

## **Achieving is Cool:**

**What we learned from the AIMHI Project  
to help schools more effectively meet  
the needs of their students.**

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## *Abstract*

The AIMHI Project comprises nine multi-cultural, low decile high schools that have been working together, with support from the Ministry of Education, since 1996. For the first six years of the Project, 1996-2001, a research team worked in the schools, formatively evaluating the developments undertaken by individual schools and others that were undertaken collectively by the nine schools. This paper discusses what the schools did that made a positive difference to their students' learning opportunities. Many of the issues we discuss relate to how the schools organised themselves to meet student needs - should the forms be vertical or horizontal? How should tutor/whanau periods be organised? What strategies work well to smooth the transition from Year 8 to Year 9? What lessons were learned about wagging, truancy and lateness? Much was learned about the importance of seeing the student as a whole child - the value of having a significant adult, and providing services that allow teachers to teach and students to get their wider needs met where they present - at school. Some of the schools made physical and image changes that gave students back pride in themselves as well as in their school. Finally, the paper talks about the importance of the attributes and skills of the teachers and how the schools are working to improve teacher quality.

## *Introduction*

The AIMHI Project is a School Support initiative set up to raise the achievement of Maori and Pacific Island students in nine low decile secondary schools<sup>1</sup>. The project began in 1996 and since that time major collective and individual school developments have been undertaken. Alongside this development, there have been a number of research activities. While the development work has continued, the research ended in 2001. No final report was commissioned to sum up the findings of this work and this paper is a response to the many requests the researchers have received for such a summary. While it does not, in any way, attempt to address all the findings, it discusses those we think are of most interest to schools.

## *Methodology*

The data for the paper come from a number of sources. During the six-year period of the research programme, three major collective reports were written (Hawk, Hill, Seabourne, Williams, Tanielu, Filiaki 1996; Hawk and Hill 1998a; Hill and Hawk, 2000b). In addition, a comprehensive individual baseline report and a mid-project evaluation report were written for each of the nine

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<sup>1</sup> Originally, there were eight schools involved. A ninth school was included when its decile rating dropped from two to one in 1999.

schools (a total of eighteen substantive reports). In response to the needs of the individual schools, the researchers also evaluated and wrote reports on a number of specific projects or issues for each of the schools (between three and eleven for each school). These included evaluations of student learning, Maori achievement, senior programmes, assessment systems, homework programmes, horizontal forms, the tutor programme, middle management, student support networks, transition from Years 8 to 9, behaviour management, managing 'at risk' students, ICT systems, student leadership and the community liaison programmes. In some instances, for example, the tutor programme, horizontal forms and student support networks, the evaluations were carried out in more than one school. The usefulness of these formative reports was the degree of honesty that was achieved by making the reports confidential to the schools but, for this reason, they are not referenced in findings or included in the bibliography. From 1999-2001 the researchers also evaluated the effectiveness of the implementation of the annual AIMHI Ministry of Education action plans for each school. This resulted in an additional three comprehensive evaluation reports for each school.

Formative evaluation methodology was used for all of the collective and the individual projects. This involved regular feedback to participant groups both during as well as at the end of an evaluation. The research design was primarily qualitative allowing the researchers to gain detailed, 'thick' description of participants' experiences and perceptions. However, quantitative data were collected on an annual basis - data on roll changes, attendance and student achievement data. The tools used in the research included:

- Group discussions with students  
All of the research projects included group discussions with students. Over 1000 students participated in the data gathering for each of the three major reports. Students were also interviewed for the evaluations of the annual action plans (1999-2001) as well as the individual 'project' or 'issues' reports.
- Interviews  
Almost every teacher in each of the nine schools was interviewed for each of the major reports. Senior leaders were interviewed frequently. Eight-nine teachers were interviewed for the 'Making Difference in the Classroom' research. Key teachers were interviewed for every individual school report. Board Chairpersons and other trustees were interviewed for relevant reports.
- Classroom observations  
One hundred full lesson observations were conducted in 1999 for the 'Making a Difference in the Classroom' project. In addition, a number of the individual school initiatives involved observations of classrooms, meetings and other school events and activities.

- Document analysis

Documents were comprehensively analysed for all the research projects mentioned above. Each school regularly passed on to the researchers new or updated school policies, newsletters, meeting minutes and school reports. The document analysis also included an analysis of student achievement data.

- Field notes

The researchers attended many meetings over the six years and recorded field notes of meetings and other school events and activities.

- School review data

Each school was assisted by the researchers to set up systems of self-review and data collection. These data were incorporated into the researchers' evaluations.

The data were used formatively in a number of ways. Key stakeholders in the schools were given informal feedback during or after the school visits and, depending on the project, included the Principals, members of the senior management teams, particular committee members, teachers, students or trustees. The researchers also provided verbal and written feedback at the Principal Retreats and regular meetings of the Principals and Chairpersons of each of the schools. This gave the researchers many opportunities to have the data verified by the participants, including draft reports, and to discuss the findings with them. Regular feedback was given to Ministry of Education personnel through reports, advisory committee meetings and regular conference calls.

