16. MAORI STUDENT RETENTION AND SUCCESS: CURRICULUM, PEDAGOGY AND RELATIONSHIPS

BACKGROUND

In 2001 the Ministry of Education of Aotearoa/New Zealand, commissioned a tertiary education initiative to support research projects that focus on the retention and success rates of Maori and Pacifica students in tertiary institutions. This chapter reports on the findings of an investigative case study conducted in one department of a provincial tertiary educational institution. The case study sought to answer the question: “What are the issues confronting Maori student participation and retention in one department in this institution?” The findings suggest that curricular transformation, classroom pedagogy and relationships are critical areas for development if we are to realise enhanced retention and success for Maori students. The case study also highlights the need for building teacher capacity through professional development in the tertiary environment, particularly in the areas of relationship building and discursive pedagogical practice.

INTRODUCTION

The enrolment of Maori in tertiary education has increased dramatically in recent years, but participation and achievement have continued to be problematic (Hawke, 2002). This investigation of the factors that influence retention and success of non-traditional students in general and Maori students in particular, is needed to identify possible actions that may serve to address current trends.

Literature that discusses issues relating to student participation and retention at tertiary level most often cites student characteristics as determinants of success or failure. Evidence that students may be at risk of withdrawal or failure in the education system include factors such as: being unprepared for tertiary study; lack of social skills needed to negotiate access and resources in the institution; financial problems and psychological state including loneliness, isolation, low self esteem, lack of motivation and family problems (Promnitz and Germain, 1996; Hall et al., 2001; Hawke, 2002). According to Hawke (2002), Maori students (as well as other ethnic groups) may experience further barriers, including negative stereotyping of identity and ability, family obligations, lack of family support for finance or study and little opportunity to contribute “to social or political change” (p. 3).

This approach promotes a view of students as lacking in skills, knowledge and attitudes that would support their success and retention. Advocates recommend increased student support services and programmes to help at-risk students overcome factors
such as self-doubt, lack of study skills and inappropriate attitudes to academic study. It is considered then, that students need to acculturate to the environment of tertiary study in order to gain “institutional fit and commitment” (Lake, 1998, p. 1). This deficit perspective positions the problem or difficulty within the student and releases teachers and institutions from scrutiny (Simon, 1990; Smith, 1991; Bishop and Glynn, 1999).

Further investigation of the literature however (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Abbott-Chapman and Edwards, 1998; Beasley, 1998; Hill and Hawk, 2000; Hall et al., 2001; Hawke, 2002, cited in Simon, 1990; Promnitz and Germain, 1996; Bishop and Glynn, 1999), reveals the emergence of a critical approach that seeks to expose structural/systemic factors that impact on student participation and success. Authors note that so-called non-traditional groups of students have now become the “vast majority of our students” (Smith, 1991, p. 2). These authors seek to shift the focus away from the shortcomings of students and instead onto the role of the institution in promoting success.

Three areas for institutional change are identified as fundamental to address issues that influence participation and retention of non-traditional students, including Maori. These are curricular transformation, classroom pedagogy and relationships (Smith, 1991; Bishop and Glynn, 1999). In the following discussion we look at each of these aspects of change.

**CURRICULAR TRANSFORMATION**

It is crucial that the curriculum itself is transformed, not only to acknowledge the diversity and value of experience and knowledge of students who are other than traditional mainstream, but more importantly, to reduce student alienation, not “simply adding courses that plug holes in the curriculum … [but] asking new questions that more naturally embrace … the perspectives of those at the margins by placing them at the centre” (Smith, 1991, p. 4). Maori (and minority) students need to see themselves reflected in the curriculum through acknowledgment of their prior learning, their values and experiences, their traditions and cultural icons, in order to effectively engage with the curriculum and develop commitment to their study and achievement (Bishop, 2002).

The vision for change in curricula is underpinned by the inclusion of prior experiences and knowledge of all students that can enable co-creation of knowledge, cultural constructivism and experiential learning (Ladson-Billings, 1995, cited in Bishop and Glynn, 1999; Stables and Scott, 2002). Discussion of such a vision inevitably leads to issues of power relations in classrooms as to who determines the control and evaluation of content and assessment (Smith, 1991; Bishop and Glynn, 1999). These authors also point out that even where appropriate content is included in curricula, classroom pedagogy will further influence student participation.

**CLASSROOM PEDAGOGY**

Bishop and Glynn emphasise that power sharing and participation are “fundamental to learning for all students” [and] “power relations cannot change unless both parties