



Supporting Academic Success by Minority Group

Students in a Private Training Establishment

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Supporting Academic Achievement of Students by Minority Group in a Private Training Establishment

Executive Summary

This report discusses the findings of an investigation into factors perceived by a group of ten Early Childhood Education [ECE] students that supported their learning and influenced their qualification completion. The research took place at New Zealand Career College [NZCC]; a Private Training Establishment [PTE] and was funded by the AKO Aotearoa Northern Region Hub in 2010.

NZCC is situated over four campuses in the Auckland area. Each campus offers classes in Level Three and Level Five qualifications in Early Childhood Education [ECE]. The college focus is on supporting students of predominantly Māori, Pacific Island and other migrant ethnicities, and also supports low achieving school leavers. The college pedagogy is based on the Whare Tapa Rima approach developed from Durie's Whaiora Whare Tapa Rima model (1994). This holistic approach to teaching and learning provides a safe learning environment in which the students experience a sense of belonging (Taha whenua), where their mental and emotional well-being (Taha hinengaro); social wellbeing (Taha whānau); physical well-being (Taha tinana), and spiritual well-being (Taha wairua) are all supported.

The aim of the project was to identify optimal learning and teaching strategies perceived by culturally and linguistically diverse students attending NZCC and to make recommendations for best practice to the tertiary sector.

The research identified four key factors perceived by the participants at NZCC that may contribute to an optimal learning environment for diverse groups of learners:

- 1. Tutor-Student Relationships:** on-going individual academic and pastoral support provided by lecturers.
- 2. The Learning Environment:** small classes which foster a whānau supportive learning environment.

3. Learning Resources and Practical Application of Learning: specifically the role of lecturers as a resource for students' learning.

4. Wider Concept for Academic Success: positive attitudes towards study, confidence, self esteem and self belief.

The findings of this study emphasise the importance of the lecturer-student relationship and the interrelatedness of this with the learning environment and resources.

Introduction

The tertiary education sector of New Zealand has seen a recent increase in student diversity. The Ministry of Education (2009) reports an increase in the cultural and linguistic diversity of students enrolled in tertiary level studies between 2002 and 2009 including a 60% increase in Asian and a 45% increase in Pasifika students. Universities, polytechnics, wānanga and private tertiary establishments (PTE's) are now being challenged to cater for the diverse nature of this student population.

The past ten years has seen an increased awareness and interest in how to support the learning of this diverse student population. Additional interest is focussing on how best to teach three other diverse groups; adults with few skills in literacy, migrants with English as a second language and those who were academically unsuccessful in the New Zealand secondary school system. Large scale research projects have been carried out across universities, wānanga, polytechnics and private tertiary institutions to determine the extent of student diversity, how their learning is supported and the effective teaching strategies used to accommodate students with diverse learning needs (see: Airini, O'Shea, Tarawa, Sauni, Ulugia-Pua, Sua-Huirua, Taipapaki-Curtis, 2007; Benseman, Sutton, & Lander, 2005; Marshall, Baldwin & Peach, 2008; McMurchy-Pilkington, 2009; Zepke, Leach & Prebble, 2005).

Benseman et al (2005) expressed a need for more studies in this field to systematically build a body of knowledge, in particular the kind of research that recognises the quality of education services delivered in PTEs where most students of minority groups are enrolled. This research investigation plays a small part in addressing that need by identifying factors perceived by students at NZCC that positively support their studies.

Research Background

Over the past five years New Zealand Career College (NZCC) has focussed on supporting students of predominantly Māori, Pacific Island, and other migrant ethnicities. NZCC has provided a pathway for students with low academic achievement levels, including those from these ethnicities, to gain entry into the second year of a university Early Childhood Education degree programme.

