

Towards Making Achieving Cool

Some policy implications for student achievement in low decile schools

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- The research was conducted by a team, comprising the two authors of this paper, and Teau Seabourne, Lita Foliaki, Lonise Tanielu and Tawhiri Williams.
- Support from the AIMHI Forum and the students, staff and parents of the AIMHI schools has made the research possible.

This paper tells the stories of students in very low decile schools and how government policies have impacted in the past, and continue today to impact directly on their achievement. These are the children from the poorest communities in New Zealand, who go to the poorest secondary schools. Over two thirds of the students are Pacific Islanders and nearly a third are Maori. There are very few Pakeha/Palagi or Asian students in these schools. The AIMHI project was set up by the Ministry of Education because of its concern at the low levels of achievement by Pacific Island students.

AIMHI stands for "Achievement In Multi Cultural High Schools". The paper is the result of the baseline research done in 1996 as part of the AIMHI project and we acknowledge the financial support of the Ministry of Education for the ongoing research. The research was carried out over a six month period by a team of six researchers working in eight secondary schools and their communities. Two of the researchers worked in the schools interviewing students, teachers, support staff and trustees; analysing documents; and making observations through being part of each school's day-to-day activities. Over 900 students took part in small group discussions and almost all staff were interviewed at least once. A team of Pacific Island and Maori researchers worked in the community and with parents in order to gain an understanding of their perspectives and their relationship to the school. The overall objective was to gain an understanding of the factors influencing student achievement.

It is important to note that, in identifying under-achievement as problematic for Pacific Island children, we defined achievement in terms of the only data base held by the Ministry, which measures retention rates and external examination results in School Certificate and Bursary. It will not be a surprise to most of you to discover that the schools with high percentages of Pacific children are also those with the lowest socio-economic status. New Zealand data show a clear and direct relationship between socio-economic status (as defined by school decile ratings) and student achievement (as defined by retention and external examination results). Our task was to understand what factors played a part in this relationship.

Predictably, the influences were many, varied and interrelated in complex ways. They can be broadly divided into influences over which the schools have **some** control, and those over which the schools have very little or **no** control. The research report addresses both in detail but this paper will not address the internal school influences other than to list them, in order to illustrate the range of factors. They are leadership, governance, qualities and skills of teachers, the transition to secondary school, lateness, wagging and truancy, school organisation, learning needs and styles, curriculum, homework, discipline, pastoral care, facilities and resources, parental involvement and school climate. The AIMHI research demonstrated that, in almost all the schools, the senior management teams, teachers and boards are energetic, creative, tuned in to student needs and put a great deal of effort into planning and delivering programmes appropriate to these needs. In theory, student achievement should follow. In practice, schools find themselves restricted because of other powerful external influences that, in most instances, they are powerless to change. It is not as simple as saying that, if there is good leadership and governance, student achievement will follow. This view trivialises the seriousness and magnitude of

the external issues which directly impact on the performance of the students and the schools. This paper will outline these influences and make the links to policy over the years. Some policy influences are educational and others are outside the education field.

The introduction to the report will serve to help us to enter the world of these schools.

In most New Zealand secondary schools the majority of students turn up to school on time in the morning, dressed in reasonable uniform, having slept and eaten well the night before. They have probably had breakfast and will have either a school lunch or money to buy one at school. They will each have a school bag with the books, pens and equipment they need for school work.

If money is required for a school trip that is part of the teaching programme, a note home to parents will be responded to promptly and result in the majority paying and the trip going ahead. Parents will help with or pay for transport and will often help organise and supervise the trip.

Most homes are equipped with books and newspapers and many will have at least one computer. Children will have a bed and a table or desk at which they can do homework. Parents will ensure they have time to do the study and assignment work required and will sometimes supervise and help with this. Most children of secondary age will have travelled outside of their immediate neighbourhood, have probably been into the city, will have been to a beach, and will have experienced the countryside. They may learn music, belong to sports clubs or have other organised recreational interests.

If they are sick, a parent will take them to the doctor and arrange for them to have the prescribed medication and/or medical aids.

The school will have most of its school fees paid and will probably have parental help with fundraising in order to buy the extra equipment, such as computers, for which there is no funding. Sports teams are often coached and managed by parents.

The teachers are therefore able to spend most of their professional time on the preparation, delivery and assessment of teaching learning. If they are concerned about a student, one phone call will bring the parents to school for a discussion. Even so, these teachers will currently feel under pressure because of teacher shortages, new curricula, the new Qualifications Framework, and the demands that have resulted from school self-management.

