

# **Aiming for Student Achievement: How teachers can understand and better meet the needs of Pacific Island and Maori students**

**1998**

## **Introduction**

What is considered to be valid achievement for students is a value laden issue and its effective measurement is a very complex business. This is especially true for students who come from poor communities and attend low decile schools.

## **The AIMHI Project and Research**

This article is based on independent research being conducted alongside a five-year development project initiated and funded by the Ministry of Education and called AIMHI (Achievement in Multi-Cultural High Schools). Eight low decile high schools with high ratios of Pacific Island and Maori students are involved. One of the key goals of the project is to raise the achievement levels of the students in these schools. The purpose of the first phase of the research, conducted over a twelve month period, was to identify, understand and describe the things that impact on student achievement in order that the knowledge could be used to improve the learning opportunities for these students. Another purpose was to provide baseline data against which changes and progress made by the schools, through their involvement in the AIMHI project, can be measured.

During the course of the research, almost all staff and members of Boards of Trustees were interviewed and over nine hundred students participated in group discussions. A group of Pacific Island and Maori researchers also talked with parents and extended families.

While the focus of the project is on secondary schools and students, there are many important messages in the research that have direct implications for the primary schools and teachers who work with the younger brothers, sisters and cousins of the students like those in the AIMHI schools.

The outcomes of the research demonstrated a number of powerful influences on student achievement over which schools have little control. Many of them linked back to poverty - parents and caregivers without jobs; poor standards of accommodation; lack of disposable dollars to provide basic gear and equipment that middle-class students take for granted; poor standards of student health; and family dysfunction. Some of the influences are a direct result of policy in areas like health, employment, housing and social policy. Some are result of education policies.

## The worlds of the students

While it is possible to separate out for discussion the various influences on student achievement, in reality, they are inextricably interconnected. It is helpful to stand in the students' shoes, in order to understand their reality, to have an understanding of the worlds they inhabit and move between and of the strategies they use in order to cope with the conflicting values, expectations and pressures of the different worlds. Most students live in five or six worlds. They live in the world of their family; the world of their culture; for many, the world of their church; the world of school; as they get older, the world of part-time paid employment; and most of all, their peer world. All these worlds are a reality for them and all are important to some extent. The children learn to live in each of the worlds but most of their parents are familiar only with the family, cultural and church worlds and have little understanding of the worlds of work or school and virtually no understanding of their peer world. The teachers understand their work, school and peer worlds but, in some cases, have little knowledge of their family, cultural and church worlds. The children work hard to keep it this way and are active gatekeepers between, for instance, the school and their parents.

Difficulties arise for the students when some of the values, customs and expectations from two or more of the worlds are in conflict with each other. Two examples will help to illustrate this.

The teachings of the church are long standing and not to be questioned. What parents say is to be accepted with respect, without question and acted on immediately. Children are not expected to challenge or question in their homes or at church. In school, however, are expected to do both these things as an integral part of the learning process. Our National Curriculum document says that students should "develop skills of discrimination and critical analysis argue a case clearly, analyse, process information, evaluate interpret different points of view, distinguish fact from opinion, think critically, exercise initiative, analyse problems from a variety of perspectives, enquire, test ideas and solutions, adapt to new ideas, and develop the ability to negotiate and reach consensus." Since these tend to be skills that students will not learn at home, they need to be taught at school. At the same time as learning and being encouraged to use them at school, they are expected not to use them at home.

Many of these students, especially the girls, described how they are expected to take responsibility for major household tasks in their homes. This may include cooking the main meal of the day and cleaning up afterwards, looking after younger siblings, running errands for family members and cleaning the house. Sometimes, the older children may be the only "adult" at home. Another priority for many of these children is church activities. Students can spend up to three or four nights at church, often until quite late in the evening. Parents and caregivers may not understand or support their children's homework or assignment commitments either because their children are not telling them or because, in their minds, family and church come first. Some teachers, on the other hand, have little understanding of these competing home pressures that the children have to manage and may say the children are lazy or that their parents don't care.