The remainder of the paper is divided into four sections each outlining the key findings of the research: School organisation, meeting student needs holistically, meeting students' teaching and learning needs, school image and reputation and teacher quality.

## *School organisation*

### Vertical Forms

To begin with, six of the original eight AIMHI schools organised their school in vertical forms. Students from across the year groups (Years 9 - 13) were organised into form classes (vertical forms). As in most other secondary schools across the country, the form classes met briefly with their form teacher once or twice a day, largely for administrative purposes - to check attendance and uniform and to listen to notices. During the collection of the

baseline data (Hawk et al, 1996), it became increasingly clear that while teachers believed that vertical forms created a 'family feel' to the climate of the school, the students disagreed. Teachers said that students enjoyed mixing with others from the different year levels, that seniors supported juniors, helped induct and welcome them to the school and provided good role models. The students reported otherwise. They reported that they did not voluntarily socialise within a vertical tutor group and that, sometimes, the senior students were not as good at role modelling for the juniors as the teachers hoped they would be. In fact, some quite negative informal induction occurred for Year 9 students in vertical forms. They learned quickly how to wag, where to smoke, how to handle relievers and about the personal lives of the teachers. Most importantly, students did not feel that the form teacher was able to adequately meet their very different needs. For example, senior students needed a form class culture geared to their particular learning and study needs. This was almost impossible to achieve when the numbers of seniors in any one form class were so small. Year 9 students had special transition and induction needs that teachers could not accommodate because of the lack of time.

One school, with a vertical organisation, trialled horizontal forms at Year 9. Teachers were especially reluctant because the school had a strong 'House' system in place and they were afraid that this strong tradition would be lost or 'watered down' in some way. The trial was overwhelmingly successful and was extended to Year 10 with the senior form classes retaining their vertical structure. Interestingly enough, the 'House' structure did not break down and continues to be used for specific annual events and competitions in sports, drama, culture and speeches.

One school organised their whanau groups along ethnic lines with the rationale that it would strengthen the students' home languages and cultural knowledge (Hawk and Hill, 1998). This system was also abandoned on the basis of convincing student feedback. Many of the students were of mixed ethnic background and did not necessarily want to identify with just one ethnic group and there were some students from smaller Pasifika groups who did not have a whanau to which they felt they belonged. The system exacerbated ethnic tensions in the playground and created schools within a school that undermined collective pride and school spirit. Like the school that worried about losing their 'House' structure, they have found other ways to ensure that the cultures of the students are acknowledged and promoted.

Eight AIMHI schools now have a fully horizontal form structure and the other school has initiated horizontal forms for Years 9 and 10. Administration messages can be targeted to the particular form and the special year level needs of the students can be addressed. Seniors can be prepared for exams, given study advice and time to prepare CVs and to organise their transition from school. Two schools found they retained more seniors through to exams after establishing senior form groups. For the Year 9's, an induction programme, including focussed form time, has enabled students to form relationships with their peers more quickly and to feel more connected with the school within a shorter timeframe. Effective form teachers will make either

system work well but most teachers find it easier to be an effective form teacher in a horizontal system. While a horizontal structure does not guarantee that student needs are met, it provides an important platform for this to happen.

### Tutor time

Even with horizontal forms, teachers in all the schools identified problems with short timeframes for form periods. The teachers were always exceptionally busy trying to complete all the tasks expected of them while the students were 'bored' with little to do.

As described in the previous section, the baseline report (Hawk et al, 1996) identified the problems students have with transition to secondary school and also the need for the holistic care of individual students. A 'significant adult' could, if they had time, establish a critically important relationship with a student that would involve knowing them, their needs, their academic progress, their family, their co-curricular interests and abilities and their aspirations for the future. The report also identified the need these students have to be taught life skills, study skills, communication and decision-making skills, and time and self-management.

In an effort to provide for all the identified needs, three schools trialled a system of having daily, extended tutor periods. When the system was first trialled, a full period each day was designated. Almost all staff were tutors and this enabled the tutor classes to be small (approximately 15 students in each). Each day the students began by getting out homework or unfinished class work or assignments. They began on these while the teacher completed the administrative tasks and checked in one-to-one with some students over a range of issues including absence, behaviour, health and uniform.

The school also planned a skills development programme that was implemented by tutor teachers during this time. Resources were provided for the teachers to deliver the programme and it was specifically designed to meet the needs of each year level. Junior classes, for instance, would learn the skills of self-management and goal setting. The senior class programme included completing CVs, learning study and exam skills and job shadowing.

All these schools, several years later, still have their tutor periods because they feel the benefits are significant enough to justify the use of the time. There have been some difficulties and learnings for the schools as a result. Neither the beginning nor the end of the day are ideal times for a tutor period. Teachers need the most up-to-date record of period absences so they can be dealt with immediately and attaching tutor time to interval or lunch seems the most practical. The school needs to be clear about what activities are, and are not appropriate tutor time activities and that teachers and students treat tutor time as seriously as any other subject period. Unless this happens, its effectiveness and status will be eroded. When the 'tutor' is connected with

another activity, such as a designated reading time (SSR), one gets confused with the other in the minds of students and the use of the time becomes blurred and sometimes abused. Ideally, tutor time and SSR should be timetabled separately. Allowing other school activities to operate in tutor time such as choir, culture festival practice and doing jobs for teachers also undermine its importance.

