others to shut

up, or helping other students to understand the work—something they believed was the teacher's job, not theirs. They would complain about it all the time on the private Facebook group for the gifted and talented students.

@everyone Argh! It's soooooo annoying when Miss makes us pair up with other people!
 @everyone IKR #ballandchain
@everyone I don't really mind helping people
 @Nia but don't you hate that they just hold us back?
@Jenny i guess i don't really see it like that - they're struggling, we can help
 @Nia they're not struggling, they're lazy
@Rachel maybe, but we can still help, maybe inspire them
 @Nia why are you so idealistic? It's annoying and not fair. Smart students in other schools get so much more extension. We are expected to teach them. That is not our job!

Nia didn't see it that way. Her parents and Church had raised her to believe in putting others first, that we're on the earth not to receive, but to give, and that there was no greater joy than an act of service. She was happy to help out her fellow classmates who maybe found the work more challenging than she did. It was also why she wanted to go into the field of medicine or something health, service or care-related, to help her family and help her community. She wanted to be in a position to help other people's lives for the better. This is why after a long day at school, she was happy to offer her time at the school's after school homework club, tutoring younger students. While students at other schools, rich schools, could avail themselves of extra-curricular activities such as dance and sport and extra tutoring for their schoolwork, Nia's only extra-curricular activity was the homework club. Her mum couldn't afford the fees to enroll the kids into different after school activities. So she got involved in things that were offered by the school that didn't require extra money or transportation, both of which they didn't have. This way, her siblings could meet her after school at homework club and they could all walk home when she was done at four-30. The boys were usually really great and always excited to meet Nia at homework club. The high school allowed them to come in because they knew Nia watched over them. Besides, it was good for Nehemiah and Jacob to see older kids studying. Surrounding them with books and students doing hard work and appreciating their education ... well that was something Jen could do more of.

When 4.30 p.m. rolled around, Nia and the boys set off for home. The ominous gray rain clouds started to form across the sky like a thick blanket. They were halfway home and Nia was hoping they would be indoors before it started to shower down. They started to run with the first drops. It turned into a race, with the boys each trying to be the winner. Despite the running, the heavens opened up and all three of them were soaking wet. Giggling and shouting, Jacob and Nehemiah made the most of the opportunity to be running and playing in the rain, but Nia not so much. She knew this meant finding a way to dry their uniforms before morning. As they stepped through the front door, Nia noticed something was amiss. Their mother was home. Usually, at five-30, she would be gone for her double shift at the factory, but today Ma was at home cooking dinner. Nia's heart fell. She knew something was very wrong.

'Ma!' the boys shouted as they ran to give their mother a wet hug.
 Eh! Get off me, boys! Go and get yourselves tidied up. *Then* come back and give me a hug.
 'Hey, Ma,' Nia kissed her mother, 'Why are you home?' As Nia pulled away from her mother, she noticed her mother's puffy eyes. She'd been crying. 'What's wrong, Ma?'
 I got laid off, love. They're restructuring or automating or something. They don't need me anymore.
 What? You lost the job?
 Yes, love.
 'Ma, what can I do? I can quit school. I can work, Ma. I can find a job in a shop or something. I know K'mart's hiring and Pak'nSave.' Nia felt desperate to help her mother.

'No, Nia. You focus on your studies. We've talked about this. That's our only chance. You finish your education. Don't worry. God will provide. He always does and always has.' Her mother was so reassuring even though this meant their family's security would once again be hanging by a thread. There was a depth to Ma's faith and she never gave up believing that God would provide. The job was a real blow but Nia couldn't help feeling admiration about her mother's courage.

'Oh, Ma!' Nia hugged her mother. They both didn't care if she was wet.

'We'll be okay, bub,' she reassured again.

The boys returned, dried up, and ready to give their mother a hug.

"Oh, come here my sons. Mama's missed her boys."

Nia knew that though they did not have much in the way of money, they were rich in love. At that minute, Jen stormed into the kitchen, "What's to eat? I'm hungry."

Nia glared at Jen.

"What!? What have I done wrong now?" Jen retorted in a typical surly teenage fashion.

Nia rolled her eyes and walked to her bedroom, removed her uniform, still soggy from the rain, and put on some dry clothes. She collected the boys' wet clothes from their bedroom floor and hung them out on the clothes horse in the lounge.