Students in situations involving this kind of conflict often wish to behave in ways that peers will approve of but, at the same time, they know they have to behave in ways that the power-holders (usually adults) in each of the worlds will accept as appropriate. They often have to make choices as to which set of values they will support and they may find themselves in “no win” situations. Students were very analytical about the circumstances of their lives and very articulate in describing how they deal with such dilemmas. Their main way of coping is to keep the worlds separate and to move from one to another, rather than to attempt to reconcile the differences. The strategies they use to try to deal with the conflicting pressures include “making excuses” i.e. telling lies, avoidance or opting out altogether. The latter might take the form of withdrawing; lateness, wagging or truancy; deliberately setting out to fail in their school work; alcohol or other substance abuse; and for some, suicide.

### **Some of the key things that schools can do**

There are a multitude of complex factors that influence achievement which are outside the schools’ ability to control but which students bring with them to school every day. In most cases, these schools do not have the resources they need to address them. Nonetheless, the research shows that there are many very positive and constructive steps that schools and teachers can take to improve the achievement outcomes of these students.

### **Transition to secondary school**

For year 9 students, starting secondary school is quite traumatic. Moving to a new school, changes in friendships and the size and different organisation of secondary schools make this a difficult time for many of these students. For many, this transition can become a barrier to learning.

It was clear that contributing school teachers could and should play a very positive role in preparing the students for this transition. Before they even get to secondary school, many students have been given a very negative view of what life will be like once they get there. Many students across all the eight schools said teachers at their “old school” had told them stories that had made them scared and worried. Some students said that teachers had used going to secondary school as a threat, as a way of making them work harder and keeping the class “in line” until the end of the year. Many of them enter secondary school expecting it to be a difficult and unfriendly place. While it is important to be realistic about life at secondary school, students need encouragement to approach the change positively and, in particular, to have opportunities to learn the organisational skills they will need.

In most secondary schools, students move every forty-five to sixty minutes, on the bell. Classes are held in rooms that are bases for their particular subject teachers. Counting form time, students can move classrooms six or seven times a day and their form teacher’s classroom is the closest most of them get to having a base. Secondary students live their lives out of schools bags. In order to create a more stable and less fragmented environment for the students, some

schools are trialing home rooms for year nine students so that, where practical, teachers rather than students move from classroom to classroom.

Because adapting to formal and instructional language is difficult for most of these students, they find it extremely difficult, especially in the first year, to adjust period by period to a different voice, different language, different teaching style and a different set of expectations. Some schools are attempting to have the same teacher teach more than one subject to the same class and, where possible, to keep the same teachers with the same group of students from year to year.

There was evidence that an organised induction process, using peer support and acknowledging the social and emotional needs as well as the information needs of the students, has many positive spin-offs for the students and the school. The students were also appreciative of peer support programmes that were actively maintained throughout the first year.

### **Communication with parents**

Effective communication with parents, under current staffing and resourcing provisions, is very difficult for schools to achieve. In an ideal world, these schools would have the resources to keep an up-to-date data base that would keep them in touch with frequent changes to student and family contact information; personnel to liaise with and support families of students who are in trouble or whose school work is causing concern; and have access to translations of key documents and translators to assist parents and school personnel to maintain good communication. Parents indicated a great need to better understand how the school and qualifications systems work, what parents should expect from schools, how to help their children achieve at school and the role and responsibilities of parents in their child's education.

Even so, there were a number of ways suggested by teachers and students to improve information sharing with parents and to encourage their involvement.

- Phoning parents in each form class once a term or when there is a report night or an important school event. The teachers in the Project who phoned parents reported that the time and energy always paid off. As one teacher said *I have the best parent interview nights when I phone each family, even when only half of them are on the phone.*
- Making use of the PI language radio station to inform parents about school events and education issues.
- Considering alternative times. Not all parents are able to come to evening meetings. A group of students suggested parents *are free* on Saturdays; some teachers suggested having a range of different times e.g. an afternoon, a time after school and an evening or a combination over a couple of days.

