

Promoting success for Maori learners in New Zealand

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Maori, the indigenous people of New Zealand, comprise 15 per cent of the population. The educational achievement of Maori, as shown in national assessments¹ and international comparative studies² is much lower than for non-Maori, therefore improving educational outcomes for Maori is a social, economic and moral imperative.

The right of Maori to be recognised as *tangata whenua* (first people of the land) began with the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi in 1840. In recent times, this agreement has been the basis for government priorities, especially in the education sector. The New Zealand Ministry of Education's Maori education strategy *Ka Hikitia – Managing for Success 2008-2012* aims to have 'Maori enjoying education success as Maori'.³

Maori can take several pathways through the education system. There is a full Maori immersion path, from early childhood education through school to tertiary level. However, approximately 80% of Maori receive their education in mainstream settings, which can include bilingual or immersion programmes.

Ka Hikitia and other strategies to improve the achievement of Maori learners are well grounded in national and international research and practice. At the early childhood level, researchers have highlighted the importance of education services listening to the aspirations that Maori parents have for their children, and providing culturally relevant programmes and practices in which the Maori language is fostered.⁴

At the school level, much has been written about the importance of rejecting deficit theories for explaining under-achievement, acknowledging Maori students' culture, language and identity, setting high expectations, building caring relationships between teachers and students, creating learning partnerships between school and home, and providing teacher professional learning on appropriate pedagogy.⁵

We know, therefore, what is possible. We know what works. But do we know if it is working? And, where it is working, what contributes to sustaining improvement?

The Education Review Office (ERO) is the government agency that evaluates the quality of education in all pre-tertiary educational institutions in New Zealand. As well as producing public reports on individual institutions, ERO provides reports on topics of national educational interest. Reporting on the engagement, progress and achievement of Maori students is a focus within individual reports and nationally. From these reports we can provide a snapshot of the current situation.

Success for Maori in early childhood

Seventy-six per cent of Maori children attend mainstream early childhood services. Two recent national evaluations of Maori children in mainstream early childhood education found that an approach that 'treats all children the same' often does them a disservice.⁶ This is especially so if the children are from cultural or language minority groups. ERO's reports highlight a mismatch between the stated values, beliefs and intentions of the services and the practices that were observed. Many services did not use effective processes to find out what parents' aspirations and expectations were and most lacked adequate self-review processes for evaluating the effectiveness of their provisions for Maori children.

Where more than one quarter of the children on the early childhood service's roll were Maori, the responsiveness to parents was higher. In effective services, the philosophy statement that underpinned the service's approach was 'more than words on a piece of paper'.⁷ Parents and the wider family were involved in developing this philosophy statement through informal means, such as face-to-face conversations, and formal means, such as surveys. Teachers understood the importance of reciprocal relationships. They found ways to keep the dialogue open and made time to listen to and connect with families. In a few services, leaders and teachers had made links with local tribal groups and/or had Maori elders advise them and/or share local knowledge and history.

Where services thoughtfully acknowledged Maori children's cultural heritage and identity, they found ways to enable the children to realise their potential. These strategies included:

- providing a bi-cultural curriculum;
- using the Maori language in conversations;
- using Maori protocols to welcome visitors, introduce and greet each other and when sharing food;
- allowing children to lead *karakia* (prayers) and use *waiata* (songs); and
- having teachers seek out and use resources with the Maori language and perspectives to support their teaching.

While teaching and assessment strategies varied across the services, highly competent teachers valued what children brought to their learning, built on prior learning experiences and set high expectations for the learners. Teachers who were focused on supporting Maori children often had to step outside their comfort zones and challenge their own assumptions and practices.

Overall, these ERO evaluations found that just over one third of early childhood services were well under way with assisting Maori children to become competent and confident learners. The other two thirds were at different stages in recognising the needs of Maori children and their parents and in adapting their services processes and practices to suit.

Success for Maori in primary schools

A recent ERO national report on success for Maori in mainstream schools found that in a third of primary schools, their achievement had remained at high levels or substantially improved since the prior national report in 2006.⁸ The report also found, however, that despite widespread information and support available, these schools were not making good use of available research about Maori students' learning to guide curriculum development and pedagogical practices. While in most schools the engagement with Maori communities had improved overall, there were still schools in which consultation with Maori was limited and the input of Maori parents into their child's education was not valued.

One of the key questions in this investigation was the extent to which schools were familiar with the Ministry's strategy *Ka Hikitia* and were using it to improve their practices. A significant finding was that where schools had made changes as a result of their consideration of *Ka Hikitia*, they were more likely to have improved outcomes for their Maori students.

The investigation also focused on Maori students' presence, engagement and achievement. In 75 per cent of primary schools, Maori students' presence (as measured through attendance, stand-downs, suspensions and expulsions) had improved or remained high. Keeping regular contact between home and school, improving pastoral care systems, and involving other agencies where necessary, were some strategies that primary schools were using to increase these students' presence.

