

Tomorrow's Schools Today NZ

Opinion Forum – Peter Simpson , President of the New Zealand Principals' Federation, respond to Elizabeth McKinley's solution to Maori student underachievement

We all want our Maori pupils to succeed in school alongside their Pakeha peers. I find it unacceptable that we have an over-representation of Maori children occupying the lower end of our achievement scales and I know my colleagues share these sentiments.

Elizabeth McKinley wrote for this forum recently and promoted her *Starpeth* programme as a credible alternative to lift Maori student achievement. Whilst I agree with some of her points, such as the importance of on-going monitoring I do not find it particularly helpful to blame the children, their parents or the low expectations of teachers for the low achievement outcomes of our tamariki.

I believe there are several issues we need to think about if we want to make a difference for Maori children. First, we need to examine whether the results we get from assessing our Maori children are a true reflection of their achievement or a function of the systems we operate. Maori NZPF executive colleagues challenge me to think about the way we tend to imply that there is something gravely wrong with our Maori children and nothing at all wrong with the system. They challenge me to think about how we might unwittingly be indulging in modern day assimilation by expecting Maori children to be the same as everyone else. This Eurocentric response to fixing the 'tail of underachievement' may be where we are going wrong. I am challenged to imagine just what the tail would look like if Ka Hikitia, the Maori Education strategy, a system designed by Maori for Maori, was fully implemented in all mainstream schools. This strategy takes account of Maori cultural practices, the importance of whanau connections, language and different knowledge sets that are valued within Maoridom.

Achieving full implementation of Ka Hikitia, I believe, is a key to changing low achievement levels which sadly have become normal for too many Maori children. I say this with some confidence because if we look at the results for tamariki emerging from Kura kaupapa schools, the picture is different. Of all Maori students progressing to University level, for example, the majority are coming from Kura kaupapa environments where Maori values and knowledges are respected. Catering for Maori in mainstream schools, which is where most are located, is one of our greatest challenges. Changes will not occur over night. There are however steps that we can all take, and in many cases as my Maori executive colleagues tell me, what is good for Maori children is also good for Pakeha children.

For example, before Maori children are ready to learn at school, they need to establish connections with the school. They need to first feel they belong in the school. This means taking time to establish relationships with teachers, the principal and other children. It is important that opportunities are provided for the children to make those connections. This is a practice that might well benefit all children. A programme called Te Kotahitanga has been developed by the Ministry of Education to assist teachers to help children establish these important relationships. Having a sense of belonging and affiliation with the school engenders pride, loyalty, a sense of family or whanau and ultimately the children want to participate in what is going on at school. Achieving a suitable environment for Maori children at school means that it must become natural and normal to use Te reo, to incorporate Tikanga Maori into curriculum activities and to find ways to measure achievement that are consistent with achieving 'as Maori'.

McKinley suggests that the government's National Standards would be useful to monitor Maori and Pacific Island children. She does not see them as 'a big bad stick' because they are there "to track student progress and school performance." I again called on my Maori colleagues to ascertain where the current National Standards would sit in relation to evaluating progress and achievement for Maori children. They were unanimous in their views that National Standards would only exacerbate the problem. First, National Standards assume that all children have the same ability, have a single language and culture, come from the same socio-economic background, have the same cultural knowledges, values and social connections. They do not. Even worse National Standards assume that all children progress at an identical pace and on identical pathways. They do not. As Dame Marie Clay said many times -*there are multiple pathways to literacy and learning and few if any children, [even native speakers of English], follow a pre-set ladder like set of progressions in learning.* Maori children are even further disadvantaged because the National Standards take no account of Maori ways of knowing and so Maori are further pushed to the periphery. If National Standards measure anything at all - and 95% of New Zealand principals seriously question that - it is this country's 'mainstream' Pakeha knowledge that is under scrutiny. What makes Ka Hikitia promising for Maori children is that at the core of the strategy document is the statement 'Maori children enjoying educational success as Maori.' My challenge to the readership of this column is to ask "I wonder what the 'tail of underachievement' would look like if we applied assessments that measured generally accepted norms of Maori knowledge and society?"