

# **Teaching Students under Stress:**

## **Implications for schools and teachers in multi-cultural schools**

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### **Background**

The AIMHI Project was the first pro-active schooling improvement project set up by the Ministry of Education's School Support Project. It was initially set up in 1995 and the independent evaluation began in 1996 with the description of baseline data and an investigation of the factors influencing the achievement and underachievement of students in decile one multi-cultural high schools. There were eight secondary schools involved<sup>1</sup> and the project has been a partnership between the Ministry and the AIMHI Forum<sup>2</sup>. Some funding is provided through Funding Provision Agreements<sup>3</sup> and the expenditure is monitored by the Ministry and independently evaluated.

### **Methodology**

Since the writing of the 1996 research report<sup>4</sup> the research has mainly taken the form of formative evaluation. The researchers work in the schools and give regular feedback to school personnel, Ministry personnel, the AIMHI Forum and the Principals' Group.

Data collection strategies include –

- analysis of documents
- Interviews with the principals and members of the senior management teams

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<sup>1</sup> This has recently changed to include a ninth secondary school and to include a junior and middle school which have joined one of the secondary schools on a campus

<sup>2</sup> This comprises the Principals and Board Chairpersons of the nine schools as well as Ministry invitees

<sup>3</sup> Three of the schools are Business case schools which means they receive significantly more funds than the others

<sup>4</sup> "Towards Making Achieving Cool: Achievement In Multi-Cultural High Schools", Kay Hawk and Jan Hill, 1996, Ministry of Education, Wellington. (copies are available on request)

- Interviews with Trustees and attendance at some Board meetings
- Group discussions with students
- Interviews with teaching and non-teaching staff
- Observations and attendance at a wide variety of school activities and functions
- Interviews and discussions with a range of Ministry personnel
- Attendance at all AIMHI planning meetings, Forum meetings, Principals' meetings and retreats and parent meetings

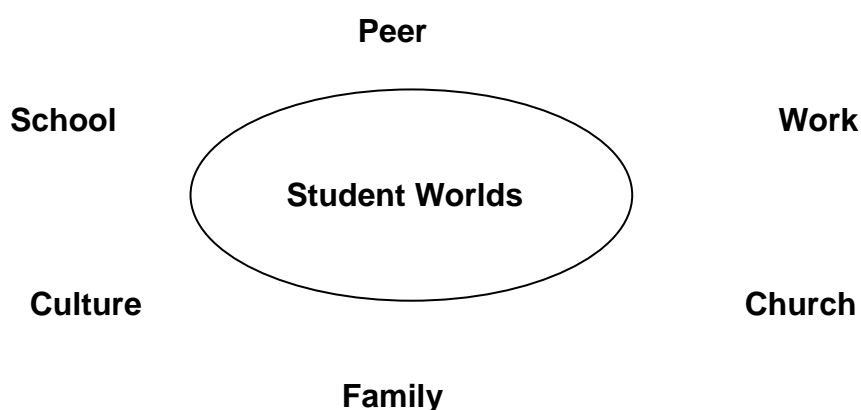
Sample sizes are large. Initially over 1000 students were involved in small group discussions. At least the same number has been interviewed over the 1997/1998 period. All staff and Trustees have been interviewed at least once. Key staff are interviewed several times each year.

### **Students' worlds**

Nearly all the students in the eight schools identify as being Maori or Pacific Islander, or both. The schools are all decile one<sup>5</sup> which means that the great majority of the students live in a world of poverty characterised by under and over-employment, poor health and overcrowded living conditions. Although most of these factors are outside of the control of the school, they affect teachers and students on a daily basis.

*"- outside of the control of the schools are the influences or parent beliefs and attitudes, cultural values, the practices and demands of the churches, physical and sexual abuse, substance abuse and peer culture."*<sup>6</sup>

It is helpful to stand in the students' shoes in order to understand their reality and to understand the worlds they inhabit and move between. Most of the students live consecutively in five or six worlds<sup>7</sup>.



<sup>5</sup> All New Zealand schools are ranked on a decile scale of one to ten. It is a measure of socio-economic position with decile ten schools having the highest status

<sup>6</sup> From the Executive Summary of the 1996 AIMHI Report

<sup>7</sup> The separation is for the purpose of discussion and for aiding insights and understanding. On a day to day basis these worlds interact and overlap

Each world has its own set of values, beliefs, expectations and demands. These values and demands are often in direct conflict with those of other worlds. This is particularly so for Pacific children.