The contrast between this scenario and that of the eight decile one study schools is so great as to make the decile one schools unrecognisable. None of the above are the norm for the majority of these students or for their schools.

When the needs are so great and so varied it is difficult for a school to know where to begin to address them. The following external influences create most of the underlying difficulties.

Poverty

In this discussion, poverty is defined not only as a lack of dollars but also as a situation that families and communities find themselves in, through no fault of their own, as a result of policies and practices of governments and society over many generations. It is the outcomes rather than the causes that are relevant to this research because they impact directly and indirectly on student achievement. These outcomes include low incomes, high unemployment or high over-employment, large families, dysfunctional families, poor housing, overcrowding, poor health, lack of private space and lack of furnishings and household equipment. As well as the relative physical and material deprivation, there is a lack of the cultural capital that is an advantage in the western materialistic and individualistic world. All these things have a profound effect on the students in these schools, on their families, on the communities and on the schools and their teachers. They result in the feelings of hopelessness and failure that many students described to us.

The lack of disposable dollars means that for most of these children there is sometimes not enough food; visits to the doctor are left until the illness is serious; prescriptions are not filled; school uniform is incomplete; there are no learning resources such as books, newspapers, reference materials or computers for homework; materials are not available for school courses such as technology and so learning is inhibited or curriculum choice is restricted; exam fees are not paid and qualifications are not gained; school curriculum trips are missed and students take on part time work which often makes them hard to teach. The narrowness of the children's life experiences creates difficulties in learning opportunities and confidence which adversely affects them throughout their schooling.

Health

The health difficulties experienced by students impact directly on their day-to-day ability to learn. They include having a poor diet to the extent that it influences the "teachable state" of students; tiredness due to pressures from conflicting worlds; low iron levels, identified by both paediatricians and the blood bank, which affect brain development and learning; lack of immunisation; vision and hearing problems; sexual health problems including pregnancy for some; passive and active smoking which often begins before secondary school; substance abuse mostly out of school; dental problems; hygiene and the diseases of poverty including skin diseases, TB, asthma and rheumatic fever. For a range of reasons, many parents do not identify the need to seek medical help and so this becomes the school's responsibility. Telling students and parents how and where to go for help often does not work. Schools are not staffed to provide medical care although most of these schools do use some of their funds for this purpose. Even then, they have difficulty providing adequate facilities for a clinic and even more difficulty accessing the help they need from the respective agencies.

Employment

Parental unemployment presents students with problems in addition to the obvious ones of the lack of income and self-esteem. Many students grow up with a lack of employed people as role models. This means that they miss out on learning many of the associated behaviours and attitudes which are important in getting and keeping a job.

The general level of unemployment in the area means that they are less exposed to a range of employment opportunities and so do not grow up knowing about the wide range of possibilities available. Often their parents have the same limited knowledge of the career market and push the children towards becoming doctors or lawyers, regardless of their abilities or interests.

Over-employment is equally problematic for many children. Both parents may have several jobs which keep them out of the home for long periods of time and result in students not being helped and supervised for homework, bed time, social activities and meals. It may also mean that the children have to take on adult roles and, for instance, get younger siblings ready and drop them off at school before they can go themselves.

Housing

The standard of accommodation for many of these families is very poor and the problem is exacerbated by overcrowding. Rent increases for state houses have meant that many families need to share houses in order to make ends meet and this has resulted in difficulties for students who have to share a room and sometimes a bed; have no quiet space for study; are unable to get to sleep until late and have more family responsibilities such as minding young children.

As well as impacting on the lives of students, the rent rises have left whole communities full of empty houses. In one area in particular, they have caused roll drops in nearly all the schools, resulting in all the disadvantages that go with a small and declining roll. At the secondary school level, one of the most serious outcomes of such a decline is a contraction of the curriculum able to be offered to the senior school.

Welfare/Pastoral care

Both the social needs of the students and the needs of their families are great. Often the needs of the students cannot be met without actively involving family members. Effective communication between parents and school is extremely hard to achieve. Even our team of community researchers had great difficulty accessing parents. There are many reasons why these difficulties exist and overcoming them will not be easy for the schools. There is an enormous gap in parents' understanding of which responsibilities are theirs and which are the school's. The schools and individual teachers have made significant efforts over a period of years to inform and involve parents but have made little progress. In many instances, such as abuse cases, the issue concerning the child is not one

which a teacher has the skills, or the school the resources, to deal with. In other instances the needs may require the school to contact, and coordinate liaison with, several agencies. School staff have often reported intense frustration at the difficulties involved in accessing and co-ordinating the help required.