At least today she could actually do her homework early and maybe get to sleep before midnight. With her mum home Nia would not have to help the boys with their homework, cooking dinner, getting the boys washed and ready for bed, cleaning up after dinner, fighting with her sister who did nothing, fighting with her brothers to actually get to bed, and tidying up the house. Tonight, Ma was home and could be Ma while Nia could be a 17-year-old girl for a change.

Nia would focus on her studies. She would keep getting good grades so she could get a good job that would help her family out of this life of constant uncertainty. Her life was not easy. She did not get to do a lot of the things other students got to do, students from the other side of the tracks, but she knew the value of honest, hard work. Some said Nia was gifted, that her brain was a gift.

No.

Nia believed it was only a gift if she used what she had to help other people.

And that was what she intended to do.

5 | DISCUSSION

Nia's story narrates the experience of many young women of color from a working-class background. Nia is an academically successful brown girl. Her success story sits counter to prevalent discourses of White, middle- and upper-class success. The story highlights some of the key themes emerging from the research related to gifted brown girlhood.

5.1 | I'm brown and I'm bright

One of the key findings emerging from the overall study of 19 participants affirms that successful brown girls encounter the brown-girl-as-failure discourse in an all too familiar way. Nia's story highlights this experience

through the narration of aspects of her interiority, such as battling thoughts of what others prescribe as her destiny to fail the labels, and low expectations.

During the dialog circle, a participant, Elizabeth, highlighted the dominance of white-centered notions of success in relation to what she observed as valued in society. In a comment to Marina, Elizabeth said, "Unfortunately, people who look like you, you know, darker skin, dark hair, you totally understand what I mean...Polynesian. People think that you are dumb." There was a pause when Elizabeth made this comment as those of us in the dialog circle were unsure about how the comment would be received. Marina, with a high degree of self-reflexivity and subjective experience, agreed with this comment. "It's a hundred percent a thing...I'm Indian...I do feel it in the same way." She felt "people expect anyone who is brown to be dumb." She continued, "People dismiss you based on your looks and your culture and your size and all that kind of thing." In the story, Nia experiences this kind of dismissal from both within her community and from outside. In achieving educational success Nia began to feel disconnected from her sister Jen and her friends but neither did she find full belonging with other high achievers in school. This finding aligns with Mayes et al. (2024) where their study asserts gifted girls of color experience a loss of connection to family and community without corresponding development of relationships among high achievers in the school community.

Ange, who self-identified as Tongan and was the Head Girl at her school, was another participant in the study. Despite the endorsement of peers and teachers through being elected as Head Girl, Ange also felt that deficit stereotypes about Pacific peoples were "just embedded in the thoughts of our society." However, on further reflection, she proposed that these thoughts came from "the outside people." Who were the outside people? "So I don't want to be racist...non-Islanders." Ange's comments demonstrate how white stereotypical notions of success were embedded and perpetuated not from her own people but from "non-Islanders." Such stereotyping was similarly experienced by the African Caribbean women described in McRobbie's (2000) work and the brown participants in Fitzpatrick's (2013) study. Fetaui Iosefo and her autoethnographic work "Who is eye?" (2016) corresponds with Ange's reflections, detailing the interplay of internalized narratives that come from external societal deficit theorizing.

Ange found the negotiation of her ethnic identity as Tongan alongside her identity as a high achiever to be problematic. She believed this was because "people have this misconception about how high achieving people are meant to look ... like obviously, I don't look like I should achieve that well." Ange spoke of people's surprise when she told them that she was head girl of her school and that she consistently achieved high grades. "I think they think that the head girl must be so, like, white ...Yeah, it's just so, so bad." When asked what she believed people thought of her as a Pacific student, she said, "They kind of think that I'm rough and if I get angry I'm gonna pick a fight with them" and "they just think that, cos you're an Islander, okay, waiting for you to get pregnant, kind of thing." Ange stated, "They... doubt you. And they think you're gonna fail soon." She articulated a deficit perspective toward Pacific peoples' success and implicit beliefs about aggressive behaviors. Bell's research (1989) highlighted similar issues for Black and Hispanic gifted students in the US whilst Harris (2004) found that UK working-class and non-white female students experienced lowered expectations and a belief that they were not interested in success, explaining that if they did show motivation to succeed, they were labeled as overambitious. More recent studies like Mayes et al. (2024) continue to show the degree to which high-achieving girls of color must navigate a gamut of negative expectations in high school at personal cost in order to overcome discriminatory barriers.