The world of the **family** is one in which the children are expected to respect elders, do what they are told without questioning, help with chores and younger siblings, care for parents and guests, and put family needs before personal needs. Strong love and loyalty is central for most, but for many children it is also one of physical abuse and for some, it includes sexual abuse and fear. When students go home from school there is usually little time for schoolwork and no place for them to do it.

The world of one's **culture** is one of having pride, respect for elders, sharing, giving, spirituality, status (the older, the more important), competitiveness, shame and guilt. For many Pacific students, the cultural world of their parents is still one of the Islands. They respect this reality but see their world as having to include their Kiwi world as well.

The world of the **church** is a strong daily reality for many students, either because of their own beliefs or because of their involvement through their family's beliefs. Many of these Churches provide a place where Maori and Pacific cultures are alive and practiced. Many denominations were represented. The values are Christian and tended to be based in traditional missionary theology.

For students, there are strong messages about sexuality, obligations and achievement, which can make day to day decisions difficult. There are often extreme demands on out of school time, before and after school and in the weekends.

The world of **work** begins for many students shortly after they get to secondary school. Jobs often involve shift work and some are almost 'full time' in terms of the numbers of hours involved. Students may be the only wage earner in the family or a major contributor to the family income. If they are allowed to keep some of their earnings, they may be expected to pay for their own school fees, uniforms, trips, stationery etc.

The **school** world is often one of contradictions for these children. For some, it is a haven and the only place where there is stability. For others it represents a place of failure and hostility. The school has rules and consequences, has a legal backing to what it demands, has defined hours and has professional adults in positions of power. It encourages out of school time co-curricular activities and expects homework.

Finally, the most important of the worlds for most secondary students is that of their **peers**. This is where the values of loyalty, reciprocity, sharing, giving, caring and doing what is "cool" are of critical importance. Things that are cool include smoking, sex, alcohol, drugs, chilling out, music, sport, clothes (particular types worn in particular ways), and cars. This does not mean that all students are involved in all of these activities but it does mean that they are unlikely to

Speak against them with their mates and they are likely to be pressured into them. Achieving at schoolwork is not cool.

### **Conflict between the worlds**

The difficulties for students arise when the values or expectations from two or more of the worlds are in conflict with each other. The 1996 AIMHI report describes some of these in detail. In brief, some examples that directly affect schooling include –

- The peer world says sex is cool and ‘the sooner, the cooler’. Parents and the church say ‘not until you are married (at least)’. School tries to teach students what they need to know to protect themselves and to help them if they are in trouble. Parents worry that this teaching will encourage and advance sexual behaviour.
- At home and at church children are expected to obey without questioning. School expects students to be involved, to have and express opinions, to question and to challenge as part of their learning.
- At home discipline is very strict and often violent. School is, by comparison, soft and students often do not take consequences seriously. Schools, on the other hand, prefer consequences rather than punishment or shame as a means of control.
- Schools expect homework and they punish for its non-completion. The family and church have after-school expectations that work against students having time for homework.
- Some parents keep their children home for a range of reasons including caring for a sick family member, babysitting siblings or doing shopping. Schools expect students to be at school unless they are sick.

These competing expectations and time constraints make it impossible for students to meet the requirements of all of the worlds. They develop a range of strategies in order to make their lives manageable. While many of these strategies work short term for students, they cause problems for them in the long term.

### **Coping strategies**

The most important strategy students use is that of **keeping the worlds separate**. They move from one to another, fulfilling to the best of their ability, the expectations of each and leaving those of the others behind. When this becomes impossible they adopt other strategies as well. The problematic outcome of this **gatekeeping** strategy is that the school and the caregivers each blame the other for problems they experience. Schools spend time, energy and money on trying to keep parents informed and involved in their children’s education and they get frustrated and disappointed when parents do not respond

to invitations or requests. Parents get angry when they feel that the school is not keeping them well informed, especially if there are concerns. Students actively prevent parents receiving newsletters, letters and messages from school. They sometimes deliberately mistranslate information and make up messages that suit their own needs.

Another common strategy is what students call **making excuses** and what parents and teachers call **telling lies**. They will tell parents they have no homework, they tell teachers they had family issues to deal with, they tell the church that they had to do school activities – and so on. One of the implications for all parties is that the student is no longer trusted, even when they are telling the truth and they are often angry and bitter about being wrongly accused. Another outcome for the school is having to spend countless hours trying to get to the bottom of what really happened in any situation.