Educational policies

A number of educational policies have had a detrimental effect on the low decile schools and have, therefore, adversely affected student learning opportunities.

There have been times in the past when schools have been differently **staffed** in order to recognise particular educational needs. The Ministry now provides this type of support through TFEA funding. Unlike most schools, however, the students in these schools have, as well as particular learning needs, a wide range of health, social, economic and welfare needs which impact directly on their achievement and on their ability to gain qualifications. The school is the place at which these problems become apparent and the place at which they could be assisted if the appropriate personnel and resources were available. Teachers are not trained medical, welfare or counselling professionals and they do not have the skills or the time to deal with the types of problems that students present with on a regular basis. There is evidence of the effectiveness of on-site medical clinics and of the value to a school of a family liaison/social worker on the staff but the provision of these types of services takes funding from the learning areas in which the needs are equally great. Teachers in these schools need more time to spend on assessing student work and giving them feedback. They need more time for diagnostic work, planning, adapting resources, conferencing with students and liaising with parents. Meeting language needs alone is a major task and this is only one of the barriers to learning. Current staffing provisions do not enable these schools to meet many of the complex and extensive learning needs of the students.

The **dezoning** of schools had a profound and immediate effect on the AIMHI schools. Students left and there was an immediate drop in the rolls of five of the schools. The rolls of six of the schools have continued to fall since that time. These are the schools that are perceived by parents to be at the bottom of the preference ladder. The reputation of these schools is inextricably tied to the reputation of their geographic area and all of the things that parents associate with that area. Students often said that their parents wanted a *better future* for them than they had had themselves. This included enabling them to be upwardly mobile and move out of an area that has a reputation for poverty, violence, ethnic conflict, crime, drugs, unemployment and hopelessness. There will always be schools that are perceived to be at the bottom of the preference ladder. If three or four close down, another three or four will take their place. The answer for these low socio-economic schools is to be resourced in such a way that they meet the needs of their students and families and therefore become desirable for reasons other than simply socio-economic reputation. Another detrimental outcome of dezoning was that it was the most able students who applied for and were accepted by other schools and this resulted in a loss of potential role models in both academic and sporting areas. The government's policy of

educational “choice” does not apply to these students. It is clear that the “choice” lies with the schools and not the students or their families.

In more recent times the ongoing threat to the viability of decile one secondary schools is **school competitiveness** and the ability of contributing schools to change status and keep back students from the receiving schools. Sometimes there is a ripple effect. A primary school with a falling roll will recapitate and threaten the viability of a local intermediate, which then becomes a middle school in order to retain its roll and that in turn threatens the roll of the secondary school. The decision is always said to be made in the interests of the students but the fact that it is usually schools with falling rolls that recapitate would shed doubt on this. There is evidence of students and parents being put under pressure to stay at their existing school and negative messages being given out about other schools. Some of the actions of staff at the contributing schools have been unprofessional and border on being unethical. In the 1996 data there was more evidence, from students and teachers, of students being disadvantaged socially and academically by being kept at a contributing school than there was evidence of benefits.

Contestable and short term funding causes major difficulties and frustrations for the schools. They try to take every available opportunity to apply for funds because there are so many student needs that are not being met by the current Operations Grant. Special projects and programmes are set up, and often evaluated, but disappear when the funding criteria change or funding is no longer available. Even when it is available over a number of years, the effort required to get it and constantly re-apply is exhausting. At the same time, there are usually problems staffing the programme because only temporary appointments can be made and the best qualified and most experienced people either do not apply or leave for permanent appointments. The schools gave us many examples of wonderful programmes that have come and gone because the funding was temporary. Some schools can use “seeding” funding to get a programme up and running and then continue to fund it themselves by fundraising. This is a luxury not available to these schools.

The current **teacher shortage** has been well documented. It is New Zealand wide and extends through both the primary and secondary sectors but it is more serious in the Auckland area because of population growth. As with most issues that affect schools, the low decile schools are more adversely affected. When it is a buyer’s market for teachers, and this sometimes includes incentives that a school with money can afford to give, why would a teacher choose to work in a school which is relatively poorly equipped, has students with language and learning difficulties, and communities with social problems? In addition some of the schools have a reputation, reinforced by recent ERO reports, as schools where teaching quality, leadership and governance are poor.

Many teachers have described the increasing problems they are experiencing with deteriorating student behaviour. At the same time as an increase in the demand for student support services, there has been a decrease in their availability and ease of access. Visiting teachers, Psychological Services, Special Education Service, truancy officers and residential homes used to be available to the schools at no cost. In the opinion of staff these services either no

longer exist or are so difficult to access that they no longer meet the needs. While problems in dealing with student behaviour are not unique to the AIMHI schools, the extent and number of problems are greater and they often involve the whole family.

