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"They didn’t care about normal kids like me"

Restructuring a school to fit the kids

"Nga Hau e Wha" by Chey Milne

A thesis submitted as partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Educational Administration, Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand.

Ann Milne
2004
Declaration

I declare that this thesis, “They didn't care about normal kids like me” - Restructuring a school to fit the kids, represents my own work, except where due acknowledgement is made, and that it has not been previously included in a thesis, dissertation or report submitted to this University or to any other institution for a degree, diploma or other qualification.

Signed: Ann Milne

Date: 28.01.04
For the kids ...

For my grandchildren, Chey, Blake, Georgia, Kairangi, Koka, Kaya, Zlon, Maicha and Mahina, who keep reminding me how important it is to be Maori everywhere in their lives

For the kids at Clover Park Middle School who show us the way to our future
Abstract

Towards the end of 2000 a group of young Maori, formerly students in Clover Park Middle School’s bilingual unit up to Year 9 or 10, approached the school to ask if they could return to the Maori learning environment where they felt they had been successful. They reported they had been unable to feel this way again in any of their respective senior secondary school settings. In the process of explaining why he felt he hadn’t fitted into his school, one young man said, “They didn’t care about normal kids like me.” For him, being Maori was “normal” and he didn’t see anything in his senior secondary schooling experience that valued his reality. This study aimed to answer five questions that arose from this student’s statement:

1. Why don’t schools fit the kids?
2. How could schools fit the kids?
3. How has Clover Park Middle School made changes to fit the kids?
4. Does Clover Park Middle School fit the kids?
5. How could other schools fit the kids?

Clover Park Middle School is situated in Otara, in Manukau City, New Zealand. In 2003, 99% of the school’s 325 students were of Maori or Pacific heritage. Originally a traditional Years 7 and 8 intermediate school, Clover Park was granted official middle school status in 1995 allowing the extension to a four year span from Years 7 to 10. Hand in hand with this restructuring has been a transformation of the school’s internal organisation and philosophy, initially to respond to demands from Maori parents for bilingual and whanau-based education from 1986 to 1992, and then gaining impetus into whole school change since 1994.

The methodology chosen for this study is within the naturalistic paradigm. Specifically the research design is an intrinsic case study informed by kaupapa Maori and critical race theory. These theories put the issues of race and power at the centre of the research and ask important questions about the control and production of knowledge. Questions such as these are crucial in the story of a school that has tried hard to break away from the status quo and challenge racism in our education system. The purpose of intrinsic case study is to tell the story “as is” because “in all its particularity and ordinariness, the case itself is of interest” Stake (2000, p.437). This was the intention of this research.

A wide range of literature presented in Chapter 2 confirms that the alienation of indigenous and ethnic minority students from mainstream school systems is endemic both in New Zealand and internationally. These communities share a history of disempowerment that is perpetuated by the pervasive white lens through which our education systems structure and view learning.

In order to empower indigenous and ethnic minority students to challenge existing school structures to make learning more relevant and accessible it will be necessary for this lens to
change and for interdependent lenses of equal status to be created. Changing the lens and then restructuring the school to fit this new view has resulted in changes to learning contexts and curriculum approach to provide a culturally relevant learning environment.

Clover Park Middle School’s power lenses connect students’ relationships to themselves, to their cultures, to each other, to their wider whanau, their community, the world and to learning in all of those spheres. The key is whanaungatanga - the interdependence of and connectedness to a network that will continue to support them and connect them to their futures. They in turn will maintain that connection and continue to contribute to the whanau network. This is empowerment.
Acknowledgements

This story spans a timeframe of 18 years and many people in the whanau that is Clover Park Middle School have contributed to its development and to finally “writing it down.”

My thanks firstly to the Clover Park Middle School Board of Trustees for giving your approval so willingly for access to school archives and documents and for your generous support in terms of time to allow the story to grow. Special thanks to chairperson, Tania Robson, for your personal encouragement and never-wavering belief that I would get it finished.

I acknowledge the contribution made by the many teachers and support staff who have been part of the Clover Park whanau over the last 18 years. To our current teaching staff, Clover Park’s “dreamkeepers” - my admiration and appreciation for the outstanding work you do, your expertise and your advocacy for culturally relevant learning. I could not have written this story without your ongoing unconditional support and help. Grateful thanks to deputy principals, Eneli Pakau and Haley Milne who gave me so much time out and allowed me to never feel guilty. A special thank you to Emily Singh and Donna Whaiapu, for whom no request from me to find things was too much trouble and who fiercely guarded my space and time to write.

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To my family who have all shared so closely, both personally and professionally, in this Clover Park journey, there aren’t enough words to say thank you. My daughters, Keri, Derryn, and Haley and my son, Kane are woven into the fabric of Clover Park Middle School. Your own journeys through schooling opened my eyes and forever changed the lens I looked through. You have motivated, inspired, encouraged and supported me in every way possible and this thesis is dedicated to your amazing children who fill me with confidence that their experiences as Maori learners will be different.

Finally, to the students at Clover Park Middle School, both now and in the past, your warmth, laughter and resilience are always an inspiration. You are this story and this story is yours. You are our present and our future and education has to work much harder for you than it has done in the past. Thank you for keeping me focused on what really matters.
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