

UNDERSTANDING ACADEMIC UNDERACHIEVEMENT OF THE MINORITY ETHNIC GROUPS IN NEW ZEALAND: THE ISSUES OF CLASS AND CULTURE IN EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

The academic success of the minority ethnic groups in New Zealand who have been historically disadvantaged by the schooling system is a major education initiative of the New Zealand government. These underachieving groups of learners are currently referred to as 'priority learners' in New Zealand. This paper portrays the prominent debate on academic underachievement of minority students in education. The issues of class and culture are discussed in depth through the theoretical lenses of Marx, Bourdieu and Gramsci with reference to Maori and Pasifika students. We support the view that inequality in education is caused by class locations not cultural identifications. The academic success of these students is dependent upon educators' need to challenge their own deficit thinking on minority students' underachievement.

Keywords: priority learners, inequality, class theory, hegemony, cultural capital, bourgeoisie, proletariats

INTRODUCTION

Schools legitimate inequality through the ostensibly meritocratic manner by which they reward and promote students and allocate them distinct positions in the occupational hierarchy. They create and reinforce patterns of social class, racial and sexual identification among students which allows them to relate 'properly' to their eventual standing in the hierarchy of authority and status in the production process. Schools foster types of personal development compatible with the relationship of dominance and subordination in the economic sphere (Bowles & Gintis, 1976).

Modern education system is recognised by theorists in the Marxist tradition as providing for bourgeoisie ideologies and reproducing inequalities in society through its dominant upper middle class knowledge and practices in education. The education system based on the principles of universal and equal opportunity education for all turns to apply unequal treatment to groups of people, mostly coming from poor cultural and social class backgrounds. The purpose of this paper is to investigate the role of education in strengthening cultural gaps and class inequalities in society, specifically in New Zealand. This paper intends to investigate, whether inequality in education is caused by class locations or through cultural identifications. It is fundamental to explain inequality in education, since it leads to social differentiation in the society in terms of resources and opportunities.

For the purpose of this paper we will use two contrasting arguments on underachievement of minority students and/or inequality in education, which are known as class theory and culture theory. The use of culture theory will be justified through the concept of cultural identification as causing inequality in educational achievement of Maori and Pasifika learners. It shows location in cultural understandings and claims that inequality comes through how power is distributed (Rata, 2001). It will look back on the role of colonisation to argue on how Maori cultural interests were suppressed in education and alienated in educational practices. It will also look at cultural hegemony explanations of Gramsci used by cultural theorists in their justification on culture.

Alternatively, the class theory will be explained through the mechanisms of capitalism (super-structure ideas) and economic forces based on the explanations of Karl Marx (1848). It will look at the socio-economic class locations in the society and how it causes class difference and exploitation. Class dominance will be explained

using Bourdieu's (1977) cultural capital and class inequality analysis. The class theory will be reflective of the ideas of Nash (2000); Marie, Fergusson, & Doden (2008); OpenShaw (2007); Rata (2001).

This paper uses the examples of Maori and Pasifika educational outcomes to explain the issues of inequality in education. This paper takes a stand that inequality in education is caused by class locations in society and their socio-economic positions that serves as working class ideologies and is often reproduced by education, broadening further inequality. Therefore, teachers/educationalists need to challenge their self-perceptions and beliefs around success for minority learners in New Zealand.

We view the use of the terminology "priority learners" which was first introduced by the Education Review Office in 2012 in their report on achievement for Maori and Pasifika students in New Zealand schools, problematic.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Causes of Inequality in Education

Discourse on the concept of inequality can be traced back to Aristotle with a strong influence from nineteenth century Liberalism and twentieth century Socialism. Ghosh and Talbani (1992) explained the notion of inequality in modern society as influenced by the conceptions of Liberalism and Socialism and is reflected in the principles of equality of status and equality of opportunity. "Inequality in society arises from a fundamental root- the inequality of power" (Hicks, 1960). Writers in the Marxist tradition argued that inequalities in education are caused by education's role in the capitalist economy, where education behaves like any form of capital, those who own the capital, exploit those without it. In education, capital is a person's qualifications which is used to increase one's 'cultural capital' and 'social capital'.

Qualification determines a person's success or failure in the society and becomes a means of ensuring elite status and privileges over other members of the society. Therefore Rata (2008) pointed out that education actually creates inequalities by distributing qualifications that are valued differently in society and positioning individuals into different social classes, reproduces inequalities across generations.

