

# ACHIEVING QUALITY AND EQUITY FOR MĀORI SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IN NEW ZEALAND



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## Abstract

Achievement disparities between specific groups of students continue to be consistently documented across the globe. For many, quality and equity have not been achieved, as education continues to underserve specific groups of clearly identifiable students. For New Zealand's Indigenous Māori students, this is neither a recent phenomenon nor is it confined to education.

This paper focuses on the results of a secondary school reform program known as *Te Kotahitanga* (Unity of Purpose). This reform was undertaken using an iterative research and development model aimed at school-wide intervention. Data are presented from 2010 to 2013, when *Te Kotahitanga* Phase 5 schools were in their fourth year of an accelerated program implementation. A mixed-method approach is used to understand the extent to which schools have successfully included and thus enabled higher rates of Māori students so that they are enjoying and achieving education success as Māori.

Changes in pedagogy have resulted in national qualification results for Māori students showing year-on-year improvements. A number of individual schools clearly show that the achievement gap between Indigenous Māori students and their non-Māori peers can be closed. This research has important implications for other countries grappling with this same problem of quality and equity for all.

With the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi in 1840, the Crown promised Māori equal benefits from their participation in the new nation of Aotearoa, New Zealand. However, since this time Māori have faced educational, social, economic and political disadvantage in their own country (Bishop & Glynn, 1999). In addition to the obvious social justice issue for Māori of not being able to benefit fully from participation in a modern nation state, this situation is now extremely serious for the nation as a whole. Twenty-two per cent of public school children are now of Māori descent; in the future a very large proportion of the population will be either an asset to their country or a liability. In this sense, the major social challenge facing New Zealand today is the continuation of these disparities within our nation, primarily between the descendants of the European colonisers (*Pākehā*) and the indigenous Māori people (Bishop, Berryman & Wearmouth, 2014).

Māori do not face these educational disparities alone. Shields, Bishop and Mazawi (2005) use the term 'minoritised' in their book to examine the pathologising by educators that continues to see three specific groups of indigenous students from around the world marginalised and failing. They explain that while these groups are examples, there are many more students who may not be in the numerical minority, but who are being minoritised so that their prior knowledge, cultural experiences and perspectives are pathologised and ascribed characteristics of lesser worth. Sleeter (2011) agrees, suggesting '[a] pressing problem facing nations around the world today is the persistence of educational disparities that adversely affect minoritised students and by extension, the nation as a whole' (p. 1). Sleeter suggests that minoritised populations generally include 'Indigenous students, students of colour, students whose families live in poverty, and new immigrants whose parents have relatively low levels of schooling' (p. 1). As populations of minoritised students expand, so too does the urgency to find responses to address these disparities.

## The beginnings of *Te Kotahitanga*

*Te Kotahitanga* aimed to respond to these disparities by engaging with secondary-school teachers and leaders with the aim of reforming conditions within classrooms and schools in order for Māori students to experience greater engagement and success in secondary schooling.

The program began in 2001 with interviews with groups of Year 9 and 10 Māori students, members of their families, their principals and teachers, about the experiences of being Māori at school. From these interviews, a series of narratives of experience were developed (Bishop & Berryman, 2006). In contrast to the majority of their teachers, who tended to dwell upon the problems that Māori students' deficiencies caused, Māori students clearly identified that the main influence on their educational achievement was the quality of their in-class relationships and interactions with teachers. Māori students also explained how, by changing the ways they related to and interacted with students in their classrooms, their teachers could create contexts for learning in which Māori students' educational achievement could improve.

### Reforming classroom pedagogy

From these interviews, an Effective Teaching Profile (ETP) was developed (Bishop, Berryman, Tiakiwai & Richardson, 2003). This ETP then formed the basis of the *Te Kotahitanga* professional learning and development (PLD) program. The program began by supporting teachers to focus on those things that they do have agency over, such as classroom pedagogy, rather than theorise about the perceived deficits of Māori students or their home communities. Through their implementation of the ETP, teachers were also supported to develop familial-like, or *whanaungatanga*-type, relationships of respect and trust with these students and their families (Bishop, Ladwig & Berryman, 2014). In so doing, teachers began adding value to and widening existing pedagogical skills. This included reinforcing these changes by using Māori student evidence to reflect critically on their own praxis in an ongoing and iterative way.

*Te Kotahitanga* teachers soon began to demonstrate that by working within contexts of relational trust, respect and interdependence they could begin to promote pedagogical responses whereby individuals (teachers and students) could be more self-determining and power could be shared; culture would count in their classroom (the culture of the student but also the culture of teachers) rather than rely only on transmission pedagogies; learning could be interactive, dialogic and spiral; and participants (teachers and Māori students) could be connected and committed to one another through the establishment of a common vision for what constituted educational excellence. We have termed this response a 'culturally responsive pedagogy

of relations' (CRP of R) (Bishop, Berryman, Cavanagh & Teddy, 2007).

## Reforming schools

*Te Kotahitanga* has maintained an iterative approach in which the findings from one phase of the project have been used to improve and develop subsequent phases. This iterative approach to educational disparities has been organic in the sense that the initiative is not linear or prescriptive but responsive to schools and their evidence of Māori students' attendance, retention, engagement and achievement.

Given the aspirational objective and the extent, depth and urgency of the changes required across the numbers of schools and different phases that have been involved, we then moved to understand how a PLD and research response at the classroom level could be both sustained and scaled up within the school, and then accelerated across schools and from one phase to the next (Bishop, O'Sullivan & Berryman, 2010).