- Working through the churches. While this may not work for all schools and all churches, Pacific Island teachers suggested that if schools have the cooperation and goodwill of the ministers, this is another avenue they have for getting alongside parents.
- Making the most of enrolment. This is an ideal opportunity to learn more about the students and their families and for the school to get across key messages about the school's organisation, parent groups, parent involvement, parents' obligations, student support services and reporting to parents.
- Working with students by putting more time and thought into briefing them about information the school wants them to take home and the reasons for this.
- Making the very most of every opportunity to inform and involve parents. For example, at one AIMHI meeting, the Principal took the opportunity to tell parents about Unit Standards, gave them information about setting up community groups, told them that the school library was open on Saturdays and after school and passed around a book to gather contact details of every parent so that information about the Project could be sent to them.
- Posting home newsletters and important documents. For a whole range of reasons, students will often decide not to take home newsletters, a report, a letter inviting parents to a meeting or important information about exam fees and qualifications. Some schools are ensuring caregivers are informed by budgeting for higher postage costs.

### **The Teachable state**

Being in a healthy and teachable state is a prerequisite for effective learning. Iron levels, vision and hearing, sexual health, diseases of poverty like rheumatic fever and skin diseases, dental health and smoking and substance abuse are just some of the common health needs of these students. Although the school is the most likely place for students to present with these problems, schools are not resourced to meet these needs and, almost always, they have difficulty accessing and coordinating help from other agencies to do so.

Most of the teachers also commented on the numbers of students who have difficulty concentrating and/or sustaining concentration, are disruptive, lack on-task behaviour, are sleepy and exhibit a range of poor health symptoms such as headaches and infections. Listening to the students talk about their lives provided valuable insights into the causes. Most do not eat breakfast, nor do most make or bring lunch to school. Many said they stopped doing these things around about intermediate age. They bring money to buy lunch at school and buy food that is *cool* and which they can share - soft drinks, chips and sweets. Many of them come to school tired because of lack of sleep. Almost all of the students go to bed between 10 p.m. and 1 or 2 a.m. with the most common time mentioned around 11 p.m. to midnight. Addiction to smoking (some find it hard

to survive from one break to another), alcohol and drugs and life pressures and low self-esteem are other contributors. Most teachers would come face-to-face with the symptoms on a daily basis and it is critical that teachers understand the reasons for these behaviours. Having a comprehensive life skills and health programme that begins at the year 9 level (or at least before the students select it as a transition option) and funding (sometimes in conjunction with the local CHE) a fully qualified, on-site nurse to work in a Student Support Team are some of the other ways that the AIMHI schools are attempting to make it easier for teachers to teach and students to learn.

### **Some of the key teacher qualities and skills that help learning and achievement.**

Students were asked to talk about the things that teachers do that really help them learn and the things teachers do that make it difficult for learning. The researchers clarified with students the importance of differentiating between “liking” a teacher and respecting their ability to assist learning. There was remarkable consistency between the responses given across all age groups both within each school and across the eight schools. The views of the teachers and students were also very similar. While it could be argued that they are qualities and skills that any fine teacher in any school would have, the teachers in schools with high proportions of Pacific and Maori students are able to apply these qualities and skills in a special way that acknowledges and respects the backgrounds and experiences of these particular students.

#### **Qualifications and subject knowledge**

- The feedback suggested that **both** high levels of subject knowledge and high levels of pedagogical knowledge are required.

#### **Personal attitudes and attributes**

- showing respect for students and treating them as individuals
- being able to relate to cultures other than their own
- being able to relate to them as young adults
- showing kindness and caring
- maintaining confidentiality
- a commitment to preparing well for lessons
- a sense of humour

## Pedagogical knowledge and skills

- being firm

Some students described this as “*being strict*”. What they went on to describe was not an authoritarian or negative approach but classrooms that are well managed, with established rules and routines that are maintained throughout the year. Following up is also important - they chase up work, keep students to deadlines and make sure punishments are carried out

- being fair

They don't want teachers to have “favourites”, they don't want “brainy” students to be given special treatment and they want girls and boys to be treated equally

- making the curriculum real

The students want to know **why** they are being taught something and they need to be able to relate it to their own everyday experiences. Giving lesson outlines, articulating the objectives and helping students to see the links between each lesson are also important.

- explanations

It is important to use everyday language and step-by-step progressions to get ideas across and this breaking of information into “bite-sizes” applies to giving unit and lesson outlines and explanations of in-class tasks and assignments. The students want it to be safe to ask questions without the fear of the teacher getting angry or being ignored or put down.