In 2008 NZCC was selected by the Tertiary Education Commission to provide additional ECE places in their programmes. NZCC's application for reinvestment provided quantifiable data that indicated NZCC:

- a) has a high record in course completions,
- b) has a high level of stakeholder support for their educational provisions,
- c) achieved a high number of diploma course graduates stair casing into the second year of a university degree programme, and
- d) has a commendable record of supporting students previously unsuccessful in the New Zealand Secondary School system into a higher education.

Research Aims and Objectives

Factors leading to the achievements described above were for the most part the subject of informal discussions among staff and students at NZCC during internal evaluation and review processes. Such factors were not formally investigated, recognised or documented through empirical research.

The aims of this project were thus to:

- identify teaching and learning strategies that appear effective for NZCC ECE students
- disseminate effective teaching strategies to the ECE sector
- identify non-teaching and learning related factors impacting on student academic achievement with a view to extending and improving NZCC student pastoral care supports

- contribute to the wider discourse on learning and teaching ‘best practice’ in relation to the needs of Māori , Pacific Island, and other migrant student groups
- systematically contribute to a larger body of knowledge (Benseman et al., 2005) and
- participate in current government funded research initiatives (through Ako Aotearoa) to further support the nationwide vision to provide the best possible outcomes for all learners.

Research Purpose

The main purpose of this research investigation was to capture student perspectives on how their learning was supported as they studied towards their national ECE qualifications. To capture these perspectives and meet the objectives above, the following questions were formulated:

1. What are the key teaching and learning support strategies provided by the New Zealand Career College that enable students to complete Level 5 ECE qualifications?
2. What are the key challenges that affect ECE students’ completion of Level 5 ECE qualifications?

LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a growing body of literature investigating the factors that contribute to the academic achievement of adult learners. Particular attention is starting to be paid to what factors increase positive academic outcomes in those students who have previously not succeeded in academic environments including students who come from ethnic minority groups.

The first factor that is recognized as increasing academic achievement in adult learners is the relationship between the academic staff and the students. A positive relationship between lecturers and students has been found to affect students’ abilities to participate successfully in courses (Airini et al., 2007). Moreover, studies by Watters and Turner (2001) indicate that effective learning occurs when students are respected as adults, and tutors provide ongoing advice, support, objectivity and encouragement. Furthermore, McMurchy-Pilkington (2009) found that student learning was enhanced when tutors were

passionate, caring, patient, approachable, firm, humorous, challenging and committed to high standards for their learners. This support appears to be important both in and out of the classroom (Zepke et al., 2005). The effectiveness of this relationship and the resulting interactions seems to be even more important when working with students who are members of minority ethnic or marginalised groups (McMurchy Pilkington, 2009). Marshall et al. (2008) found that students from a Māori or Pasifika background viewed lecturers as pivotal to their success and stated that ‘good-practice tutors were seen as being flexible, committed, having a passion for teaching, being focussed on the learners and able to motivate them’ (p. 7).

The influence of the peer group on learning is well documented (see Zepke et al, 2005; Watters & Turner, 2001). Regular interactions and positive work relationships within the peer group appear to contribute to the development and mastery of skills. Learning is enhanced when students participate in class discussions, work with peers on group projects, and share learning with peers (Zepke, et al., 2005). Watters and Turner (2001) confirmed regular contact among students was encouraging and motivational and helped students to feel a true part of a learning community. Students were found to prefer to learn in small groups (as compared with school) where large classes have negative effects on a student’s willingness to participate in class and ask questions when they don’t understand (Zepke et al., 2005). Small learning groups were found to be particularly important for immigrant students with English as a Second-Language and Billington (1996) found *‘group learning enabled students of all ages and backgrounds to learn English fast and well’* (p 2).

The learning environment is initiated by the tutor who is often seen as strongly influential over the atmosphere for learning (Benseman et al., 2005; Zepke et al., 2005). Research has shown that effective learning occurs in positive learning environments where students have a sense of belonging (Airini et al., 2007; McMurchy-Pilkington, 2009) and where they feel safe and comfortable to share their life experiences (Rogers and Freiberg, 1994). Learning is also enhanced when students are actively involved in interesting and fun exercises (Billington, 1996). In such environments students are believed to be more able to deal with the demands of study (Ross, 2008). Research indicates that positive, professional relationships between students, their peers, institutional support staff, and teachers have major effects on student learning (Zepke et al., 2005).