Individuals are naturally different in terms of their intelligence and talents due to biological and genetic forces. Rata (2008) explained this approach by pointing out that if differences in individuals have a natural cause then not recognising these differences will lead towards treating children unequally. Another approach according to Rata (2008, p. 39) explained individual abilities and talents through social causes, where "unequal social circumstances mean that even equal opportunities are unable to compensate for initial inequality".

In contrast to the liberal and socialist approach is Johan Herder's culturalism approach, which explained that status hierarchies and rule by birth- ascribed elites, as the natural way to distribute authority. He explained that individuals are constructed within the social relations of their culture and therefore must be identified as the member of the ethnic group, which has a strong connection with their history, tradition; culture, language and lifestyle as a basic need (Burke, 2000). Culturalism has given rise to 'identity politics' and 'biculturalism' in New Zealand education through the establishment of Kura Kaupapa Maori schools.

Inequality is also explained by some historians as a consequence of colonisation practices and policies, which were embedded in the education system at the time it was established and subsequent developments including the educational reforms have reproduced these inequalities. Therefore inequality in education has to be understood in terms of the relationship between education and wider social, cultural, political and economic forces in the society.

At a time of rapid social, political and cultural change such as the present, the history of education has the key role in re-assessing aspects of education that have tended to be taken for granted. (Coxon, Jenkins, Marshall, & Massey, 1994). Hence we find it vital to explain inequality in education through class versus culture theory.

Class Theory

Capitalism and class

The basic idea of capitalism was developed by Marx (1848-1883). Marx's interest in the class theory laid specifically in the social class, the industrial working class and viewed capitalism as inevitable for the development of Socialism. Marx's class theory rested on the premise that "the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle" (Marx & Engels, 1962, p.37). Society according to Marx comprised of a moving balance of 'antithetical forces' that generated social change by their tension and struggle. Society was seen struggling for dominance amongst competing social groups (classes, gender, races and religion) through

the power, authority and coercion of dominant groups. The most powerful member of the dominant group creates the rules for success and opportunity in society, often denying subordinate groups such success and opportunities. This ensured a continued monopoly of power, privilege and authority of the dominant class, whereby “The ruling ideas of each epoch are those of the ruling class” (Marx & Engels, 1962, p.38).

Marx suggested the main reason for social class inequality laid in the private ownership of the ‘means of production’. These were the key bourgeoisie resources like land, property, factories and business which were necessary to produce society’s goods. The individual social class was defined according to the ownership of the means of production. Due to necessity, people engaged in the acts of production using the ‘forces of production’ to engage in the production process. This showed that the society exists through its ‘material infrastructure’ or ‘forces of production’ and through highly organised ‘wage labour’.

This engagement built economic relationship between the two classes of people- the bourgeoisie or capitalist and the proletariats or working class. When the two classes cooperated to produce a good, Marx called these as ‘relations of production’. The ‘forces of production’ and ‘relations of production’ made the ‘mode of production’. Marx viewed the ‘mode of production’ as the ‘economic base’ for the society, that generated the ‘superstructure’ of ideas such as religion, education, art and political systems, hence it formed a consciousness in men determined by society existence or position held in the society.

Cheal (2005) described the relationship between capital and labour as a power relationship in which the bourgeoisie exercises power over the proletariats. The need for ‘capital accumulation’ made the bourgeoisie more competitive, hence exploiting the workers. This created a ‘surplus value’ or profit from workers. Since the worker is exploited he becomes alienated from the production and process of his labour. Marx pointed out that as more workers become ‘dispossessed’ of the means of production, the proletariats would grow in size and will overthrow the bourgeoisie in revolution, thereby creating a classless society (Cheal, 2005).

Marxism also explained the development of ‘ideological hegemony’ which developed from the economic base and structure of the society, in favour of the dominant ruling class. According to Marx the class of ‘dominant material force’ in the society turns to be the ‘dominant intellectual force’, since they owned the production and distribution ideas and used ideologies to preserve their own interests by setting up levels (status) to administer society, reflecting the bourgeoisie identity (Cheal, 2005).