Schools with over 50 per cent Maori students or with at least one Maori staff member on the leadership team were most likely to have a high knowledge and understanding of Maori issues and to have community engagement that had remained high or substantially improved. Schools with high levels of engagement often achieved this by putting school-wide initiatives in place. These included:

- extensive use of Maori language and protocols;
- involving elders in school life;
- providing leadership opportunities for Maori students and parents, and
- setting strategic targets for continuing engagement of students and their families.

In 79 per cent of primary schools, the quality of achievement data and analysis was good or better. Again, schools with higher numbers of Maori students were more likely to have better quality data and appropriate improvement targets for Maori. There is still room for improvement in many schools however, in particular in gathering baseline data and separating out analysis of Maori student data in a way that shows the impact of the various initiatives so that the effort put in actually makes a difference.

Success for Maori in secondary schools

Since ERO's previous review, most mainstream secondary schools had made progress in engaging Maori students, families and communities.⁹ Those that had maintained high levels of engagement or had substantially improved had used a range of strategies to integrate Maori language and content across the curriculum. Highly effective schools monitored and reported Maori students' achievement, increased their numbers of Maori staff, established home rooms, developed effective career guidance, and supported learning through mentoring programmes.

These initiatives helped improve Maori attendance, retention and participation in external examinations. Teachers in highly effective schools were confident in their ability to engage and teach Maori students. They had high expectations of their students and demonstrated a supportive, collaborative ethos. Maori students were involved in a wide range of school activities, often in leadership positions.

These schools used self-review information to improve responsiveness to Maori students and parents. They used open-door policies, home visits, surveys and community meetings to communicate and consult. Families felt that they had a sense of connectedness with the school and a voice in contributing to long-term visions and directions.

The next step is for schools to use this data to evaluate the impact of their programmes and to assist with decision making about future initiatives to promote or sustain success for Maori students. There is a bigger step needed to be taken by schools who have not yet implemented *Ka Hikitia* to ensure that they meet their obligations to their Maori students.

Success for Maori in immersion schools

Of the 76 immersion schools reported on in this study, 21 per cent were rated successful (providing a consistently high quality education), 71 per cent satisfactory (within a continuum of performance) and 8 per cent were struggling to provide quality education (for a range of reasons). Successful schools were committed to high quality and excellence. They focused on student achievement. Their commitment was reflected in their strategic directions, goals and targets. They had instituted effective self-review to examine whether or not they were meeting these goals and targets. The approach to teaching and learning was holistic – including academic, cultural, spiritual, physical, emotional and social dimensions. Maori language, knowledge, traditions, protocols and curriculum content were embedded in all learning programmes. Each successful school had strong relationships with their community, tribe, and elders. Students' sense of identity was strengthened through an emphasis on Maori histories, stories, songs, chants and genealogy. The local meeting place was an integral part of the learning programme and important Maori concepts underpinned relationships and learning activities. Comprehensive, well-analysed student achievement information was used to inform planning, programme design, resource selection and reporting, and students were motivated, challenged and stimulated.

The successful examples show what can be done to provide consistent high-quality education in Maori immersion contexts. Other immersion schools can learn from and build on this good practice to raise the provision of education for their students to the next level.

Conclusion

Reducing disparity in educational achievement in New Zealand by aiming for Maori to meet with success as Maori, is a government priority. *Ka Hikitia* outlines how this might be done. National evaluations conducted by the Education Review Office give a picture of the progress that is being made in early childhood services, schools and immersion schools.

In each setting, there was wide variation in the successful implementation of appropriate strategies to lift Maori students' achievement but there were also success stories. There were two key findings to come through from this brief synthesis of these national evaluation reports. First, there is more likelihood of success if strategies are extended from those that benefit all children to include culture-specific strategies for particular groups. Second, when schools/services embrace the principles and commit to working on the strategies in *Ka Hikitia*, they also meet with increased success.

We do know what works and we know that it is working for some early childhood services, schools and immersion schools, but to reach and sustain the *Ka Hikitia* goals by 2012 will take increased commitment and effort by all concerned.

Endnotes

¹ Such national assessments include the National Educational Monitoring Project (NEMP) which samples achievement across the country at years 4 and 8. See www.nemp.otago.ac.nz

² Such international comparative studies include PISA, PIRLS and TIMSS. See www.oecd.org and www.pisa.oecd.org

³ Ministry of Education (2008). *Ka Hikitia – Managing for success 2008-2012*. Wellington: Author.

⁴ See, for example: Ritchie, J., & Rau, C. (2006). *Whakawhānaungatanga – partnerships in bi-cultural development in early childhood care and education* www.tlri.org.nz

⁵ See, for example: Bishop, R., Berryman, M., Cavanagh, T., & Teddy, L. (2007). *Te kātahitanga. Phase 3. Whānaungatanga: Establishing a culturally responsive pedagogy of relations in mainstream secondary school classrooms*. Wellington: Ministry of Education.

⁶ Education Review Office. (2010a). *Success for Maori children in early childhood services*. Wellington: Author; Education Review Office. (2010b). *Success for Maori children in early childhood services: Good practice*. Wellington: Author.

⁷ ERO, 2010a, p. 11.

⁸ Education Review Office. (2010c). *Promoting success for Maori students: Schools' progress*. Wellington: Author.

⁹ Ibid.

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