Finally, another very common strategy to deal with all the stress of untenable pressures is **to withdraw**. This can take the form of **wagging, lateness or truancy**<sup>8</sup>. This escaping has a major negative influence on the cycle of failure. Once a lesson is missed, the student gets behind in their work and so it is more comfortable to miss the next lesson than to struggle to cope with it and feel a failure. Other forms of withdrawal and escape include **substance abuse**. Smoking, alcohol and drugs are ways of alleviating stress as well as fitting in with peer expectations. The final escape from an unmanageable life is **suicide**.

While adults may judge as inappropriate the strategies they use to cope with the conflicts, contradictions and pressures, many of these children do not have the skills, the support, the will, or the confidence they need to act in ways that may be better for them in the long term.

### **Strategies that help meet student needs**

There are many strategies and attitudes that individual teachers can employ in the classroom that will make a significant difference to student learning, attitudes, skills and confidence. These are detailed in a recent NZCER *set* article<sup>9</sup>.

As part of the AIMHI developments, the eight schools have used the research findings to adapt programmes, strategies and school organisation and to introduce new programmes to try to address the identified needs. Although it is early days in terms of long term outcomes, evaluation data to date indicates that significant changes have occurred in student attitudes, behaviour and learning. Whether or not these translate into achievement, as measured by external exam results, is yet to be proven.

The following strategies have been put in place in some of the AIMHI schools and look to be very promising.

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<sup>8</sup> Wagging is used to describe missing occasional and selective periods in a day. Truancy will involve larger blocks of time. Lateness can be lateness to school and/or lateness to classes.

<sup>9</sup> "Aiming for Student Achievement: How teachers can understand and better meet the needs of Pacific Island and Maori Students", Jan Hill & Kay Hawk, *set two*, 1998 No.4

- **Induction programme** for year nine students. The transition to secondary school is traumatic for students. Most come feeling fearful because of differences their intermediate teachers have told them to expect. Many schools use programmes such as peer support or buddies. These help but are not always enough. The research shows that an informal induction process happens amongst students, which is counter-productive. New students learn from seniors where to go to smoke, how to wag and which teachers to give a hard time to. Placing year nine students in horizontal forms and 'home' rooms with their own tutors and a carefully planned school induction programme have resulted in more settled behaviour, happier students and less problems than in previous years.
- **Horizontal form groups** have been trialled by some of the schools, which previously believed in the importance of their vertical/whanau groups. Without exception they have proved to be successful, not only for year nine students but also for other levels. Form periods are usually problematic for schools because they do not allow the time needed to achieve their espoused goal of pastoral care. The longer the time a school is able to programme for form period, and the better trained the form teachers, the more effective the use of the time. This is the case for all school systems. When the form class is horizontal, students' needs have been able to be met more effectively.
- **Home rooms** for year nine and ten students have proved very successful in improving attendance and increasing learning time by preventing lateness. This is a system in which all students are based in a room with their own desk and teachers travel to them, at least for the core subjects, rather than the students' moving from class to class.
- **Longer periods and block teaching** have been trialled in two schools. In one of the schools, periods are 70 minutes long and there are only four each day (only one in the afternoon). The teachers that the students regard as effective teachers have found the time enables them to make links between lessons, give full explanations, give one to one time more often and to have more students complete their work. Students reported the same benefits and said they are finding it easier to understand the work and are feeling more confident about coming back to the next lesson. In the same school for the year nine and ten classes, the timetable is organised so that the same teacher will take students for English and Social Studies and the same teacher will take maths and science. Students find it easier to learn when they interact with fewer teachers in a day. They can adapt more easily to the voice, the style of teaching, the systems and the expectations of the teachers when there are fewer of them.
- **Holistic care** for individuals was a need identified by the research. Most schools have a separation between their systems of pastoral care, discipline and learning care. It is not often, unless a student is in difficulty, that an adult spends time monitoring and supporting all their needs. One of the schools has introduced a system of tutors, who are like case

managers, for each child. Every professional in the school, except one senior manager, is a tutor, which means the groups can be kept to about 15 students. Time is programmed every day for the group to have a period together. This time is spent doing study and homework as well as an organised programme of study skills, self-management, life skills, career planning, family liaison, monitoring of health and attendance, self esteem building and goal setting. There has been a dramatic change in the school climate and attendance patterns as well as an improvement in student behavior and attitudes to their work.