The extent to which teachers take their tutor role seriously varies and needs to be monitored by the school. Some teachers allowed students to play games, go to the gym or do whatever they liked. Teachers must be encouraged to see it as an integral part of their work and not as an 'extra' task. When new staff are appointed they need to have the purpose and philosophy explained to them as well as be supported for a period of time. Students also need to be clear about the purpose of the period and be helped to see it as a serious learning time.

Classes need to be kept as small as possible to maximise the teacher's ability to keep closely in touch with each student. Ideally tutor teachers should continue with the same students over most of their school years. At Year 9, in particular, it helps if the tutor also teaches most of the students in a subject class.

When the tutor classes are working well, it is the tutor teacher who supports learning and pastoral needs as well as managing behaviour. There is less need to refer students to a Dean or HOD than there is in a school with very brief tutor or form times. It is also easier to prevent problems and be proactive with support rather than have problems escalate. This learning period has the potential to provide support and skills that will benefit the student in all learning areas, as well as beyond school.

### Length of lessons

Three schools trialled extending lesson times to sixty or seventy minutes as opposed to the traditional forty-five or fifty minutes. Data from teachers and students showed that effective teachers were able to maximise the benefits of this extended time. It allowed teachers and students to do more in-depth work during a single lesson, topics could be more fully explored and there was less of a rush to get through a planned lesson topic. Teachers also found that with shorter periods, only a small number completed the work and the extra ten or twenty minutes allowed more students to finish.

The extended lesson time did not help teachers who were already having difficulty. They found it harder than ever to keep the students engaged and, very often, the behaviour of the students in these classes worsened. The researchers have often seen good systems or strategies that meet the needs of students stopped because of problems a few of the adults in the school are having with the changes. In this case, the schools have not done this and continue to provide additional professional development and coaching to help those teachers that struggle with the extra lesson time.

One school has timetabled for just one lesson only after the lunch break, which is taken at 1.45 most days. Teachers and students find the afternoon less tiring and more productive under this timetable

### Lateness, wagging and truancy

Lateness refers to students arriving late for school in the morning, wagging (a term used by the students) describes selective skipping of classes and truancy covers taking a day off school, days off school over a period of time, irregular attendance and chronic non-attendance. Improving the ways in which wagging, lateness and truancy were monitored and improved was a major focus for a number of the schools (Hawk and Hill, 1998a). The premise for this was clear: if students are not in class, their learning is compromised. Students described that if they miss classes, their confidence levels drop. In some cases students can never catch up and get into a cycle of failure, either in a particular subject or in all their subjects. A critical factor in student motivation is the notion of self-efficacy or a self-belief that you can learn and that you are capable of improving on your personal best (Hill and hawk, 2000a). Students need visible evidence that their efforts are being rewarded and that they are making progress with their learning. If they are not in class, they have little chance of experiencing success and are far less likely to be motivated.

All the schools now have computerised systems for tracking the students and all have truancy or community liaison officers to ensure that teachers are not spending time on these issues and can focus on teaching and learning. Every school recognises the importance of having accurate information available to teachers and Deans by the next day so that absences can be verified and followed up. One of the most successful strategies used by two of the schools was to publish the attendance and wagging data on the staff noticeboard for each form class and year group, every day if necessary, or at least every week. School wide improvement targets were set and met because the ongoing monitoring increased teacher awareness of truancy, which in turn, was passed on to students.

The students made it clear that half or whole day truanting is more likely to be caused by peer pressure than if classes are wagged selectively. In the latter case, students very often described these classes as 'boring'. For them, 'boring' is not usually defined as it is in a dictionary. Occasionally, it is a reference to completing worksheets and copying notes from the blackboard but it is far more likely to relate to the relationship they have with the particular teacher of that subject and/or the feeling that they are failing. Invariably, the consequence for being caught wagging is detention. This rarely addresses the underlying issues and instead the student is left feeling resentful and even more disempowered. Although the pressure of time could be seen as a barrier, an open and honest discussion with a significant adult, which focuses on teaching and learning, might provide more genuine and lasting solutions.



The data drew us to the conclusion that, if period wagging records can be accurately maintained, they are good indicator of teachers who are not performing, who are struggling or may be incompetent. As with records of students sent to 'time out' rooms, wagging records show that the same teachers use or overuse these systems and often with the same students. Only one school used the data to begin to comprehensively address teacher quality issues.

Lateness, wagging and truancy are complex and interrelated issues. For instance, a school focusing on lateness might end up creating an increase in truancy because it may be easier for students who know they will be late to stay away until lunchtime or for the whole day. All the systems need to be working well all the time.