Materialistic Domination in Education

According to Marx and Engels (1848) the ideologies of the ruling class was manifested through education. The education system was seen as a part of superstructure that was a reflection of the material economic base of the society that served to reproduce inequality. It simply meant that the institution of the society like education was reflection of the world created by human activity and that ideas arose from and reflected the material conditions and circumstances in which they were generated (Burke, 2000).

Hence education was recognised as one of the key bourgeoisie institutions that exercised hegemony in practice.

Bourdieu also explained materialism through the theory of reproduction, where dominant classes maintained their position through the control of material and symbolic resources. They are able to manipulate those in an educational system that gained legitimation from its apparent commitment to the principles of democratic equality, while acting all the time as a particular effective conservative force (Bourdieu, 1977). According to Bourdieu, schools actively excludes those it deems to possess an ‘inferior’ habitus, since schools work on the habitus of the dominant class, those who lack this cultural capital are systematically excluded. This can be explained by Nash’s (2000) example of Pasifika students who fail to ‘internalise’ the levels of achievement and maintain it, this positions aspirations as an ‘unattainable dream’ for minority learners.

According to Bourdieu’s ‘statistical mode of production’, schools placed educational credentials as necessary requirements of entry to professional and commercial occupations. Nash (2000) explained reproduction through the transmission of ‘symbolic capital’ mediated by the ‘objective’ mechanism of the school that operated with its own scholastic logic, ensured only the general ‘statistical’ success of the dominant class.

Education and Cultural Reproduction

Theories of education and cultural reproduction claim to show how education (through its language, values, processes and knowledge) ensured the reproduction of cultural and economic inequalities. Bourdieu argued that

schools transmit certain forms of culture and thus reproduce not only that culture but also its social class structure. Gibson (1986) added that at school children learn that only certain forms of culture is important. The middle class pupils already have access to these ‘cultural codes’ while the working class do not.

Schools thus favour those already favoured and hence cultural inequality is reproduced. According to Bourdieu although schools claim to be fair and neutral transmitters of ‘culture’ they effectively maintain inequality, whilst claiming to provide equal opportunity. Bourdieu uses symbolic violence, cultural capital and habitus in explaining the relationship between education, culture and domination.

Bourdieu (1977) described ‘symbolic violence’ as a subtle process whereby the subordinate working class pupils come to take as ‘natural’ or ‘common sense’ ideas and practices that are actually against their own best interest. Symbolic power is wielded by schools to ensure that inequalities are seen as necessary and inevitable rather than man-made and changeable (p.55). Schools’ therefore legitimise and reinforce disadvantage. Working class children find their home culture devalued and disconfirmed, but accept that rejection as legitimate (Gibson, 1986).

Bourdieu’s cultural capital and habitus referred to the forms of culture valued or devalued in education in relation to the social class of the particular culture. Bourdieu (1977) explained cultural capital as ‘language, meaning, thoughts and behaviour styles, values and dispositions’ that identify a child to a social group, therefore habitus is an embodiment of the cultural capital ‘internalised’ by the child such as speech, attitudes, body language and aspirations.

METHOD

We used secondary data from Statistics New Zealand to support our argument on the underachievement of minority ethnic groups in New Zealand. The data used is 2006 and 2013 New Zealand census data which was gathered through longitudinal surveys.

RESULTS

Figure 1: Qualification Attainment by Maori in 2006 & 2013



1. These categories have been combined due to data quality concerns.

Source: Statistics New Zealand

Figure 1 shows the New Zealand highest qualification attainment percentage by Maori in 2006 and 2013. It should be noted that most Maori people had qualifications at level 4 and below in both consensus years. Which strongly indicates an unsuccessful secondary schooling education experience.

Figure 2: Qualification Attainment by Pasifika in 2006 & 2013



Figure 2 shows highest qualification attainment by Pacific people in New Zealand in 2006 and 2013. It should be noted that less than 15 % of Pacific people had a qualification at level 5 and over, noting that no Pacific student had a doctorate degree in both 2006 and 2013 census records by Statistics New Zealand.