5.2 | The invisibility of familial labor

Nia's story highlights another significant finding from the study, which is the invisibility of familial labor, in the form of being a young carer to family members. White, middle- and upper-class notions of success (Harris, 2004; Idriss et al., 2022; McCall, 2014; Pomerantz et al., 2013; Walkerdine et al., 2001) tend to emphasize the development of individual pursuits, often resulting in teenage girls trying to involve themselves in numerous extra- and co-

TABLE 1 Number of activities.

1-2 activities	3-4 activities	5-6 activities	7-8 activities	9-10 activities	11-12 activities	13+ activities
2	7	4	4	0	1	1

curricular activities. This is seen as advantageous to their curriculum vitae and opens up opportunities for post-high school pathways with high entry requirements. For brown working-class girls; however, access is limited as many of these extra-curricular activities require a high degree of financial capital and significant time commitment. Nia's story highlights the barriers to such capital, including her important role as a second caregiver to her siblings to support her mother, which involves many responsibilities related to managing a household and looking after children, but is not necessarily something that can be listed on a resumé.

In the study, participants from across all the schools engaged in extracurricular activities including leadership roles, cultural and the arts, service roles, extension groups, and school committees. Table 1 shows the number of activities participants were involved in.

Girls from lower socioeconomic backgrounds were involved in fewer extracurricular activities. They cited Church and family commitments and financial constraints as reasons for less participation in such activities. The work of Kiraly et al. (2021) on Australian young people who are carers for family members (siblings, cousins, or parents) highlights the impact of being a young carer. For many, it can interrupt their schooling and prevent them from accessing further education that supports them into employment. Certainly, in the case of Nia's story, she was juggling the responsibilities of caring for her younger siblings, supporting her mother whilst at the same time maintaining her high grades.

5.3 | Existing in a hybrid space

Another key finding affirms the experience of hybridity that was highlighted in the review of literature. Those from lower socioeconomic school communities struggled with what Walkerdine et al. (2001) describe as an "against the odds" discourse that positioned them as at-risk of failing. According to Walkerdine et al. (2001) and Mayes et al. (2024) successful women from devalued ethnic backgrounds develop inner resources to help them beat the odds and their motivations are embedded in notions of struggle, upward mobility, and guilt. Nia discusses the tensions of experiencing such success, a success that others in her family have not experienced. In the story, the more she experiences high academic achievement, the less connected she feels to her family, even though this achievement brings pride to them all.

Nia must also negotiate with her social group who tease her for her being smart. Brown participants in the study discussed having a more intellectually diverse peer group than white participants who tended to maintain friendships with intellectually similar peers. Those with diverse friends described being labeled the "smart one" in their clique. For example, it was evident that Andrea, who identified as Samoan, did not want to be differentiated from her friends due to her high academic ability: "I just don't like, I don't want to make my friends feel like, I don't know how to explain it, but like...I would always come down to where they are and just blend in with them." She described how her friends felt she was different, perhaps no longer one of them. "They were like, 'Why are you changing?' and I'm like, 'No I'm not. I'm still here at school!'"

5.4 | It's not about me

This study raised interesting distinctions in participants' motivations for success. While participants from all the schools demonstrated motivations that were underpinned by neoliberal notions of success, participants from

schools representing families from higher socioeconomic backgrounds (and predominantly of Pākehā/New Zealand European ethnicity), had internalized a self-actualization motivation for success that focused on pursuing the life of one's choosing. However, the participants from schools representing families from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (either of Pacific, Indian, or South-East Asian ethnicity) focused on doing well to serve others, and privileged service over individual success. This is explicit in Nia's story where her motivation to do well in school is clearly related to wanting to support her mother who was working several jobs. There was an urgency from Nia's mother for Nia to remain in school as this could offer the entire family upward mobility in time. For Nia, doing well was less about her own individual achievement, but how her success would benefit the collective.

The brown girls in the study viewed their academic success with a sense of responsibility to help others who were not as academically successful. Ange felt that service to her peers was a positive outcome of having high academic success, which is how she viewed her role as a high achiever and as Head Girl of her school: "That's what I like about being a high achiever. It's that you can help other people." Andrea, described how she preferred to focus on peers who found learning difficult and did not experience the same academic success:

I wouldn't change anything because...with the assignments that my friends get from the teachers they would always come and ask for help from me. I would never turn away from them...I like helping people, but I don't like people that know what they are doing, like they have got high grades. I like helping people that want help and they are lost.