In response to the pedagogical reform at the classroom level, the school's leaders were then supported to incorporate a CRP of R in their own attempts with teachers to reform the school's systems and institutions. School leadership teams have demonstrated that evidence-based co-construction meetings and the development of strategic goals and action plans at multiple levels of the school can be used to effectively own and solve pedagogical and school leadership problems (Coburn, 2003). Meetings such as these have been used to re-institutionalise the decision-making processes and institutions within the school and then externally, by seeking to engage with their Māori communities (Durie, 2006).

A recent analysis of the effect of the implementation of the CRP of R in Phase 3 and 4 schools showed that when implemented most effectively, the schooling experiences of Māori students improved dramatically with attendance, retention, engagement and achievement all showing very positive gains in relation to a comparison group of schools (Bishop, Berryman, Wearmouth, Peter & Clapham, 2011). At the end of 2009, *Te Kotahitanga*, as a long-term, iterative, research and development program in over 30 New Zealand secondary schools, was able to apply what we had learned throughout all previous phases (Bishop, Berryman & Wearmouth, 2014) into an accelerated Phase 5, with 16 new schools.

## Method of inquiry

In order to examine the degree to which a CRP of R was being implemented within the classrooms of Phase 3 and 4 schools, we developed and trialled two questionnaires and a walk-through observation tool using well-defined categories and related rating scales. The questionnaires focused on the changes in students' and teachers' classroom experiences, and the walk-through observations focused on identifying changes in teachers' pedagogy according to the CRP of R. In this paper, data from these questionnaires and observations are presented from Phase 5 schools, from 2012 and again in 2013. In addition, Māori students' achievements, on national assessments at Years 11 to 13, are compared with a decile<sup>1</sup>-weighted comparison group. These data examine the changes that Māori students and teachers had been experiencing in their schools as a response to the changes in pedagogy and achievement that had taken place.

## Results

### Results from questionnaires and walk-throughs

The majority of Year 9 and 10 Māori students surveyed in 2012 (600) from across the 16 schools said that they sometimes to always experienced schools where they felt good to be Māori; where Māori students had opportunities to do the things they wanted to do and were achieving; where teachers knew and respected them, cared for them and knew how to help them learn; and where teachers expected that they could and would achieve. A slightly lesser number said their teachers listened to students; knew how to make learning fun; let students help each other with their work; and shared their results with them so that they could achieve better results. Interestingly, results from the teacher survey revealed that teachers thought they were achieving even more positively in these domains than did their students. Importantly, there was very little difference between the responses of Māori students and non-Māori students.

Evidence from the walk-through observations revealed 216 teachers across the Phase 5 schools were providing

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<sup>1</sup> From the New Zealand census figures, schools receive a decile weighting and are funded according to the socioeconomic standing of the communities in which they are located. Decile-weighted funding is an attempt to achieve greater equity.

learning contexts in which a CRP of R and more discursive teaching interactions had become the new pedagogy. While a further 178 teachers were still learning to integrate these practices, of concern were the 20 teachers who showed no evidence of having changed their practices. In 2013, when these questionnaire and observation data were gathered again to provide a comparison measure over time, despite the data coming from new groups of students and many new teachers, the trends had continued to improve positively.

### Results from national assessments

From their beginnings in *Te Kotahitanga* (the end of 2009) to 2012, across years 11 (NCEA<sup>2</sup> Level 1), 12 (NCEA Level 2) and 13 (NCEA Level 3), Māori students' results showed significant increases when compared with Māori students in a decile-weighted comparison group of schools. These increases were seen at rates of 9.5 per cent for comparison schools to 26 per cent for Phase 5 schools at Level 1; 11.0 per cent for comparison schools to 32.7 per cent for Phase 5 schools at Level 2; and 11.5 per cent for comparison schools to 30.9 per cent for Phase 5 schools at Level 3. Furthermore, in a context of greatly increased numbers of Māori students remaining to Year 13, the actual number of Māori students gaining University Entrance increased by 81 per cent over the period 2008–12 (Alton-Lee, 2014). The most recent NCEA data from 2013 national assessments have still to be confirmed but anecdotal evidence from these schools' leaders suggests that the positive trend has continued.

These combined data have become important talking points for school leaders in Phase 5 schools to have the challenging conversations that will continue to co-construct more equitable pathways for their students, thus maintaining the reform momentum.

### Significance of this work

Phase 5 *Te Kotahitanga* school leaders have now begun to use classroom evidence, including the voices of students and teachers, to understand, evaluate and realign the school's institutions in response to pedagogical change and Māori students' increasing engagement and achievement. While this is still proving challenging for some teachers and school leaders, for others, developing co-constructed approaches to school-wide evaluation and reform has provided an

important alternative to conventions of evaluation that are commonly misunderstood, 'somebody else's responsibility' or too focused on accountability and compliance. The use of evidenced-based co-construction meetings by teachers, facilitators, senior leaders and middle leaders is helping all to understand and take explicit ownership for both the evidence and the solutions. These actions are resulting in a more coherent and productive approach, whereby each is able to take responsibility for making judgements and determining specific acts of teaching and leadership in response. Importantly, this approach is creating contexts for learning in which more Māori students are enjoying the learning experience as Māori, where they are engaged with learning and where their achievement of national qualifications has begun to show marked improvements (Alton-Lee, 2014).

### Conclusion

Shifts in pedagogy, to more closely resemble a CRP of R, have resulted in national qualification results for Māori students showing year-on-year improvements, with a number of individual schools clearly showing that the achievement gap between indigenous Māori students and their non-Māori peers can be closed (Alton-Lee, 2014).

The education 'achievement gap' between students from the majority cultural group and Māori students in New Zealand reflects a wider issue of cultural minoritisation that is increasingly common around the globe (Bishop, Berryman & Wearmouth, 2014). This research has important implications for other countries grappling with this same problem, as it provides a powerful example of educational research that is innovative and changing both practice and policy towards a more socially just and equitable education system for all students.

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