Figure 3: Qualification Gained by Dominant Ethnic Groups in New Zealand

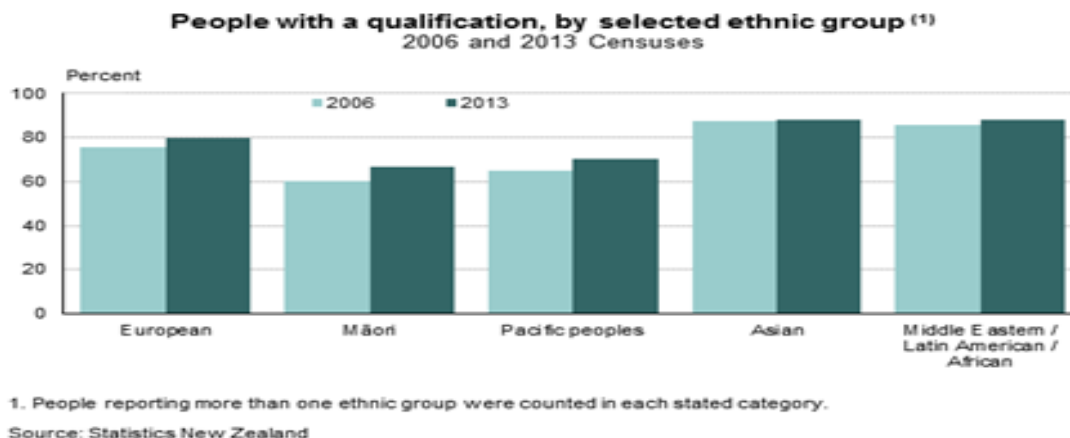


Figure 3 shows a comparison between qualifications gained by the dominant ethnic group categories in New Zealand. It is obvious that the qualification attainment percentage for Maori and Pacific peoples has increased slightly from 2006, however when compared with other ethnic groups such as European and Asian it is relatively low.

Based on the data shown from the three figures, it could be postulated that Maori and Pacific peoples form the largest youthful working population in New Zealand who have a qualification which is at level 4 or below. This strongly supports our argument on the significance of class distribution in society and the role of power structures in place which favours the ruling class ideologies and creates systematic exclusions of marginal classes.

DISCUSSION

The fundamental explanations on class by Marx and Bourdieu provided the basis of the argument on class theory. Therefore we find it useful to emphasise that class theoretical views strongly support inequality in education. Educational outcomes between Maori, Pasifika and other New Zealanders should be explained by considering the role of socio-economic disparities between them. According to Marie et al. (2008) it is the

disadvantaged position of the Maori within the nation's labour market economy that has led to poor educational outcomes for Maori children in New Zealand.

These socio-economic disparities can be understood through linking economic status, resource capacity and educational performances of Maori children. According to Marie et al. (2008) Maori children are brought up in a single-parent environment, with limited income than non-Maori. Therefore Maori children are exposed to greater 'social adversity' and 'psychosocial risk' than other New Zealand children. This economic deprivation results from their economic positioning in the society that has a major influence on their educational achievement.

The placement of Maori at the bottom of the working class during the 19th century shows deprivation of Maori educational process during colonisation which led many Maori people being under qualified and without a formal qualification. As a result they became the poor working class people earning low wages, facing frequent financial hardships and having generally low standard of living. Furthermore, their children in early childhood are exposed to more socio-economic disadvantage. Marie et al. (2008) suggested that Maori children in early childhood are less likely to attend an early childhood centre due to economic constraints. Using Bourdieusian lens, it means that their 'cultural capital' necessary for progress at school are not developed when compared with Pakeha/European children coming from a good educational background with elite economic status, who possess basic 'cultural capital' required for schooling and they keep on expanding it through the process of schooling as on their side.

A greater number of non-Maori occupy elite positions in the job market through better qualifications and take control over all important resources acting like a Bourgeoisie. Whereas the Maori and Pasifika become dispossessed and dependent on low class jobs which does not require much training for their basic livelihood. Increased urbanisation has also added to the effects of marginalization of Maori people. Social divisions due to class locations between Maori and non-Maori broadened the educational 'gap' where education benefited those with cultural capital of the upper middle class and the economic system favoured those with economic capital. In both Marxism and Bourdieusian lenses, the working class Maori and Pasifika are the victims of educational underachievement in New Zealand.

Cultural Hegemony in Education

Cultural hegemony is associated with the works of Gramsci. According to Gramsci, cultural hegemony was a means of maintaining the capitalist state. Capitalism as Gramsci suggested maintained control, ideologically through a hegemonic culture in which the values of the bourgeoisie became the common sense values of all. Thus a 'consensus' culture developed in which people in the working class identified their own good with the good of the bourgeoisie and helped to maintain the 'status quo' rather than revolting.