In terms of their future pathways, this collectivist mindset was a key driver in their decision about their post-high school endeavors. Helen explained that her aim for her future was a strong motivator for her academic success:

I have this vision in my head that later on in life I would...become, hopefully, a pharmacologist, so I can have the good things I've always wanted and hopefully give back to my family 'cause you know, all the things they've done for me. So every morning I kind of like, think about it so I have that motivation to wake up and then come to school and do the work and things like that.

Similarly, Ange's plans revolved around helping her wider community as a result of witnessing the issues her mother experienced with her own health and life:

So I'm applying to get into Engineering and I want to specialize in biomedical and then I'm gonna work on a product that's gonna help the Pacific community with certain, um, diseases and illnesses that they have. So um, my mum has diabetes. So I'm thinking I might go along that track or I might go through gout or livers or something. I'm not too sure. And try and gain more money so that I can provide for my family and also to inspire my little cousins and sister and that they can get to uni and get a better job.

These participants demonstrated a more collectivist motivation for success because they wanted to use their abilities to help others, whether their families or the wider community. While Harris (2004) believed young women "whose cultural, racial, and class affiliations create[d] more possibilities for community and responsibility to and respect for others" would find "competitive individualism" to be "a contradictory and painful lesson" (p. 107). bell hooks writes something of her own story of being a high achieving black girl in *Teaching to Transgress* (1994):

It was always assumed by everyone else that I would become a teacher. In the apartheid South, black girls from working-class backgrounds had three career choices. We could marry. We could work as

maids. We could become school teachers. And since, according to the sexist thinking of the time, men did not really desire 'smart' women, it was assumed that signs of intelligence scaled one's fate. From grade school on, I was destined to become a teacher.

(hooks, 1994, p. 2)

hooks describes this trajectory as one of service. Her own dreams and desires were private longings and the needs of the community so great that she put these things aside. hooks' story resonates with the participants in this study that are represented in the fictional collective story "Nia". The participant dialogue circles offered a critical window into how young brown women were navigating the narratives concerning girlhood and success. Similar pressures and expectations that hooks writes of above were part of the participants' experience too. Their discourses together also contained sites of solidarity and resistance, the counter-hegemonic spirit that we catch a glimpse of in Nia's story; a story about a young woman who is coming to know who she is in a deeply engaged and reflective, "Pasifika girl ... with a jig in her hips, smiling looking up" (losefo, 2016, p. 207).

6 | CONCLUSION

Nia's story centers the brown-girl-as-success narrative and achieves the aims of collective storytelling as research alluded to by Richardson (1997), Richardson et al. (2022), Richardson and St. Pierre (2000) and Leavy (2012, 2015, 2018). These aims include the privileging of marginalized voices, evoking reader empathy, and proposing counter-narratives to white-centered discourses that marginalize and alienate brown narratives of success in education. bell hooks (1994) writes powerfully of her own memories of school where black educational success was perceived as a threat, and the hegemonic politics of schooling oppressive. hooks' story (1994) is resonant with the collective stories of brown girlhood collated in this study and speaks to the possibility of collective resistance, disruption of white-centering narratives, strengthening of identity, and pushing against the limits.

The participants of this study described experiencing a range of emotions when reading the findings. Wendy explained, "I know quite a few friends that have been in the same situation as this and so could feel empathy for them whilst reading this...". Iris found the findings uplifting and relatable: "I like it probably 'cause...Nia shared a lot of my values which I feel are what have kept me going—especially faith, hard work and family. That, combined with the fact that while Nia spent a lot of her time helping other students (something I got used to at school) ...". Ange described the experience of the dialog circles and findings as deeply empowering and inspiring, "...there are other people just like me that haven't had the most 'ideal' upbringing that have managed to find their strength and purpose despite their circumstances at home or school."

Collective storytelling in this study offered not just the re-presentation of a range of oppressions experienced by brown girls in Aotearoa, but in company with bell hooks, the stories became a collective voicing of gifted brown girl advocacy for other gifted brown girls. In the disruption of the brown-girl-as-failure narrative this work takes another step toward the possibility of an educational future where education might become, as bell hooks denotes it, the practice of freedom.

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There is no conflict of interest to disclose.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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