### Girls and boys classes

Two of the seven coeducational schools trialled single gender classes. In one instance, a separate class each of boys and girls was trialled. In the second school, a girls only class was set up. In both instances, the decisions were driven by issues that were not directly related to identified student needs. Some teachers thought that the girls would do better in single gender classes because they would be freed from the domination of the boys and would be less distracted. For the same reasons, there was a perception that Pasifika parents preferred single sex schools, especially for the girls, and that offering an alternative might attract students to the school. Neighbourhood school politics was another factor. In one instance a local Intermediate was offering single gender classes and in the other, there were discussions about turning a nearby school, which had closed, into a girls' school.

In both schools the trials were abandoned after one year. The boys' behaviours, previously causing concern (dominating, distracting and sometimes bullying), continued in the 'boys only' class and also developed in the 'girls only' classes. The style was more verbal than physical in the 'girls only' class but teachers reported it as worse than in the mixed classes. The 'boys only' class, in particular, was the one that teachers dreaded taking. In the school with the girls' only class, boys were over represented in the other year level classes and the perception of both teachers and students was that this adversely affected the dynamics of the classes.

### Detentions and 'punishment' systems

Throughout the six years of the research, all nine schools retained some system of detention as their main strategy for managing inappropriate student behaviour. Detention systems are notoriously difficult to manage effectively and are disliked and generally regarded as a waste of time by students. Giving out a detention may make the teacher feel better at the time but students consistently told the researchers that, because the causes are not addressed, detention doesn't change behaviour. The punishment often

becomes self-fulfilling because if the behaviour is repeated or if detentions are missed, more detentions are meted out. When this happens the detention escalates the behaviour rather than contains or eliminates it. Some of the detention activities given to students turn them off the very things teachers want to encourage. For example, teachers want students to enjoy writing but a common punishment is to give students thirty minutes to an hour of writing out lines or copying rules or passages of a textbook.

The only detentions that work are those that are supervised by the teachers in whose classes the misdemeanour has occurred. As the teachers put it, you have to 'kill your own snakes'. This works for several reasons: the student is held directly accountable for the behaviour; the 'punishment' is more likely to fit the behaviour; and the teacher has the opportunity to talk to and work with the student during the detention and is more likely to be able to resolve the issue this way.

Again and again, the students told the researchers about the strategies that would bring about changes in their behaviour (Hawk et al, 1996; Hawk and Hill, 1998, Hill and Hawk, 2000b). Their first strategy is to involve their parents as early as possible. Their second strategy is to engage the students in one-to-one discussions with an adult they respect, identify the real issues and then put written plans in place. The plans may include further discussions with a teacher and should involve follow-up and ongoing monitoring. As described earlier in the lateness, wagging and truancy section, the chances of the issues being relationship or teaching and learning related are very high and most detention systems fix neither of these. In the first instance, when issues are referred to HODs rather than Deans, the data suggest that teaching and learning, rather than pastoral care issues, are more likely to be addressed.

Another common punishment, probably instigated by a Dean or a member of the Senior Management Team, is a 'sorry' letter to a teacher. Teachers find this ineffective and unhelpful because the apology is very often insincere, does not fit the behaviour and does nothing to resolve the issue. The teacher at the receiving end is left feeling frustrated and let down. Like the students, they want a longer lasting and more genuine attempt to resolve the causes of the problem.

### Homework

The researchers evaluated the homework programmes in several of the AIMHI schools during the duration of the research. Homework programmes are not easy to set up or maintain but students that used them reported very positively on the benefits. There are a number of factors that help to make homework centres successful. A top priority for success is students having access to trained or skilled personnel who can help them with their work. This person needs to be able to relate well to the students and to provide them with practical help and advice. It helps to be able to begin the sessions with food and some students reported that this was the first incentive to get them

attending. A number of the schools set up their homework centres in the library where students appreciate being able to access written resources and to use the computers. For some students, this is their only opportunity outside of school hours to access the Internet and prepare their work on the computer.

All of the schools experimented with homework books of varying formats and sizes (small pocket-size to A5). The most critical factor in ensuring that students use the homework diaries is that class and form teachers check that students are using them. When class teachers check that homework is recorded in the diaries and form teachers regularly ask to see them, then the students use them. In schools with an extended tutor period during the week where students get a chance to complete homework, teachers were in an ideal position to ensure that students were using their homework diaries effectively.

### *Meeting student needs holistically*

In any one year, primary age students spend the majority of their time with one teacher, in one classroom. This teacher manages their pastoral care needs as well as their learning needs across the entire curriculum. For these teachers, it is much easier for them to see, and take responsibility for making, the connections between the social, emotional, and physical needs of the students as well as their learning needs and to respond accordingly. In the secondary system, many people may be involved in managing the same needs. Students, especially in Years 9 and 10, may have up to ten teachers and the people managing their learning (the classroom teacher, the HOD, other specialists such as the ESOL or reading teacher) are often different from those who manage their pastoral care needs (the form teacher, the Dean, the Guidance Counsellor). Often, these people are geographically separated, students have to make appointments to see them, and it is common that they do not talk to each other directly.