- making the lessons interesting and varied

This means creating opportunities for student involvement and interaction, incorporating practical activities, presenting information in different ways. Many teachers mentioned the benefits of using Language Through Language strategies.

- group work

Both teachers and students talked about the enjoyment and benefits of working in groups. The examples given included structured group activities and opportunities to discuss informally with other students. They also commented that group work needs to be set up carefully and with clear steps in place to ensure the students get the most out of the activity and that it cannot be taken for granted that they will have all the necessary skills to work effectively in this way. These skills may have to be taught.

- multi-level teaching

There are benefits for students when teachers are able to cater for different levels of knowledge and skill within a class (or within a topic). As one group of students said: *Some teachers teach too fast for some of us. Some pick it up but others need more time. They don't put you in groups, they just give up on you.*

- encouragement

The feedback from both teachers and students suggests that a teacher's ability to believe in the students and to make them feel special and important has a crucial impact on the way they feel about the teacher, the subject and their performance in that subject. Encouragement about day-to-day efforts and achievements, as well as longer-term goals, influence the way they feel about learning and the effort they put into it.

- non-confrontational behaviour management

Knowing how to handle angry students as well as being able to handle their own anger is important to effective behaviour management. While some students said they can understand why some teachers get angry, anger often makes an already tense and hostile situation worse. Singling out students easily embarrasses and "shames" and may result in ongoing resentment. Dealing with the situation quietly and away from the rest of the group is seen by the AIMHI students, and teachers, as being more effective.

The students made it clear that the attributes, attitudes, knowledge and skills discussed above, were all considered to be more important to the students than age, ethnicity and gender.

## **Some of the key teacher behaviours and teaching styles that are barriers to achievement**

- lack of commitment or being unprepared for lessons - students described these teachers as *lazy*
- negativity - teachers who are *grumpy and impatient*
- anger - teachers who are unable to control their anger with certain students or with classes in general
- put downs - mocking and humiliating students
- racism - overt e.g. put downs and name-calling; covert i.e. a perception that a teacher just doesn't like Maori and Pacific Islanders; and sometimes inverse racism where teachers let Maori or Pacific Islanders get away with things because teachers are afraid of being culturally insensitive.

- favouring certain students especially girls over boys or “bright” students over “slower” students
- lecturing - where a teacher talks throughout most lessons and there is little, if any, variation or what the students called *fun*
- getting students to copy and summarise or do work sheets for large parts of each lesson
- making assumptions that students have understood and quickly moving on to another point or another topic
- actively discouraging students from asking questions and seeking explanations
- excessive control where students are not allowed to speak, ask questions or have any input at all; or no control where lots of time is spent on discipline or teachers “give up” on the class altogether
- understanding some non-New Zealand teachers - their accent, the pronunciation of certain words or where they have insufficient English to elaborate on an idea.

## Notes

Jan Hill and Kay Hawk work at the Educational Research and Development Centre (ERDC) at Massey University’s Albany Campus. For the last few years they have worked extensively in a wide range of different types of schools, from early childhood centres through to secondary schools, on both research and development projects. Their areas of interest and expertise include school leadership and management, self-review, Board of Trustees’ training, performance management and assessment. They can be contacted at ERDC, Massey University: Albany, Private Bag 102904, North Shore Mail Centre, Auckland; e-mail: ERDCALB@massey.ac.nz

The team of community researchers who worked with parents and families in the AIMHI communities and wrote the two chapters in the report on Maori and Pacific parents’ perspectives were Teau Seabourne, Tawhiri Williams, Lonise Tanielu and Lita Foliaki.

The “Making Achieving Cool Report” contains -

- a full explanation of the impact of government policies on these students, their families and the schools they work in can be found in the full report
- other areas (in addition to those referred to in this article) where schools can make modifications and changes to better meet the needs of Pacific Island and Maori students e.g. governance; lateness,

wagging and truancy; school organisation and management; learning needs and styles; curriculum content and delivery; homework; discipline; pastoral care; school climate;

The full report is available from the Research and International Section, Ministry of Education, Private Bag 1666, Wellington and is called "Towards Making Achievement Cool: Achievement in Multi-Cultural High Schools".

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