

Multi-cultural the future redeemed?

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ABSTRACT

The problem with Multi-cultural Education is the problem of what is meant by Multi culturalism. I am uneasy about the usage of either term, of the issues they are being addressed to and of the respective measure of piety and realism contained in them. I have come to the view that the greatest single problem confronting me as a Teacher of Maori Studies is the failure of my students' overall school and life experience to give them any clear, confident notion of themselves as Pakeha New Zealanders. We can never have a multicultural society if the majority culture opts out of the process. Until this situation changes, multiculturalism will continue to be, like its partner, Multicultural Education, a morass of unclarified aims and random recipes cemented by a slurry of good intentions.

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'Multiculturalism' is, like 'Democracy', easier to describe than to define - it is more used as an adjective than as a noun.

Usually expressed as a pejorative, it has rapidly become a 'basket' for all our notions of how peoples and cultures should relate to one another. It tends to be stated in very general terms but is only seldom related to specific hard realities within New Zealand society. At one end of the scale of usage it has become a polite way of saying 'We've got problems.' whilst at the other end an optimistic way of contemplating the future without addressing the present - of celebrating the potential of diversity without facing the challenge it presents today, or indeed, next Monday morning.

In 1981 the Post Primary Teachers Association established an Advisory Committee on Multicultural Education. In reading the reported comment surrounding this event I found it difficult to determine particular motives. Was it to improve minority culture performance in the existing curriculum? Has it to develop a more culturally diverse curriculum for all pupils? Was it to modify the cultural attitudes with which we approach our students and through which we strain our assessment of them? Or was it, more ambitiously, to avert the stressful interaction of race, culture and social class on which New Zealand seems hellbent?

These are all worthy aims and there are several more which might be added to the list. Individuals push their barrows of interest and preference into this sector of ideas and collectivise the whole into 'Multicultural Education'. The answer to my question is that all or most of these motives are seen as part of a more developed approach to Multicultural Education issues. The

problem is that they all demand their own particular kind of response. For example, in terms of Teacher Education, one is faced with providing a range of courses to meet this umbrella of demand.

There is a further aspect. Because I inhabit, personally, tribally and professionally, the cultural interface of Maori and Pakeha¹ cultures I am much more clear about that particular relationship. I take recourse in the advice of a Samoan colleague that the prime issue facing New Zealand is the rearrangement of the Maori/Pakeha relationship. With that more satisfactorily sorted through, recognition of and respect for other minority cultures will follow.

I have developed considerable sympathy with the widespread Maori suspicion of Multiculturalism as merely the current 'Pakeha Cop-out' - a device for avoiding the entrenched problems of the Maori/Pakeha relationship. By diversifying the question you avoid the central issue. The question: 'What about all the other minorities?' is one to which Maori have been long accustomed.

I have placed some emphasis on the lack of clarity in our usage of 'Multiculturalism' because it is general in our society. The accompanying lack of clarity surrounding its educational application is merely the system reflecting the society, the school reflecting the community. Confusion is similarly present in Teachers Colleges. More than two decades of injunction remits and recommendation have produced a wide consensus that 'something should be done' at the Teachers College stage but very little about just how the task should be confronted. The prescriptions have been wide ranging - race relations studies New Zealand History, migrancy studies, compulsory Maoritanga,² human relations studies, Maori and Polynesian languages, cross-cultural studies socioeconomics - the list goes on.

Over the same two decades all or some of these have been attempted in some of our Teachers Colleges. They have occurred in the standard frames of Professional Studies, Selected or Compulsory Studies. In some Colleges there has been strong attention to the cross cultural relationships within New Zealand in the context of the Forms I-IV (11-14 years) Social Studies but this has been severely hampered by the non-availability to date, and future uncertainty of, a planned Maori Studies Teaching Kit. There has been, as well, a reasonably consistent concern in the In-Service Course offering at all levels. This somewhat desultory effort has had some effect in the schools. Relatively speaking there has been an enormous growth in awareness of the presence of cultural minorities in the school system and, in some cases, a notably effective response. Maori language and Maori Studies programmes are impressive examples of recent growth. I emphasise, though, that I am speaking relatively. Measured against the pattern and speed of demographic change the scale has only moved from 'nil' to 'some improvement'.

The somewhat desultory contribution of the Teachers Colleges has reflected the general response of the schools, the profession, the Department and society at large. They have all merely tinkered with the challenge of multiculturalism, let alone biculturalism.

This is essentially because the response has been merely an additive one. A need has been perceived and a course has been plastered over the deficiency in the normal curriculum to cover the need. There has been no review of the 'normal curriculum' itself. Its cultural bias, its cultural character, has not been examined or modified. An example: It is a widespread view that a dose of Maoritanga is desirable for young teachers - it helps make them less culturally unaware, somehow more comprehending and complete New Zealanders. For a probable maximum of 25 hours you push them through a highly condensed and selective introduction to taha Maori³ - you may improve their place name pronunciation, you may even transmit some effective insight. They may achieve some limited cultural performance skills. At conclusion they return to the womb of the majority culture and trundle on to certification. If the course has been successful some of the attitudinal fences of monoculturalism will have been pulled down, the student may be more open to an alternative cultural viewpoint. He or she is, however, unlikely to have had time to actually build any competence in the 'new' culture.