Research indicates that students of minority groups learn best from tutors who deliver course content in a sequential and coherent way using a range of teaching methods (Benseman et al., 2005). In Airini et al's study (2007) students responded particularly well to tutors who broke course content down to a level that could be clearly understood, who clarified assessment requirements, and the tasks required to complete assessments. Furthermore, research has reported that student's understanding of course content is found to be deepened further when content is made relevant to 'real life' and when tutors teach in a practical, more hands-on way that makes links to contexts that students are familiar with (McMurphy-Pilkington, 2009; Zepke et al.2005). Various studies emphasise the importance of allowing students to learn through practical experiences which enable them to evaluate and reflect on their learning (Knowles, 1984; Rogers, 1969,). Studies found *'student learning was enhanced when students were given the opportunity to transfer knowledge learned in the classroom'* (Howison, 2006, p 63). They benefit from sharing their learning with colleagues. This reinforces their own learning, strengthens connections with existing knowledge, inspires learning in others and utilises opportunities to reflect on their practice (Seaton et al., 2009).

Student learning is also positively supported when relevant materials and resources are made readily available. Students are highly appreciative of tutors who provide the essential materials needed to complete assignments (Airini et al., 2007) and make other resources easily accessible (Benseman et al., 2005). Studies also found students learn better in environments where appropriate facilities were made available, for example, car parking, a student cafeteria, computer labs and libraries (Zepke et al., 2005).

Several studies examined the support provided by academic and pastoral care services in various institutions. Studies found students of minority groups utilized this service mostly to assist with assessments - namely clarification of what the assessment is asking, the best way to structure an assessment and the appropriate content to use (Airini et al., 2007). ESOL students used this service to identify and define the meaning of words, phrases expressions and idioms as well as tackling assessment requirements (Watters & Turner, 2001). However, despite the services available for students of minority groups there was an

underlying personal desire to continue to try and to succeed independently (Airini et al., 2007).

While these studies identify individual factors that can lead to achievement, other studies have highlighted the need to consider the student from a holistic point of view. A *'holistic environment includes caring for the physical, mental and spiritual well being of learners'* (Marshall, Baldwin and Peach 2008, p.16). Marshall et al (2008) found that the components of the holistic approach – surrogate whānau/āiga, sense of belonging and the concept of creating a greater humanity, were interrelated. This related to the findings of a study completed by Auckland Uniservices (2009) who found that the concept of wider success was considered more important to many Māori and Pasifika students than academic grades.

The literature reviewed has given some insight into how students of minority groups are supported in tertiary education across a range of institutions. This present study extends this knowledge by investigating factors that positively support qualification completion from the perspective of these students.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Participants

Purposive sampling (de Vaus, 2002) was utilized to select both the site and participants to produce the most relevant and valuable data (Denscombe, 2003). The Manukau campus was selected as the site of the research. The diverse student population at that campus included Māori, Pacific Island and Asian ethnicities.

All graduates of five ECE courses between the years of 2006 to 2008 were invited to participate in the research. Fifteen graduates, from different year intakes expressed interest. These prospective participants were invited to a dinner meeting at the Manukau campus where they were introduced to the research project. Ten out of the fifteen prospective participants agreed to participate and completed the research consent form.

The participant group was diverse linguistically and culturally with two from Arabic, three from Pasifika, four from Māori and one from NZ European backgrounds.

Research Design

Qualitative research methods were selected as most appropriate to the research aims and objectives. Narrative enquiry was used to capture the unique stories shared by participants and these allowed the researcher to engage with new knowledge, broader perspectives and expanded possibilities (Rossiter, 2002). The case study approach was used to identify the unique nature of the sample group and provide rich data.