The working class needed to develop a culture of their own, which would overthrow the 'notion' that bourgeoisie values represented 'natural' or 'normal' values of society and would attract the oppressed and intellectual classes to the cause of the proletariat. Gramsci saw cultural hegemony as fundamental to the attainment of power. The class that wished to dominate in the modern conditions had to move beyond its narrow 'economic corporate' interests to exert intellectual and moral leadership and to make alliances and compromises with a variety of forces. Gramsci called this as 'union of social forces' which produced and reproduced the hegemony of the dominant class through 'a nexus of institution', social relations and ideas.

Culturalist writers used Gramsci in developing the idea of hegemony as a strategy to control the state, whereby the interest of other groups and social forces are combined with its own interest to build a network of alliances with social minorities. The working class "must unite popular democratic struggles with its own conflict against capitalist class to strengthen a national popular collective will" (Bishop, 2003, p.29). The concept of cultural hegemony is evident in Maori cultural renaissance claims of biculturalism in New Zealand.

So far in our discussion we have looked at the foundations of inequality through the pioneering works of Marx, Bourdieu and Gramsci through critical class theory ideas, we will now explore culture theory to achieve the scope of this paper.

Culture theory

The culture approach provides an alternative explanation to inequality in education through ethnic difference or cultural identification model. Culturalism approach has been described as 'Maoritanga theory' and 'Kaupapa Maori theory' in New Zealand education since late 1970s. This theory regards Maori and Pakeha educational performances as different. According to Rata (2001) ethnicity is considered to be the main cause of division in

society where a child's identity is understood first as a Maori identity. Therefore Maori underachievement is explained as a "systematic denigration and marginalization of Maori culture" (Rata, 2001, p. 152).

According to the culturalist perspective Maori people had been a victim of colonisation since the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi in 1840. Bishop (2003) explained that Maori have been marginalised through legislation, educational policies and initiatives. These policies and initiatives had affirmed Pakeha knowledge and practices to detriment of Maori (Smith, 1997). Colonisation processes and the education system had rejected Maori language and culture because they were seen as obstacles for educational progress of Maori children (Pilkington, 2001). As a result "Colonising agendas remain embedded within present educational structures" (Smith, 1997, p. 186).

Historical disadvantages faced by Maori people are experienced in the lack of attainment of formal qualification. According to Smith (1997) historical educational policy reveals a lack of successful participation of Maori both in school and in society. Marie et al. (2008) explained that "the present day disparities are a result of an educational system that historically neglected to recognise cultural difficulties between Maori and non-Maori. Culture theory outlined that inequality results through how power is distributed, therefore Maori or Pasifika students' should be involved in a power sharing model, whereby their "voices are listened and given some power and self-determination" (Pilkington, 2001, p. 163). This power includes the rights for Maori to achieve the cultural aspirations they have for their children and to procure the appropriate resources so that education, as part of a cultural renaissance can improve their future life chances (Pilkington, 2001).

Bishop (2003) explained power and control as dominated from the colonising culture of New Zealand. The ideological foundations of assimilation and integration continue to be promoted by the new right politics of recent governments. Therefore Bishop suggested that the main-stream education system should address the needs of all its participants rather than just a dominant group. Culture approach for equality in Maori educational achievement therefore rested in reclaiming education through Kaupapa Maori schools in New Zealand.

The patterns of dominance, subordination and differences could be addressed through "pedagogy incorporating the reassertion of Maori cultural aspirations, preferences and practices known as Kaupapa Maori theory" (Bishop, 2003, p.4). The Kaupapa Maori theory is a collective resistance method by Maori leaders to revive their language and cultural values, therefore it is seen as a radical pedagogy which challenges and resists the hegemony of dominant culture. The Kaupapa Maori initiative is a reflection of Gramsci's notion of cultural hegemony where intellectual and moral forces combine with social forces to make an army against the dominant culture.

The discussion on culture theory mostly points out that cultural identification played a key role in educational inequality of Maori and non-Maori children, through 'distinct' pedagogical practices' and 'contrasting styles of cognition', which led Maori to be educated in a culturally inappropriate learning environment that failed to reinforce Maori values and beliefs in educational processes resulting in the loss of cultural esteem and devaluing Maori identity (Marie et al. 2008, p.184).

