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**Art Teaching: Making a Difference  
in Low Decile Schools**

**A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for  
the degree Master of Education at Massey University**

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2004**

I certify that the thesis entitled and submitted as part of the degree of Master of Education, is the result of my own work, except where otherwise acknowledged, and that this thesis (or any part of the same) has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other university or institution.

Signed.....

Date 10/10/07

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## **ABSTRACT**

Students in low socio-economic schools are over-represented in the group of students who leave school without a qualification. An analysis across seventy New Zealand secondary schools reveals Year 11 examination success in low socio-economic schools that is consistently higher in art than in other subjects. Performance at Year 11 in the Auckland/ North Auckland region for the 2000 School Certificate art exam shows that these students are able to achieve at similar rates in art to medium and high decile schools.

This thesis outlines the political and socio-economic culture of Aotearoa/ New Zealand's low SES schools where the study was conducted. The selection of the teachers and the research process is described, and comparisons made to relevant literature. The findings draw from a data set of interviews identifying common teacher attitudes and beliefs which are introduced and elucidated. The study seeks to make visible, the ways in which art teachers enhance examination success by examining the beliefs, attitudes and reported practices of three highly successful teachers.

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

In this chapter the study is introduced through a brief examination of the researcher's interest. The justification for the research is outlined and the chapter concludes with a brief overview of each of the eight chapters which make up the thesis.

Pass rates in Year 11 and 13 examinations continue to be the measure of 'success outcomes' contained in Ministry of Education documents. Secondary schools, therefore, are concerned with the progress of their students, and in developing systems that will enable them to monitor and enhance student achievement (Nash & Harker, 1998). At the macro level of the national education system is the complex relationship between education, society and the economy. At the micro level are the teachers' classrooms where pedagogy extends or restricts students' chances of success. Current measures of school success are still defined within a Western-European educational context which rests on the assumption that success equates with academic achievement (Pitama, 2002:13). In these terms the majority of art teachers working in Auckland and Lower Northland's low decile<sup>1</sup> secondary schools are highly successful in their practice.

This study emerged from my interest in art teaching and experience of working mostly in low decile schools over a period of fifteen years. During this time I became interested in how a substantial number of art teachers in my region seemed to be outperforming other subject level scores in their low decile schools at Year 11 and 13 national examination levels. I wanted to investigate whether this was more than a local trend, and if so, explore how low decile art teachers were able to facilitate achievement.

First, the study attempts to understand the setting of low decile art teaching in the wider problematic of schooling, education and society (Hattam, Smyth and Shacklock, 1997). New Zealand based research demonstrates low socio-economic-status children, like the children of other minority groups from western capitalist countries, do not reach their

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<sup>1</sup> All New Zealand schools are ranked on a decile scale of one to ten. This is a measure of socio-economic position with decile ten schools having the highest status. In this study low decile schools are designated as those within the decile 1-3 range.

educational potential (Harker, 1990; Lauder and Hughes, 1990). The children of the working class do not achieve academically at the same rates as their counterparts from middle-class families. Low decile schools have suffered particularly harshly under the combination of Tomorrow's Schools policies and the overarching framework of government policies such as the marketisation of education (Fiske & Ladd, 2000; Lauder, Hughes & Watson, 1999). A prevailing emphasis on competition, governance and user pays in this market model has polarised education in the secondary sector. In higher decile schools, reforms have made little difference in terms of educational outcomes, but the effects on schools in poorer areas have been overwhelming (Gordon, 1997; Thrupp, 1998). Low decile schools like those in this study have been perceived as less desirable and have found themselves with limited power to compete in the new marketised education system. In low decile schools there is a clear link between the decile of the community from which a school draws its students, and the likelihood of ongoing success as measured by movement into tertiary training. It is well known that a large degree of the future success of students is determined by cultural capital; the economic advantage and the educational culture of the socio-economic group to which students belong (Bourdieu, 1977).

The relationship of a study about art teachers to issues embedded in ongoing educational success seems, at first glance, tenuous. However, if today's school students, many of whom are from lower socio-economic backgrounds, are to experience success in their school careers, then it is useful to focus on areas where they are already achieving highly. Other subjects in these schools might benefit from such an investigation.

The study draws from secondary school art teachers' examination results at Year 11 within a geographical sample of ninety secondary schools (New Zealand Qualifications Authority data). From their high average School Certificate scores for 2000, three low decile art teachers were selected. This study is largely based on interviews conducted with the teachers and those familiar with their practice (including students) in three New Zealand Secondary Schools. The purpose of the study is one of documenting and analysing the reported beliefs and attitudes of the teachers in relation to the way those beliefs informed their practice. The study attempts to gain a deeper understanding of how secondary school art teachers develop and conduct their work, and how they exercise their agency to motivate their Year 11 students to achieve highly.

There are a number of dominant issues identified in the extensive literature on lower socio-economic status schools and the issues that surround them. Respect and caring have been

suggested as crucial parts of the teacher/student relationship (Hawk, Tumana Cowley, Hill and Sutherland, 2002; Noddings, 1992a; Sheurich, 1998). Literature on how diversity is valued in educational settings and how educators mediate the different cultural systems of home and school, is explored (Delpit, 1995; Pasikale: 1999). The teachers' pedagogies and philosophies are also examined and contextualised (Eisner, 1996; Hall & Bishop, 2001; Hawk & Hill, 2000). Accordingly, in this study, the literature and findings are used to sketch a picture about how teachers contribute to student success in the art assessment 'system' at Year 11.

It is within such systems of assessment and the pedagogies this encapsulates, that deep social justice issues lie (Lingard, Hayes, Mills and Christie, 2003). For students from low socio-economic and diverse cultural backgrounds who attend low decile schools, having effective teachers is critical. If the present study is to contribute to the identification of effective pedagogy, knowledge of the beliefs and attitudes of these teachers and understanding the reported lived experiences of their classrooms, may offer valuable insights. In the present situation in New Zealand, little appears to be known about beliefs and attitudes of teachers who have a powerful influence on high student achievement. The present study seeks to examine these.

Chapter one introduces the study through a brief examination of the researcher's interest and involvement in art teaching, and the significance and justification of the research is outlined. Chapter two provides a critical review of the literature in four key areas and concludes with emergent themes which inform the research questions.

Chapter three outlines the research process including both methodological and ethical issues. Four major research questions which guided the research endeavour are described. The methodology which guided this research is explained and justified. The ways in which data were collected and methods used in their analysis, are detailed. Results from the quantitative data are reported and from these findings the selection of the three art teachers is described.

In Chapters four, five and six the results are based on data from the interview phases of the data collection. The data are presented in three themes, the three teachers' relationships with their students, and their pedagogies and philosophies.

Chapter seven concludes the major qualitative and quantitative findings of the study in relation to the four specific questions which underpinned the research. The final chapter, Chapter eight, reprises the study as a whole, discusses the implications of the findings and outlines recommendations for future research. Finally, the limitations of the study along with the significance of the research findings are considered.

The next chapter critically examines the research and literature in relation to the study. A brief overview of the education policy context is detailed in relation to implications for learning and teaching. Connections between teacher/student interactions and achievement are critiqued in regard to theoretical and ideological assumptions underpinning educational performance of low SES students.