Methods

Methods included a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire comprised of two parts. Part A collected demographic information. Participants were asked questions regarding their backgrounds, specifically, age, nationality and their current status in terms of study and employment. All 10 participants completed this questionnaire. This data provided the information needed to accurately describe the extent of diversity and ethnic distinctions within this group.

Part B of the questionnaire took the form of a semi-focussed questionnaire and aimed at providing insight into the participants' perspectives on their learning experiences at NZCC. Participants were invited to comment on the nature of the support available through the college, factors outside the college that supported their learning and finally the challenges that affected their study both at the college and in their home and social lives.

Semi-structured interview

Participants were then invited to participate in semi-structured interviews. They were invited to attend either individually or in pairs. Six participants attended individual interviews and four participants chose to attend in pairs. The interviews were conducted by the Researcher and comprised of the same questions as the semi-structured

questionnaires. The repetition of the questions enabled participants to reflect on their written responses and provide more in-depth information than that provided through the written questionnaire. The interviews were audio recorded. The semi structured interviews were transcribed by the Researcher and returned to the participants to confirm accuracy.

Data Analysis

Thematic Categorising

The written responses to the semi-structured questionnaires and the transcripts of the semi-structured interviews were compared and searched for themes. The participants' responses were coded into these themes to provide data on the nature and frequency of each theme.

Reliability of the thematic categorising analysis was verified by an Independent Research Mentor.

Ethical considerations

Approval was sought and granted from the New Zealand Career College Research and Ethics Committee to ensure the minimisation of harm to participants, the researcher and the institution. Participant Information Sheets and Consent Forms were used to gain participants' Informed consent and pseudonyms [P1, P2 etc] were used to provide confidentiality.

Challenges to data collection

Participants' attendance at interviews posed a challenge due to a number of issues; participant lack of transport, work commitments, child-care, home and family responsibilities, and the general lack of time and energy. However, all interviews were completed within the time frame.

FINDINGS

Research findings were coded into the following four key themes that emerged from the participant responses to the questionnaire and semi structured interview questions:

1) Tutor to Student Relationships

The most common response from participants when asked how their learning was supported at NZCC was the on-going support provided by their tutors. For example:

Tutors were very supportive, helpful and encouraging (Participant 1 [P1]);

Tutors were always there for you if you need to talk to someone about work...there was a lot of encouragement to complete the course and continue with further professional development (P10).

Participants reported that some tutors provided practical support to participants to enable them to overcome personal challenges to their studies:

When I was doing level 5 course I got busy and it was very hard to do all the study...she (the tutor) email me my assignments and I do at home...I went to classes for 1 to 2 hour then I get all the assessments and all the notes to complete my level 5 (P7).

2) The Learning Environment

Six of the 10 participants indicated that their learning was positively supported through being in small classes. They reported that small classes enabled them to have more one-on-one support from the tutors. Moreover participants indicated that small classes provided opportunities for discussions, stating that:

the discussions we had in class were really important to help with assessments (P4).

Participants for whom English was their second language stated that group discussions were instrumental to effective learning:

Working as a group it was really helpful because we were second language so when we sit with a group of the people it will help more to correct and do our work (P8);

we learning more by being involved in a group and sharing the idea (P9).

Four of the ten participants found that a small campus provided a positive learning environment:

It was small like a community thing...everyone knew each others' names ...that helped each other to get along (P2).

Other participants felt it was their tutors that created the positive learning environment:

They're (tutors) very friendly (P6);

They were really welcoming and whānau (family) like (P10).

Participants also referred to the tutor's sense of humour and how this affected the learning environment:

They made it fun, made the learning fun (P3).

One participant commented that their peers were an important part of the learning environment:

I met some amazing friends and we all got along just fine. I found it very easy because I had a good environment and very helpful people around me. Therefore I knew that I could always rely on them if I ever needed help. I was very happy because it was such a great place to be. I was more motivated with studying and had the courage to go further and build my future (P8).