However, for the purpose of this paper, we do not feel confident in totally relying on culture theory to explain inequality in education through underachievement of Maori children because, culture theory explains Maori socio-political structures but it fails to explain the link between educational achievement and Maori access and participation in New Zealand's capitalist economic system (Marie et al. 2008, p. 184). One of the main attributes of Maori and Pasifika students' educational underachievement could be linked to bourgeoisie ideologies and values represented by educators in the mainstream education system through deficit thinking and polarized behavior on these students'.

Deficit Theorizing in Education

Openshaw (2007) suggested the theorizing of teachers' in New Zealand as one of the foci of Te-Kohahitanga Project. These theories and behaviour of teachers' has an adverse impact upon and make a difference to Maori student educational achievement. According to Shields, Bishop & Mazawi (2005) teachers' actions and behaviours and how they relate and interact with students' are governed by the discourses in which they position themselves and how they understand and position other people in the relationship (p.73). This engagement becomes vital in addressing the outcomes of the socio-economic marginalization of Maori people. It is evident that despite a parallel education system for Maori children, those Maori children in the mainstream English medium school perform poorly in terms of academic outcomes (Shields et al. 2005). This is identified as an effect of deficit theorizing. There are three main discourse identified by Shields et al. (2005). Firstly, the

discourse of children and their homes, Teachers turn to blame children and their homes as problem for their underachievement. Secondly, the discourse of structure and systems was identified as causing a conflict between the values and standards of the school and the home, where Maori children find the knowledge taught at school as irrelevant to their needs. Thirdly, the discourse of the relationships, that teacher and student relationship had most influence on Maori students' learning and achievement. Good relationship enhances healthy learning environment.

To deal with the replication of hegemonic practices in education, educators' must learn to accommodate and renew their knowledge on the ways they have understood the educational achievement of minority groups in education. The 'normal' understanding of differences in society which is mostly through cultural identifications has to be erased in order to help equally open the doors of success for all ethnic groups in modern education system, which is neutral in practice and thus helps in creating classless society. It is crucial to re-iterate the consequences of teachers' own theorizing on the achievement potentials of different minority groups of students'. Which also means that teachers as agents of change should challenge their own deficit theories on minority students' educational achievement and should adopt strategies of change on teacher performance in classroom teaching.

To this end, we feel that the current terminology used by the New Zealand government when referring to Maori and Pasifika students as "priority learners" could be viewed problematic. We feel that such terminology regenerates and reinforces social and emotional stigmatization on students who identify themselves as Maori and Pasifika students and puts them into a national underachieving basket which could lead Maori and Pasifika students not identifying themselves as Maori or Pasifika due to labelling using a new terminology "priority learners". If we as educationalists and teachers are not careful with the use of this terminology it could overshadow achievement of those Maori and Pasifika learners who are doing extremely well in schooling/education. This could give rise to a new form of identity politics in New Zealand in the near future.

FINAL COMMENT

In this paper we have explored the issues of class and culture in relation to the underachievement of Maori and Pasifika students in New Zealand and we support the view point that inequality in education is caused by class locations. We found it important to draw on the argument of the marginalization of Maori and Pasifika children in mainstream education in New Zealand. The use of social theorists like Karl Marx and Bourdieu for class theory and Gramsci, Herder and Bishop for culture theory provided a theoretical base for this paper. Both argumentative lenses claim that the education system is based on the principles of bourgeoisie ideologies as a result it devalues the weaker culture, furthering inequality in society.

We found it imperative to discuss inequality in education because such inequality leads to social differentiation in the society amongst groups of people therefore it differentiates provisions in resources and opportunities. The class theory was identified as giving the broader explanations on the existence of inequality by taking into account socio-economic disparities that people face in daily living as more relevant explanations on underachievement of priority learners than cultural identifications based on ethnicity explanations. Deficit theorizing has also been identified as a significant problem for the increasing marginalization of Maori and Pasifika students' in terms of achievement in education in New Zealand. We urge educators to challenge their ways of thinking and working with the priority learners in New Zealand in terms of change in their perceptions and expectations, enabling effective support systems and also by reviewing the teaching techniques so that we are more inclusive and appreciative towards the needs of these learners within an inclusive but rather dynamic New Zealand classroom context.

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