The additive approach is replicated in the school. With some notable exceptions the pattern tends to be a block of concentrated Maori Studies and activities, culminating in the obligatory hangī⁴ and then back to 'real life' normal curriculum.

Whilst fully appreciating that the addition of things Maori has been an important step forward, it has thus far been essentially an exercise in which an extra 'square' has been added to the timetable and coloured in brown.

Because of the failure of the general curriculum to reflect our cultural diversity a teacher of Maori, for example, has to compress into that 'square' something of language, cultural practice, history, race relations, current issues and the whole range of human experience and perception identified as Maori. A smattering of song, myth and tradition will be thrown in, particularly in Teachers Colleges, to offer a vestige of classroom relevance. There is no sector of the general curriculum of which a comparable range of content - whole culture - is required in one timetable 'slot'.

The general curriculum is comprised of the various subdivisions of Pakehatanga with specialists in each subdivision. In a culturally inclusive curriculum - as distinct from our monocultural one - specialists there would be able and competent to handle the Maori dimension of their particular subject area or, for that matter a range of cultural dimensions. Whilst this poses a particular challenge for the 'people subjects', it applies also to Science, Mathematics and Geography - or aspects of them.

You don't make a Teachers College or a school multicultural in curriculum terms by adding a dash of Maoritanga or Fa'a Samoa⁵ to it. The whole range of the curriculum has a responsibility to competently represent the cultural diversity of our society in its content. However there is no evidence that such a shift is even perceived let alone beginning to happen. I believe it is fair to say that at this stage, Maoritanga is carrying multiculturalism in the Education system and that beyond the system Maori and other minorities are carrying it for the larger society. The majority culture, Pakehatanga, is merely accommodating it. The irony is that Multiculturalism is no problem to minorities - at the bicultural level at least it is a constant fact of life. The problem belongs primarily to the majority culture - to Pakehatanga.

How then to shift Teachers Colleges in these terms? The Colleges are, like their students and the profession itself, monocultural. They are the cultural property of the majority.

It is not in the nature of majorities to see themselves in cultural terms - it is minorities which are identifiable. The only tool of crosscultural access is comparison and to use that effectively one requires the base of cultural self perception. It is the old Socratic injunction: "First know thyself!".

It is always least disturbing to consider the culture values and patterns of other peoples' lives than it is to consider one's own. Generally the more distant and exotic the subject of study the better. It avoids the discomfort of self-comparison.

Studying Maori in any substantial way involves the cultural interface with Pakehatanga - It can not be avoided. The majority culture student is immediately faced with the challenge of comparison and self-identification. This challenge can be avoided by concentration on 'Museum Maori' topics or on the expressive arts. Whilst excellent in themselves and interesting and useful in their own right they simply represent content accumulation. It is in the area of cultural values of the dynamics of contemporary social and cultural practice and the beliefs and perspectives underlying them - the thinking, feeling, doing aspects of a culture - that the comparison cannot be avoided. It is sharing the pain of history and the tension of the present that forces the hard comparisons of values and the development of bifocal vision.

It is in this latter area that I have found the greatest weakness amongst teachers college students. They comprehend so little of their own Pakeha culture, it's roots, it's history, it's values. They have a minimal perception of their own society and tend to be widely ignorant of its history.

As teachers of Maori we have frequently to teach them the content of their own culture before we can begin on Maoritanga. Most difficult of all is the lack of experience in seeing their own behaviour, their own social practice and experience in cultural terms. When one considers that these students are an elite, drawn off the upper achievement streams of our schooling system, the implications for Multiculturalism are not promising. I have come to the view that the greatest single problem confronting me as a Teacher of Maori Studies is the failure of my students' overall school and life experience to give them any clear, confident notion of themselves as Pakeha New Zealanders. The inadequate development of Pakehatanga, in self esteem and self knowledge, is the greatest single barrier to recognition of and status for Maori and other minority cultures in New Zealand. We can never have a multicultural society if the majority culture opts out of the process.

Maori and other minorities will fight for equality of treatment and they will sustain themselves. They will, in time develop secure "Homelands" in which their colonies of culture will survive. That will not be Multiculturalism. If they are to survive in the stream of an evolving New Zealand culture, the quality of that survival will depend on Pakehatanga coming to the party.

Until it does Multiculturalism will continue to be, like its partner, Multicultural Education, a morass of unclarified aims and random recipes cemented by a slurry of good intentions.

Editors' Notes

1. 'Pakeha' - white man, (strictly speaking, foreigner. Usually applied to white people).
2. 'Maoritahga' - Maori culture.
3. 'Taha Maori' - Maori issues, things Maori.
4. 'Hangi' - Maori meal where food is cooked in an oven consisting of a hole in the ground. Stones are heated by fire in the pit and wrapped food is placed on the hot stones. Branches and leaves are placed over the food and sprinkled with water. Earth is piled over the leaves and stamped flat.
5. 'Fa's Samoa' - Samoan culture.