Participants reported that a positive environment was essential to maintain their confidence and motivation to complete the course; to enable them to maintain focus and interest (P3), and overcome self doubt (P6).

3) Learning Resources and Practical Application of Learning

Nine out of ten participants commented on how well tutors explained course content and how it was 'broken down' to a level they could understand. They reported that this enabled them to complete their assessments and other course requirements more successfully:

The tutor was helpful in the way she explained the course content which gave us advice on what and how to do assessments (P2).

Some participants acknowledged that they were in the beginning stages of developing the academic skills needed to work at tertiary level study. So for them, the breakdown of assessments into manageable sections and bringing things down to a level that the students could understand was important.

Seven of the ten participants found they were fully supported with learning resources provided by their tutors:

I was given all the required materials like notes (P4);

I had access to the internet to do research handouts, information were photocopied and given to us pretty fast by our tutors (P5).

One resource that participants identified as very useful was the student support tutor:

She was a great help...someone we could go to if we had problems (P1).

Six out of ten participants found their theoretical knowledge and pedagogical skills were further supported by applying the theory learnt in the classroom to their practice:

The practicum...we needed that (P3);

When we go for practicum we learn a lot about childhood care, do the activity with the children, how to do the plan, it was very helpful the practicum for us (P8);

I could connect my work (at the EC Centre) to what I was doing in level 5 (P2).

Another participant stated that what she learned she transferred to her subsequent studies at University:

I reflect to my studies when I went to the Uni (P9).

4) Wider Concept for Academic Success

All participants viewed the achievement of their national qualifications in ECE as the much needed stepping stone to further University studies and a fulfilling career in early childhood teaching:

I finally completed this and with a lot of struggles but I still did it...it gave me the confidence to move further up to University (P3);

What I have achieved here has helped me go on to a career in teaching (P1 & P2).

Participants saw changes within themselves, including confidence, and an increasing responsibility in themselves as learners. Participants had a sense of achievement:

I am so proud of myself, coz I didn't think that I'd be able to do it' (P6);

It really lifted my self-esteem and confidence when it comes to get a job and speaking to people is a lot easier for me as well (P10).

Participants indicated that their tutors played a role in this:

They (the teaching staff) . . . helped me to stay positive about myself (P4).

Participants found their studies and achievements changed their lifestyle. For example one student commented:

I was relying on the benefit, with a baby daughter and had no work. I finished my studies and realised I can do something with my life. It really feels to know that someone really wants me. I don't know how to describe it but it was really good to have work and know you don't have to depend on the benefit, it's an awful feeling (P2).

One participant found differences in her parenting:

I found what I learnt here I was able to put into practice at home. I learnt how to speak to a child, how to give children 2 choices instead of just telling her I want. I was able to help treat her more as a human being instead of my possession (P1).

Family commitments and responsibilities were identified as being a common challenge to study. Four participants commented that family issues and commitments impacted on their studies. For example:

it was very difficult having young children, followed by a lot of responsibilities in the house (P2);

My father being sick and needing care and lack of sleep because baby was still very young (P11).

Three students stated that time management issues were a barrier to their studies. For example:

Combining childcare and house work duties (P6)

Finding my own time to study (P7)

I had to cope with a part time job and study at the same time (P8)

DISCUSSION

This investigation identified four key themes as being significant to the participants' successful completion of ECE courses at NZCC. These key themes are relevant to the tertiary sector as they may be applied to teaching and learning situations across institutions.

Tutor – Student Relationships

The tutor support and encouragement provided by tutors at NZCC were identified by participants in this study as important factors affecting course completion. This supports the work of Watters and Turner (2001) which identified tutor-student relationships as a major contributor to effective learning. Participants also commented on extra support from tutors outside of the classroom. This is recognized as best practice by Zepke et al. (2005) who recommend that good teachers are prepared to provide student support both during and outside class times.