Secondary schools find it difficult to create opportunities for any one person to discuss all these needs in relation to each other and inevitably the meeting of students' learning, behaviour and pastoral care needs becomes fragmented and uncoordinated. For many students, there is no significant adult in their school lives that monitors their needs to ensure that they are being met as well as possible. Often, the response is reactive. Often it is not until a crisis arises that all the pieces of the jigsaw of a student's life will be pieced together and the people directly involved will meet and organise a comprehensive and holistic programme of support. As a result, some students 'slip through the cracks'. Others make a career of not being in class and spend their day seeing the nurse, the guidance counsellor, the Dean and any other specialist available. And, in some instances, the behaviour of a teacher or their teaching methods is not addressed. The AIMHI research highlights some important learnings in this area and these are outlined below.

### Specialist support

One of the key findings identified in the baseline report was the importance of these schools having additional non-teaching specialists and experts to take care of non-classroom issues that impact on teaching and learning - attendance, student health and well-being, relationship and social issues - in order that students are in a 'teachable state'. The contracting of these staff allows teachers to get on with the business of teaching and learning knowing that the other needs of the students are being taken care of. These additional professionals and adults include a qualified nurse, access to a convenient doctor and dentist service, a fully accredited social worker and community liaison and/or truancy officers who are able to speak the main languages of the families in the community. Using the research findings, the schools used scarce AIMHI funding to trial the employment of some of these positions in each of the schools. More recently they resulted in the setting up of the Healthy Community Schools' initiative in all nine AIMHI schools. School is the logical place for these needs to present and the necessity for them to be addressed on the school site will continue to be the reality.

### Tutor system

The extended tutor period was the closest the schools came to providing a significant adult for the students that spent enough time with them to get to understand their needs and to see them holistically. It is still operating in three of the schools and was outlined in a previous section.

### Database

Schools need an accurate and easy to use database that can be readily accessed by all staff. The database should include a record of the number of interactions each student has with specialist pastoral care staff, but not the content of those interactions. This way, signals for help can be identified early and over users of the system can be monitored.

### Learning Support Team

All the schools have set up Learning Support Teams whose purpose is to deal with students with at risk behaviour and/or those whose learning is at risk. Typically the teams are led by a member of the senior management team and comprise both specialist teaching and pastoral staff, a behaviour management specialist, truancy or community liaison officers and any other student support staff member. These teams meet regularly, often once a week, and make sure that there is ample time to deal with each student referral. Careful notes are taken on each student, often in the form of updating a register. If they are not involved in the meetings, Deans are given copies of the register or the notes that pertain to students in their year level. Students do not come off the

register until they are no longer in need of specialist support or they leave the school.

### Transition

Many of the AIMHI evaluations show that, for many of the students, the transition from intermediate to secondary school is a traumatic time for them (Hawk and Hill, 2000a; Hawk and Hill, 2001b). Their intermediate school teachers have often given them negative pictures of life at secondary school which the students say are to help keep them working hard and because the teachers often do not know enough about the systems and the teachers at the secondary schools. The students' anxiety and the adjustment they have to make to the different systems - bells, timetables, moving from class to class and, in many cases, different pedagogy - means that many students are unable to relax and focus on their learning. Some students said it took them nearly a year to feel confident and enthusiastic about learning again.

### *Meeting students' teaching and learning needs*

In 1996, when we began our research in the AIMHI Project, teachers constantly asked the same questions: How can we motivate these students? How can we get them to want to learn? How can we get them to take responsibility for their learning? Over the six years and, in particular, by listening to the voices of the students, the researchers were able to unravel some of the critical factors involved in helping these student achieve success and become motivated learners.

### Relationships

In 1999, the researchers were asked by the AIMHI Forum to identify the practices of effective teachers that help or hinder student learning. This resulted in the report 'Making a Difference in the Classroom' (Hill and Hawk, 2000b) referred to earlier. It outlines the critical factors as observed in a hundred full classroom observations, follow up interviews with the observed teachers and group discussions with the students from each of the classes. One of the pivotal findings from this research was the critical nature of the relationship between the teacher and the students. So extensive was the data about the importance of the relationship, that the researchers described it as 'a prerequisite' for learning for these students. This research has since been confirmed by several other research studies (Hawk, Tumama Cowley, Hill and Sutherland, 2001) and Bishop (in publication). Important aspects of that relationship as identified in the AIMHI research include:

- Understanding the worlds of the students

Students live in different worlds each with a different set of values and expectations - the world of school, their peers, home, church, work. Teachers need to understand and value these worlds and help students to manage the often-competing demands of each of them.