Governments have always expressed their commitment to **equitable resourcing** for schools. The means by which this is implemented have changed, even since the advent of Tomorrow's Schools. What is immediately obvious to anyone visiting schools is that these AIMHI schools are seriously disadvantaged compared to their more affluent neighbours. The use of technology across the curriculum has highlighted the problems. These children have no access to computers in their homes and limited access at school. While the schools receive equity dollars through TFEA funding, this is negated somewhat by their inability to collect donations/fees or fundraise.

While there were no participants in this study who questioned the need to have some external agency monitoring and reviewing schools, there were grave concerns about some of the policies and practices of **the Education Review Office**. In particular, the lack of accurate reporting and follow-up in the past gave some schools a false sense of what should be expected; the honest admission of difficulties appears to work against schools; reviewers who are inexperienced in low decile schools have difficulty understanding them; and reports lack balance and seldom acknowledge some of the exceptional practice that occurs. The media publicity resulting from negative reviews was devastating for some of the schools. An area of concern for schools that had the worst reports was the speed with which the Office returned and did a follow-up review. The schools had accepted the need for immediate action and had begun to implement major changes. The effort this required from the senior staff in the schools and the Trustees was enormous. Six months was clearly not long enough to implement all of the required improvements and it was not nearly long enough to see changes in the classrooms, yet ERO did another full review and published this. The damage through yet another media release so soon was felt by many in the schools to be almost terminal.

Last, but certainly not least, are the policies related to **qualifications**. The current system of external exams, and School Certificate in particular, seriously disadvantages the students in these schools and the schools themselves. School Certificate is an exam which has outlived its original purpose as an end-of-schooling qualification and which acts as a barrier to achievement for students in at least the decile one schools. It interrupts, at a critical time, what could otherwise be an effective developmental learning programme and significantly exacerbates their spiral of failure in a very public way. It is a major source of parental pressure on students as well as one of the main ways in which the lower-decile schools are publicly judged to be failing. There is a consistent body of New Zealand and overseas research demonstrating the link between socio-economic status and achievement as measured by norm-referenced standardised testing. On the other hand, the evidence collected during the research regarding the introduction of Unit Standards is that, to date, they have provided very positive achievement opportunities for students - for some, their first ever.

While we as researchers have been able to separate out, for the purpose of discussion, the various influences on student achievement, in reality they are inextricably interconnected and it is helpful to stand in students' shoes, in order to understand their reality, to have an understanding of the worlds they inhabit and move between and 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 paid employment, and most important 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 the peer world. The children work hard to keep it this way and are active gatekeepers between, for instance, the school and their parents.

The 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 church. In school, however, they are expected to do both of these things as an integral part of the learning process. Our National Curriculum Framework 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, enquires, 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.
- Sex and sexuality involves many contradictions and conflicts for students. In the Pacific culture, family and church worlds sex is “taboo” or “shame” and is not discussed at all, or certainly not between genders. At the same time, the peer world, through TV, movies and videos, is full of explicit material and often shows explicit sexual behaviour. The values promoted by most schools in New Zealand through the health curriculum and pastoral care staff include the right of the student to knowledge and appropriate information about sexuality. Many of the students are sexually active and will rely on their friends, siblings and/or peer relatives for information if they do not get it from school. Pregnancy testing is arranged by the schools if required. For some students there is the added contradiction of being victims of sexual abuse themselves or being a friend to someone who is. The hypocrisy of an adult sexually abusing a child in a culture where sexuality is denied them and “sex does not exist” because it is not spoken about, is not lost on the students.

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 was 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” ie. telling lies and/or avoidance. The latter might take the form of withdrawing; lateness, wagging or truancy; alcohol or other substance abuse; and for some, suicide.

It is no coincidence that the poorest schools have falling rolls and poor reputations. The policy implications of acknowledging the influence of socio-economics are profound. If students and families in poor areas are to have local schools and not be required to bus out of the community, then these local schools have to be provided for differently in order that students have an equal opportunity to achieve. Even if a decision were to be made **not** to provide schools in the poorest areas, there would still be issues to resolve because it is schools which have the choice, under the current policy, of selecting or rejecting students. Who will provide schooling for the students who cannot afford to travel outside their area? Who will provide places for the students who are not wanted by the selecting schools? Who will provide schooling for the students who are expelled or indefinitely suspended by other schools? There will always be schools which are at the bottom of the parents’ order of preference and they will remain vulnerable in the ways described.