Participants in the current study also commented on tutors providing encouragement. This supports the findings of Marshall et al (2008). However, Marshall noted that passion for teaching was an important quality of successful tutors. The participants in this study did not identify tutor passion as an important contributor to their success. However, they commented on the fact that their tutors provided extensive extra help. If the tutors did not possess some passion for teaching it is argued that it is unlikely that this level of extra help would be offered and provided. So although this study did not measure passion for teaching explicitly, the actions of the tutors could imply that this exists. Further research would be necessary to support this supposition.

Participants in the present study commented on small class sizes as contributing to a positive learning environment. This is also reported in the findings of Benseman et al. (2005), Billington (1996) and Zepke et al. (2005). Larger class sizes could impact on tutors' abilities to develop effective relationships with individual students and potentially create a barrier to effective learning. Therefore it can be argued that the impact of class size is

greater than is evident from the participants' responses. Creating and fostering effective tutor – student relationships in larger class sizes would be an area for future research and one of critical importance to many in the tertiary teaching sector.

Participants in this study made links between the tutor - student relationship and the learning environment and although the two factors are explored separately in this article, it seems that a close relationship between these two factors was essential for optimal learning for participants in this study.

The Learning Environment

The learning environment was recognised by participants as a factor that strongly impacted on their learning, specifically the opportunity to work in groups within small classes. Small group work was perceived by participants as an important factor in supporting their understanding of the course content. This concept supports the findings of Billington (1996) and Zepke et al. (2005) who identified small classes as a positive strategy, specifically for learners of English as a second language.

Both this study and previous research have indicated that learning is more effective when students are supported, encouraged and given ample opportunities to engage in shared and group learning. This supports the findings of Howison (2006) and Seaton et al. (2009) who also found that sharing learning between classmates reinforced individual students' own learning. Billington (1996) and Zepke et al. (2005) noted that being able to build friendships with peers was recognized as promoting optimal learning. Friendships and having their own shared learning community was viewed as a positive factor in learning by participants in this study also. This type of holistic approach to learning is considered by Marshall et al (2008) to be particularly necessary when guiding Māori and Pasifika students. Participants in the present study stated that tutors made the class feel like a whānau and the class activities and discussions set by the tutor helped develop friendships. It appears that the learning environment is intimately connected with the teaching approach of the tutor. It is clear that the participants in this study did favour a more holistic

approach (Marshall et al., 2008) which incorporated building friendships, fostering a sense of belonging/family (whānau).

Participants in this study also reported that learning was more effective if classes were enjoyable. Billington (1996) cited the role of humour in enhancing learning. This factor seems to be determined by the tutors and to some extent the students themselves. For humour to be effective it is important to know both the audience and the content very well. This factor may be the hardest to include in a teaching situation as the variables that lead to humour are numerous and prone to failure, however incorporating fun into learning situations is possible and is possibly an ingredient missing from many tertiary teaching environments (Billington 1996). The link between fun and play as an aspect of learning is well documented in the ECE field for children; investigations on the impact of fun for tertiary learning environments may be beneficial.

Learning Resources and Practical Application of Learning

Participants in this study cited their tutors as the most important learning resource. This is recognized by Airini et al. (2007) and was reported as particularly important for students who had little academic background. Several comments from participants noted that they relied on the tutor to bring material to a level that they understood. This requires a lot of skill on the part of the tutor to ensure that material is presented at an appropriate level to allow student engagement without compromising the level of the course, and to ensure that in time students lift their performance to the required level. While participants commented on and appreciated having access to research, hand outs and other information, it seemed that tutors were regarded as the main learning resource by participants in this study.

Participants did not comment on the need to be taught in a practical more hands-on way in the classroom as described as desirable by McMurchy-Pilkington (2009), rather they found that learning was supported by going out on practicum in ECE centres and actually working with children. It has long been recognized by ECE teacher education providers that

students need a combination of theoretical instruction and as well as the opportunity to work with children for optimal learning. This study supports that belief.