- **Respect**  
Students said that effective teachers treat them as people and adults rather than students or children. How they are treated is reflected just as much in what teachers do and how they do it as in what they say. The students are very good at recognising genuine respect.
- **Caring**  
The students in these classes felt cared for and cared about because the teachers tell them frequently that they do and show them in a myriad of ways such as giving them personal time, listening to their ideas, supporting their co-curricular activities, organising trips, marking and returning work quickly and letting them borrow gear.
- **Being fair**  
Students need to trust that a teacher will be fair to them and to everyone else in order to have respect for them. This means giving all the students in the class attention and affirmation and not giving preferential treatment to any one groups - *the bright kids, the girls, the ones with no reputation, the dumb kids or the boys who are good at sport.*
- **Giving of themselves**  
This does not refer to tangible gifts but to the ways teachers share their lives, their feelings and their failings with the students. If a teacher can do this, the students are more likely to give of themselves in return.
- **Perseverance and patience**  
Students want teachers who will persist and never give up on them. This goes hand in hand with patience. Students talked about how important it is to them that they can ask for help and know that the teacher will give it to them and keep on giving it for as long as it takes for them to understand. Teachers who believe in the ability of the students to learn and 'hang in there' for them give the students the confidence to try things for themselves.

Many of these aspects of the relationship depend on the notion of reciprocity - if the teacher is respectful, fair and perseveres then the students will pay the teacher back in kind. That special relationship they have with a teacher is critical to their willingness to engage in the subject, their motivation and their learning.

## Formative Assessment

The importance of formative assessment lies in the locus of control that it gives the students (Hawk and Hill, 2000a). Learners who attribute their success, or failure, to factors within their own control are more likely to succeed than those for whom the attribution of success is due to external factors located beyond their influence. This means that the locus of control for learning must be with the students. They must have ownership of the learning process and must be given the knowledge, understanding and skills to be able to take control of that learning. They need to know how to succeed. Contributing to this is the notion of self-efficacy or a self-belief that you can learn and that you are capable of improving on your personal best. In turn, students need visible evidence that they are making progress with their learning and that they are succeeding. Success motivates and motivation leads to ongoing success. The critical importance of formative assessment to this process and, in particular, feedback, feedforward and self-assessment is well documented (Black and William, 1998; Hattie, 1999; Assessment Reform Group, 2003).

There were many, many instances recorded in the observations of teachers giving quality feedback to students. There were also examples where students were not afraid to make mistakes or were not devastated by a poor result because they knew they would get feedback and be given strategies and support to improve. Not all teachers had a common definition of feedback. For some, feedback was synonymous with praise and was indicated with comments like 'well done', 'excellent work', 'good effort' or at the opposite end of the scale with comments like 'not as good as last time', 'careless work' and 'poor effort'. For others, there was confusion between feedback and direct instruction. For example, an explanation of how to complete a task was sometimes described as feedback. There were also examples where checking for the right answer, indicated by a tick or a cross, was deemed to be giving good feedback. There was less awareness shown by the teachers of the importance of feedforward or identifying the next steps that a student needs to take in their learning.

The focus on feedback and feedforward highlights the importance of teacher/student dialogue. This, in turn, invites teachers to critically examine the quality of the talk that goes on in their classrooms and to think about whether they are giving genuine feedback and feedforward or whether they are simply praising, giving direct instruction or checking work for the right answers. Feedback and feedforward needs to be specific to the task, in both the positive and the critical, it should be descriptive rather than judgmental and should involve the learner wherever possible to improve the chance of it being understood and acted on.

Another aspect of formative assessment that encourages self-efficacy and student ownership of their learning is self-assessment. This is not an easy process for students to grasp, or adults for that matter, and teachers needed to understand the developmental needs of their students in this area in order to plan self-assessment tasks that were pitched at that level of development.

Students had to be taught the skills quite systematically and be given self-assessment exemplars on which to model their responses. Some teachers timed self-assessment tasks for the end of the unit which prevented the students from using the feedback to help them learn and to improve their work. A number of self-assessment formats were lists of tasks or steps in a process that the students ticked on completion. These checklists rarely contained criteria for evaluating the quality of the work and, if they were prepared for every unit, became a repetitive and meaningless activity for the students.

### Literacy

In 1996, we identified the difficulties the AIMHI schools have in making up the gap in achievement between the level at which students arrive in Year 9 and that required to achieve against national levels at Year 11. Serious deficits in literacy in particular make it hard for all teachers to teach at an appropriate level in all learning areas. We said that every teacher had to be a teacher of language. From that year, teachers were encouraged to identify vocabulary that they needed to teach and include it, and appropriate strategies, in all unit plans.

A range of strategies for enhancing literacy have been trialled in some of the schools and, while it is still too early to draw conclusions about all of the things that have been tried, there are some conclusions about two for which we have strong evidence. The first relates to SSR (Sustained Silent Reading). It became clear very early that students found it difficult, if not impossible, to be silent or to sustain reading. Since the main purpose of this programme is to achieve 'reading mileage' it relies on reading to take place and this was rarely the case, especially in the junior classes. Two schools put an enormous effort into this programme providing class sets of specially selected reading with high content interest and appropriate reading levels, organising book monitors to issue and collect books, providing support staff time to prepare and repair books, and have a system of rotation of materials. In brief, class observations and student interviews indicated that very little reading was taking place, even when students were quiet and appeared engaged. They responded more positively to a range of whole class, group or individual language-rich activities.