- A programme of **formative assessment** has been introduced for year nine students in all eight schools. This requires teachers to incorporate assessment into their planning, clarify criteria with students, use exemplars, have a combination of self, peer and teacher assessment and involve parents in an ongoing way by sending the work and the assessment home for them to sign and comment on. There is qualitative and some quantitative evidence that the learning has improved for these students. In particular, the components of self assessment and parental involvement seem to be very important.
- A **parent booklet** was produced for Pacific parents to help them understand how a secondary school works and what they can do to support their children's learning. This has been published in English and all the main Pacific languages.
- The use of **Pacific radio** to get school information through to parents has proved very effective. Some schools have advertised school events and encouraged parental attendance at report evenings. This bypasses the gatekeeping activities of the children and enables parents to be informed.
- **Two schools have employed community liaison staff.** They are available to visit homes and talk with parents<sup>10</sup>. In one school, the parents of thirty serious truants have been visited and action plans have been put in place for the students, their parents and the school. Attendance is checked on by the CLOs and, to date, has been almost perfect. The students interviewed said they now know they cannot get away with wagging or truanting. One said it was a relief to have been caught. Another said she had been unable to stop her Mother keeping her at home for a range of reasons. One Mother was shocked because she had no idea that there had been a problem.
- **Homework Centers** have been set up in several of the schools. It was noted earlier that many students do not have access to a desk or quiet place where they can do homework and often have no access to resources at home. Some schools run evening or late afternoon sessions, provide afternoon tea or snacks and have tutors available to help. The time immediately after school seems to be the most effective and least problematic. Access to the computer databases and help from

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<sup>10</sup> The term parent is used broadly to include the main caregivers for the child. This is sometimes people other than parents.

teachers is greatly appreciated. Some schools are using the library for their Homework Centres and this expands the resources available for the students to use.

- **Student support centres or coordinated systems** have been set up in two schools. These involve the coordinated support provided by a qualified nurse, guidance counsellor, social worker or liaison worker, careers advisor and sometimes other specialists. Such a system is able to ensure all the wellness needs of students are being met in a coordinated way so there is no double up of care and no students falling through the gaps.
- Self-management systems such as a **learning diary, journal or homework diary** are effective if students are taught how to use them and supervised in their use. They are often not effective without such support.
- Discipline systems are often problematic for schools. It is our observation that the more effective the classroom teacher is, the fewer problems the school experiences. Discipline systems can easily become top heavy with vertical layers of tutors, deans, house leaders and then senior management. Professional time is spent in reacting and dealing with somebody else's inadequacies rather than on proactive school development. Another problem we have observed is that sometimes schools tend to change a good system because one or two teachers are not fulfilling their responsibilities. Senior staff are often reluctant to front accountability issues with individual teachers. Teacher consistency is the key to successful systems. **Assertive discipline** programmes are an answer to this providing they are actively supported in an ongoing way and providing individual teachers are supported and made accountable for their implementation.
- There are early indicators that some special programmes are having a beneficial effect on student learning, metacognitive skills, self esteem, career development and/or general behaviour. These include Project K, Lion Nathan Challenge, You Can Do It, and Mind Kind<sup>11</sup>.

## Conclusion

The AIMHI Project is ongoing and the longer-term effectiveness of the above strategies, and others, will be monitored and evaluated. What is already clear is that these types of schools have not been able, in the past, to provide an education which enables their students to compete successfully in external exams or in the work place. The difficulties are complex and many are external to the school's control. If that were not the case, the schools would have solved the problems years ago.

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<sup>11</sup> The named projects have been trialled by some of the AIMHI schools and appear to be making a positive difference. This does not mean that other programmes do not have merit.

The adopted vision of the AIMHI Forum states that “Through a partnership between the AIMHI schools and the MOE the students in these schools will succeed by –

- Attaining relevant school qualifications at a level consistent with national averages
- Going on to meaningful employment **OR**
- Going on to further education or career training
- Developing a sound work ethic and taking responsibility for their own learning

These schools are looking outside of the square in the way they organise themselves and are challenging the traditional ways secondary schools have, or have not, provided for the needs of their students. In many instances this effort highlights a tension between what meets student needs and what is convenient for teachers. It has also resulted in the schools having to challenge some past practices that have become institutionalised, even glamorised, but which no longer meet the needs of today.

The efforts of the staff in these schools to provide for their students demonstrate an exceptional level of commitment to alleviating the stresses that the children have to manage and to making achievement a reality.