Wider Context for Academic Success

Participants reflected on the success of their learning in terms of how it had impacted on their personal life rather than achieving good academic grades or completing the course. Personal qualities such as increased confidence, boosted self esteem, personal pride and self belief were noted as major outcomes recognized by participants in this study. This supports the findings of Auckland Uniservices (2009) who noted that academic grades were less important to Māori and Pasifika students than the concept of success in a wider context. It also highlights the importance of maintaining a holistic approach to teaching and learning as recognized as best practice by Marshall et al. (2008).

The present study shows that it was considered important by the students that their studies were able to foster aspects of mental and spiritual well being, had relevance to their daily lives, as well as being able to give them a qualification. Participants commented that their studies had increased their parenting skills and that their practical experiences contextualised the study material into reality. While this finding may be more applicable to the participant group of this study, many of whom were combining motherhood with early childhood education studies, it is important for all tertiary disciplines to ensure that their courses are relevant to the lives of their students, focus on the whole person and not just the learning outcomes of the course.

In contrast to their studies enhancing their lives, many participants also commented that the wider context of their world was a major stress and barrier to their learning.

Participants noted that family commitments, responsibilities and issues were a major challenge that needed to be overcome in order to complete their studies. This research does not specify how these issues were addressed. Airini et al. (2007) noted that students of minority groups have a desire to succeed independently; it would seem that the participants in this study did try to succeed independently rather than access pastoral

supports other than their lecturer. However, participants appeared to view their lecturers as a “one stop shop” and the person to go to with all their concerns, even those not related to their studies. Although this again relates to a holistic approach, it does place a greater work load on academic staff who may or may not have the skills required to deal with the issues that students present with. One participant did comment that having greater pastoral support and professional mentors in place would be beneficial. It is considered best practice for tertiary institutions to provide pastoral support for students and staff alike. It seems that students, especially those from minority groups, need further encouragement to make use of the supports available to them and understand that it is acceptable to do so. While pastoral support is well recognized and provided by many institutions, mentoring programmes are less common or are sporadic and need to be considered as part of the holistic development of the student.

Study Participant Post NZCC experiences

Since gaining the Level 5 ECE qualifications at NZCC all of the participants in this study have gone on to further study. One has graduated with a Bachelor of Education from The University of Auckland and is working full time at an Early Childhood Centre; another participant has gained a National Diploma in ECE (Pasifika) (Level 7) from AUT. The remaining eight participants are studying towards the National Diploma in Teaching (Early Childhood Education, Pasifika) (Level 7) at AUT. Alongside this three participants are employed part time in a local childcare centre as educators in training.

NZCC qualification completion rates

In 2006, 63 Level 5 ECE certificates were awarded nationally. This increased to 146 in 2008. The proportion of certificates completed at NZCC increased from 14 (22% of national awards) in 2006 to 34 (23%) in 2008 which indicates that NZCC maintained its place in the ECE training sector and provides some evidence that the programme provided by NZCC during this time was successful in supporting students to complete the Level 5 ECE qualification.

Data to provide an indication of NZCC's level of success in delivering the optimal programme for Level five students compared to other PTEs is not available. However, figures recently released by the Tertiary Education Commission (2011) on the performance of PTEs in 2009 and 2010 provide data on NZCC qualification completions compared with other PTEs. Although the data includes PTEs that run courses in areas other than ECE, it provides a comparison of successful certificate completion rates at NZCC with other Level 5 qualification providers.

Level five qualification completions at NZCC were higher than the national average in both 2009 and 2010. In 2009, 87% of Level 5 students at NZCC completed their qualification compared to the national average of 69%. This meant that NZCC rated 47th of 193 providers which is higher than at least five other well known established ECE providers. This rate was maintained in 2010 with 88% of Level 5 students at NZCC completing the qualification compared to the national average of 73%.

