



## Linwood College

### **Making a Difference in the Classroom: Effective Teaching Practice in Low Decile, Multicultural Schools**

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*The AIMHI Project is a School Support initiative set up to raise the achievement of Māori and Pacific Island students in eight low decile secondary schools. The project began in 1996 and since that time major collective and individual school developments have been undertaken. Alongside this programme of development, there have been a number of research activities. In 1996, a baseline report identified the factors that influence achievement for these students. A mid-project report was prepared in 1998, evaluating the progress being made by the schools and the AIMHI group as a whole. In 1999 the researchers were commissioned to constructively critique actual teaching practice by identifying effective teaching and learning strategies used in the classrooms of teachers in the AIMHI schools.*

#### **Full report:**

[http://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/maori\\_education/english-medium-education/5459](http://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/maori_education/english-medium-education/5459)

#### **Executive Summary**

The AIMHI Project is a School Support initiative set up to raise the achievement of Māori and Pacific Island students in eight low decile secondary schools. The project began in 1996 and since that time major collective and individual school developments have been undertaken. Alongside this programme of development, there have been a number of research activities. In 1996, a baseline report identified the factors that influence achievement for these students. A mid-project report was prepared in 1998, evaluating the progress being made by the schools and the AIMHI group as a whole. In 1999 the researchers were commissioned to constructively critique actual teaching practice by identifying effective teaching and learning strategies used in the classrooms of teachers in the AIMHI schools.

Over a six-month period, the researchers observed 100 lessons involving eighty-nine teachers in broad range of subjects across year levels 7 to 13, most of which were in classes of year 9 to year 13 students. Close to twelve 'effective' teachers were selected from each school on the basis of their credibility with their colleagues and students, for the quality of their classroom management skills as well as their classroom instruction, social interactions and teaching and learning interactions. To make it possible to triangulate the data gathered in the observations, each was followed by an interview with the teacher and a group discussion with approximately six students from each of the classes observed. The work carried out by the researchers in the classrooms was guided by data from the original baseline document that outlined the qualities and skills of the teachers as perceived by teachers and students. The observations provided an opportunity to make links between what was perceived to be happening in classrooms (espoused practice) and what was actually observed (actual practice).

There was a high degree of consistency in the way the teachers in the sample thought and felt about their work as teachers. As well as being professional and highly skilled they are very positive and optimistic. They perform with a confidence that gives their students a confidence in them and they want to solve problems rather than putting up barriers to progress. These teachers are hard working and bring a certain energy to their teaching that creates a sense of urgency and purpose in their classrooms. They are not afraid to share power with students and work hard to divest the locus of control to students rather than keep it to themselves.

The data show that these students have particular needs that students in other schools do not have. The relationship that students in these schools form with their teachers is crucial. While the relationship that forms between a student and a teacher in any school is important, the data in this study show that it is not only important to these students but is a prerequisite for learning. If a teacher has not been able to form a positive relationship of reciprocal respect the students in that class will find it very, very difficult to be motivated to learn. The teachers in this study had particular understandings and attitudes that make it easier for these relationships to be positive and strong. One of the most important dimensions to the relationship is the respect the teachers have for the students. The students described how the body language, tone of voice and the actions of these teachers showed the students that these teachers did not want a 'power over' relationship but 'power with' their students. The students felt that these teachers treated them as people and adults rather than students or children and, because their relationships are based on notions of reciprocity, the students respected these teachers in return. These teachers understood the various worlds the students live in and how they manage the tensions and conflicts between them, they were fair and patient, enjoyed participating in activities with the students, and were prepared to give of themselves - sharing their lives, feelings, failings and vulnerabilities with the students.

While the relationships with teachers are critical, positive relationships amongst the students in a class are also important. Positive student relationships made it safer for students to contribute, take risks with their learning and learn from each other. In other words, the data suggest that the group dynamics of the classroom make a difference to student motivation and attitudes towards learning. The really cohesive classrooms were a result of a planned team-building strategy that was put into effect right from the beginning of the year. The teachers in these classrooms planned so that high levels of class-based control were achieved for such things as classroom behaviour, student support and other learning activities. They took time to teach relationship skills and created situations where it was safe for the students to take risks. Some of the teachers made the most of opportunities to model risk-taking and supportive behaviour themselves.

The overall impression of most of the classes was one of busyness, focussed activity at a high pace, a relaxed atmosphere and an ethos of mutual respect and enjoyment. An important contribution to this climate was the use positive and constructive behaviour management strategies. These teachers each had their own routines that they expected students to follow. Several teachers who had taught in other schools felt that students in the AIMHI schools responded well to routines and were more important than in other schools they had taught in. The students expect, and respect, a teacher who is 'strict', which the students described as positive and not letting them get away with inappropriate behaviour or to flouting ground rules that had been established in the class. It was the norm in these classrooms that behaviour issues were handled very quietly and in a non-confrontational way. Humour is of great importance also. It is not the teacher who has to be funny but rather all class participants being allowed to enjoy each other's humour. This results in a relaxed learning atmosphere that the students said reduced their stress levels and made learning fun.

Some remarkable teaching and learning was observed occurring in the classrooms and several key pedagogical approaches and strategies emerged as being effective in meeting the particular learning

needs of these students. The approaches and strategies were used across all subjects and year levels with **none** observed that were subject specific or not transferable to another learning area. Many of the teachers used sophisticated skills in their dialogue with students that encouraged students to take responsibility for their learning and to think at a deeper level. Regardless of the subject, these teachers worked hard at making the learning process transparent and understandable for the students. They spent time on vocabulary and language and planned for differentiated activities and in many classrooms that took account of different styles of learning and actively engaged students in their learning. Another crucial strategy was ensuring that direct instruction was taken in small steps, pausing to check students' understanding, providing opportunities to practice and requiring students to construct their own meaning of new information and ideas.

In the 1996 report, teachers were divided about providing students with such things as pens and paper. Many believed that supplying them with this type of equipment created a dependency that would not be helpful in building life skills in the long-term. Most of the teachers in the research provided their students with gear, when necessary, and did not let a lack of gear create a barrier to getting on with learning. Their focus was on promoting students self-efficacy and helping students learn how to learn.

There are clear implications for teachers and schools from the research. Firstly, schools must have the best possible recruitment processes in place to ensure that new teachers have the appropriate attitudes and qualities as well as the skills required for teaching in these schools, or at least, the strong potential to develop them. Once appointed, these teachers should have access to an expert teacher and an induction programme that gives them intensive personal and professional support.

One of the keys to effecting change in the classrooms is teacher self-efficacy, accurate identification of development needs, the provision of a comprehensive professional development programme and ensuring that this development translates into practice. The targeted development can be delivered at several levels. Some needs will be specific to individual teachers but whole school development can occur, as well as (AIMHI) cluster-wide programmes.

Student feedback indicated that each of the schools has a number of teachers whose performance is not meeting students' needs. It is important that teacher needs are accurately identified through a comprehensive appraisal process, using methods such as observations and student feedback. This needs to be followed up with targeted development and careful monitoring. It is argued strongly that, based on the research findings, a number of performance standards should be developed that become a part of what is required of teachers who work in these schools.

Professional development should focus on the pedagogical approaches and strategies that work for these students rather than on subject content and organisation. It is important that other key development areas, such as relationship and group development, are also included in the professional development programmes.