Three schools have used the Paul Nation vocabulary lists to assess students and have implemented school-wide use of words from the academic vocabulary list. Six words are selected each week and every teacher and adult in the school are expected to use the words in as many contexts as they can over the week. Feedback from students has been very positive. They feel they are becoming expert at 'serious' words and are more confident about assignments and exams as a result. School-wide testing indicates significant progress in vocabulary acquisition. Since they are hearing and learning the words in relevant contexts it is comprehension rather than rote learning or merely decoding that is achieved.



## *School image and reputation*

The researchers are aware of the validity of the comment that the wearing of a school uniform has nothing to do with teaching and learning. They are also aware of the many public statements made about schools spending scarce dollars on promoting themselves rather than using the money in the classrooms. Some of the teachers in the AIMHI schools echoed these comments. Despite this, the AIMHI research data (Hawk and Hill, 1998b) show that changes to the school uniform, the physical environment and the public messages about the school had a profound influence on students' self-esteem, their pride in the school and school morale. It also impacted on the general raising of expectations and standards.

Many of the schools have updated their uniforms since the project began. In four of the schools, the changes to the uniforms and the uniform standards have been dramatic. Previously, in order to keep costs manageable for parents, some of the schools allowed the flexibility of 'any white shirt' or 'any black trousers'. Students believed that they looked scruffy and asked for uniforms to be standardised. Some schools that previously allowed seniors to wear mufti adopted a senior uniform and most of the schools now keep sets of school blazers that students can wear when they are representing the school. Woollen jerseys have replaced sweatshirts, leather shoes have replaced sneakers and many have smart jackets as an optional extra. Teachers feared that parents would struggle to afford the more expensive items but, almost without exception, complaints did not materialise. In many cases, the students were delighted with the changes. Comments like *'we feel like a real school'* and *'we are as good as those other schools now'* (the higher decile schools) were common. It gave them a stronger sense of identity and was used by some of the schools as a visible symbol of the setting of higher standards.

Some schools started physical upgrades by changing their front entrances, installing wrought iron fencing around the perimeter of the school, painting the buildings, putting in new gardens and taking care with the image the school portrayed to the public. One school put up a large, but very smart, community notice board at the front gate that is used to acknowledge student achievement and to promote school events. Others adopted new procedures for managing graffiti. Another school set up a 'Respect' campaign where a committee of staff and students met regularly to set up programmes and strategies to help students, and staff, build respect for themselves, for each other, for the environment and for learning. This committee continues to operate today and its work has been an important influence in changing the culture of the school. Feedback from the students indicated that the quality of the physical environment and facilities a school offers does have a positive influence on the way they feel about themselves and the school.

## *Teacher Quality*

### Whole school professional development

Since the advent of 'Tomorrow's Schools' there have been some major shifts in thinking in New Zealand and internationally about how best to organise and deliver professional development (PD) programmes for teachers (Hill, Hawk and Taylor, 2001). There were some critical learnings in this area for the AIMHI schools as well, demonstrated particularly in their work in assessment. Early on in the project, the decision was made to begin implementation of a formative assessment PD programme with the teachers of Years 9 and 10 classes. This development continued over two years. At the end of that time there were a few teachers who appreciated the development and had taken the initiative 'on board' but, overall, there was little evidence of changes in teacher practice other than a rather over-formalised system of student self-assessment. The implementation of the model was perceived by many of the teachers as an 'extra' and a workload issue rather than being accepted as good teaching practice. There was little evidence in the schools of the development work and it was not reflected in teacher planning or in many assessment documents.

At the beginning of 1999 the schools made the following changes in the method of implementation:

- Formative assessment was adopted as a school goal (by all of the AIMHI schools) and it became a stated priority for development.
- Every teacher was directly involved in implementing the goal in their school and participated in the PD programme.
- Assessment had to be included in all unit planning in a very detailed way (tasks, criteria and timeline).
- There was extensive work with groups of teachers, usually working in departments, on planning for assessment, developing appropriate assessment tasks and, in particular, on writing criteria.
- In some schools HODs were given the responsibility to ensure the development took place and assessment became part of their leadership role.
- Teachers were required to show their students the learning outcomes, assessment activities and assessment criteria for all assessments at the beginning of the unit of work.
- Student self-assessment was required to be incorporated into all units of work, always using criteria, but using a variety of formats.
- Induction for teachers new to the school was provided.
- The notion that this was 'extra' work was challenged and re-defined as 'normal' and best teaching practice.

- Most of the schools made it a requirement for individual teacher appraisal.

There was soon evidence of good formative assessment practice happening throughout the schools in classroom practice, teacher talk and in planning and appraisal documents. As with any change process there were some individual teachers who made faster progress than others. There were some HODs who drove the implementation in their departments more rigorously than others.

The schools gave assessment development status and credibility by requiring it of every teacher and building it into the school goals and appraisal requirements. The effectiveness of the appraisal process itself in promoting the development is debatable and is only as good as the skills and confidence of individual appraisers. The fact, however, that it was to be formally monitored school-wide gave it credibility and ensured accountability. Requiring it to be specifically included in detail in planning documents gave the facilitators and HODs a vehicle for discussion and for assessing the level of understanding of individual teachers. It also provided the schools with resources to share and documents to ensure the continuity of the teaching practice if and when individual teachers leave the school and when new teachers arrive.