A limitation of using this data in this study is that it refers to qualification rates in 2009 and 2010 and the study participants completed their studies in 2008. However, the programme run at NZCC during these years is similar to that provided to the study participants, who completed in 2008, including the small class, whānau group approach and delivery by some of the same tutors, and is thus relevant to the findings of this study.

The Performance of Tertiary Education Organisations' data also enables a comparison of student ethnicities. Māori, Pasifika and Asian students at NZCC make up approximately 80% of the student body whereas nationally they represent just 44% of the student population. This shows that NZCC caters for a higher proportion of diverse ethnicities than the majority of PTEs. The level of completed qualifications at NZCC provides an indication of the success of the approaches used at the college and appears to suggest that the teaching and learning programme at NZCC is relevant to the ethnically diverse nature of students attending the college.

Limitations of the Investigation

This investigation focussed on a small group of culturally diverse ECE students studying at NZCC. Class sizes at NZCC are small (often under 15 students) and the same tutor teaches across all subjects fostering a strong relationship with students. As the size of the investigation participant group was small, generalisation of the findings across the tertiary sector may be limited.

Implications for tertiary teaching

The institution in which this study was conducted is quite unique in terms of providing small classes for undergraduate courses. Other tertiary institutions, for example universities that provide courses at this level still favour the lecture/tutorial group model with lecture groups of 200+ students and tutorial groups of 30. Although it is not the aim of this research to disparage these types of teaching methods, it is clear from this research that having an effective tutor –student relationship appears to be the optimal factor in the success of the students in this study. The challenge for tertiary institutions is to enable effective tutor – student relationships to develop and ensure that class size does not become a barrier these relationships.

The findings from this study also call for the need to ensure that tertiary courses focus on more than the academic qualification and consider student development in a holistic way by considering how the course content will enhance the life of the student in general. While this is definitely a challenge, this study indicates that students place value in holistic development as much as the qualification that they are working towards.

Recommendations for Further Research

This investigation studied only a small sample group of students and cannot represent the sector overall. It is recommended that this investigation be conducted with representation

from minority group students from university, polytechnic, wānanga and more PTEs to further identify teaching strategies that support such students to complete the qualifications

The findings of this study highlight the importance of the tutor-student relationship and the interrelatedness of this with the learning environment and course content. Further investigation surrounding how this relationship can be developed and nurtured with a larger cohort would be beneficial for the tertiary sector.

As it is known that these students have moved onto higher level studies at other institutions, it would be beneficial to track their progress with a view to determining if the skills they learnt at NZCC were transferable and if they were able to continue to achieve well. It would also be useful to determine if the four factors identified in this research continued to be important for the students as they progressed through higher levels of study.

CONCLUSION

This research set out to identify the key teaching and learning supports provided by NZCC to successfully support students' level 5 studies. Four key factors were identified as key to providing optimal tertiary teaching –

1. Tutor – student relationship
2. The learning environment
3. Learning resources and practical application of learning
4. Wider context for academic success

It was significant to identify the interrelatedness of all these four factors, especially a positive tutor – student relationship.

This research also set out to identify the challenges that have impeded the students' level 5 studies. As the sample selected for this study all managed to successfully negotiate and complete their studies to level 5, this research has not been able to explore the factors that impede students with any depth. It did however identify that the holistic context in which students live created challenges to the studies for these participants. Students reflected that further support in mentoring and pastoral support would have further enhanced and supported their learning experiences and supported them in dealing with the challenges that they face outside of the tertiary teaching environment.

With the identification of four key findings, this investigation goes further than previous investigations in that it specifies and suggests practical teaching strategies that may optimise learning achievement for diverse minority group students. Further implementation and replication of the investigation, relating specifically to these four factors, at other tertiary institutions is recommended. The findings indicate that having strong tutor – student relationships fosters an appropriate learning environment and when combined with appropriate materials can produce learning for minority groups that reaches far wider than the learning outcomes of the course.

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