This did not mean that all Departments and individual teachers had to undertake the same activities. The whole-staff programme was the 'glue' that kept the teachers focussed and added to their knowledge and skills development but, in addition, Departments and individual teachers found different ways of helping to achieve the goal that made sense in their subject and in their particular classes.

Another significant learning was that school-wide pedagogical changes take years, not months to take effect. A year-long PD focus gets the process underway but if a school wants to ensure that a new approach becomes part of every day practice for all teachers, it needs to be a school-wide priority for at least three years. With the inevitable turnover of teachers, it is very easy for important priorities to get watered down or lost within quite a short space of time. If the new approach or practice is to remain an important aspect of a school's approach to teaching and learning, training needs to be included in the induction programme and ongoing support and monitoring provided.

### Teacher competency

Teacher competency was an issue for just a small number of the schools, principally at the beginning of the project. These few schools had a long history of damage and neglect and, right from the start, needed to address some issues of teacher performance. These were best dealt with when the Principals and the Boards of Trustees placed a high priority on meeting student needs and were prepared to put student needs first, ahead of the needs of the adults involved. Being technically competent was not enough.

The issue was whether a teacher was meeting the needs of these particular students. The Principals who were clear about this were the most successful in dealing with these teachers.

To begin with, they needed to have the courage to make a stand and the courage to follow through the process. It proved important for them to access outside advice and practical support as soon as the decision was made to take action. Contracting outside experts to conduct the Departmental or individual reviews proved particularly helpful for one school. It provided a level of objectivity that could not be achieved by members of the staff. Several of these experts were highly credible HODs from other schools.

There was always fear of the effect that the process would have on the morale of the other staff. Invariably there was a negative response from some staff, especially to begin with. The highly effective and conscientious teachers, however, were relieved that something was being done as it demonstrated that the leadership valued good teaching and that, what was often a problem for other teachers as well as the students, was being addressed. It also gave a very strong message to other negative or lazy teachers.

Another fear was that, if the teacher left the school or was required to leave teaching, the school would be unable to find a replacement teacher or replace them with someone better. The evidence suggests that, even though it was not easy to do so in every subject area, the schools did employ someone better and often the teacher was much better.

Another myth was that a principal could only manage one teacher competency issue at a time. The evidence suggests otherwise. One school dealt with five instances over the period of a year and was able to move forward very quickly with new initiatives. It was difficult work but the data suggest that it is more exhausting to deal with one teacher at a time and certainly slows down the general progress of the school. Some teachers, when provided with targeted support and development, improved their performance and this directly benefited the students.

## *Conclusion*

In 1996, two of the eight original AIMHI schools came into the project with good reputations and with a stable or growing roll. Three of the schools had a history of problems and were in serious trouble on a number of fronts. Their reputations were extremely poor and their rolls were dropping significantly. The other three schools were vulnerable - they had poor or fading reputations and their rolls were slowly declining. Over the last six years, the collective and individual school initiatives have had a dramatic effect on some of the schools and even in those schools that were strong to begin with, some important changes have been made to the ways in which the needs of their students are met.

It is correct that additional Ministry of Education money has been given to these schools to make many of the changes that are described in this report, and in three cases, considerably more money. The schools have also contributed their own funds and their professional time and commitment. Another crucial factor has been the research, which provided the schools with ongoing and specific feedback about what was working well and, based on the data, options for further progress and achievement.

In return, there is clear evidence that the AIMHI schools, both individually and collectively, are better equipped to meet the needs of their students than they were prior to the project. None of the schools is now in a declining roll situation and several have increased roll numbers (Ministry of Education Secondary Schools' Benchmark Indicators). A number of them look very different physically and in many Departments and classrooms, the way in which the programmes are delivered and the approaches to teaching and learning have changed. The most recent report on the AIMHI schools (Ministry of Education, 2002) notes that seven of the nine schools have reduced their absence rates and confirms mid-project achievement indicators (Hawk and Hill, 1998) that students are gaining more qualifications. This latest Ministry of Education report states that there has been a dramatic increase of over 500% in the number of unit standards passed by AIMHI students (although the number of School Certificate and Bursary passes of 'B' or higher remains largely unchanged). The schools have regained their reputations with their communities and now have a lower risk profile than was the case at the start of the project (Ministry of Education, 2002).

The schools have worked hard to ensure that the support they have received has directly benefited students and that they have been given the best possible chances to improve their well-being and raise their levels of achievement. It is important to recognise that much of the groundwork - stabilising the schools, strengthening the leadership, addressing teacher quality issues, putting sound systems in place and building community confidence - had to be done first in order to establish a strong base on which more intensive classroom change and development could take place. Many of the strategies and programmes described in this report are ongoing and there are two important recent initiatives - the coaching programme and the Healthy Community Schools project - that hold great potential for long-term gains in student achievement. It is critical that the collective support the schools give each other and the partnership established with the Ministry of Education remains and that the search for new understandings about what works for these students continues.

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