

The Maori response to education

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ABSTRACT

The meaning of education is derived from its Latin root *educare* which means to lead forth, to nourish. In relation to the Maori that noble purpose was debased by the founding fathers of our nation who used education as an instrument to subvert Maori culture and replace it with their own.

*Paper presented to the PPTA Conference on "Secondary Education - the Maori Perspective"
Waahi Marae, 13 April 1984.*

The meaning of education is derived from its Latin root *educare* which means to lead forth, to nourish.¹ In relation to the Maori that noble purpose was debased by the founding fathers of our nation who used education as an instrument to subvert Maori culture and replace it with their own.

The missionaries who were the advance party of cultural invasion regarded Maori mythology, traditions and customary usages as abominations to be extirpated. For them conversion to Christianity was synonymous with transforming the Maori from barbarism to civilised life. In Freire's analysis this involved "a parochial view of reality, a static perception of the world and the imposition of one world view upon another. It implies the superiority of the invader and the inferiority of those who are invaded."²

The Pakeha's assumed superiority over the Maori was built into the institutions of the new society, including education. The missionary schools taught only the standard subjects of the English school curriculum, namely English, arithmetic, reading, writing and catechism.

Governor Grey strengthened the missionary schools with a subsidy of one tenth of government revenue in order to take Maori children away from what he termed "the demoralising influences of their villages".³ No doubt an inverted allusion to his own predilection for liaisons with Maori women.

After the Land Wars Grey carried the campaign against Maori culture right into the heart of Maori communities when he established the Native Schools in 1867. Maori language was used only in the junior classes in order to induct new entrants into school routines. Thereafter Maori was displaced by English as the medium of instruction. The conflict generated by the process of an unsound pedagogy produced poor results. In 1897 the Inspector of Native Schools reported a lack of progress which he attributed to Maori difficulty with the English language. This victim-blaming strategy validates Freire's contention that for cultural invasion to succeed those invaded must be convinced of their intrinsic inferiority.⁴

After 1900 education authorities took a hard line against Maori language. Children were forbidden to speak Maori in the playground. Corporal punishment was administered against

children who failed to comply. This repressive policy marked the retreat of the Maori language. In 1900 over 901 of school entrants spoke Maori. By 1960 this had fallen to 251.⁵ The paradox of this necrotic process is that Maori leaders initially complied with it. Ngata, the greatest Maori leader of this century saw facility with English as the means of gaining access to *taha Pakeha*. At a conference in 1936 he stated that if he were to devise a curriculum for Maori schools he would make English four out of the five subjects of instruction.⁶ Three years later Ngata changed his viewpoint with his perception that education was subverting Maori culture by producing Maoris who were unable to speak their language.

A Philosophy for Transformation

Freire's contention that "knowledge of the alienating culture leads to transforming action resulting in a culture which is being freed from alienation"⁷ is borne out by the Maori experience. The Maori philosophy for transformation was written by Ngata in a child's autograph Look:

Grow tender shoot for the days of your world!
 Turn your hand to the tools of the Pakeha
 for the well-being of your body.
 Turn your heart to the treasures of your
 ancestors as a crown for your head.
 Give your soul unto God the author of all things.

In these oft quoted lines Ngata exhorted the Maori to grasp knowledge from *taha Pakeha* for one's livelihood while retaining *taha Maori* for one's sense of spiritual well-being. Ngata himself initiated transforming action in a twenty year struggle to introduce Maori as a subject for an arts degree. Criticism from the professor of Romance Languages that Maori lacked a literature and therefore could not be deemed a subject of academic study was rebutted by Ngata's collection of the oral literature of the Maori in a two-volume work called *Nga Moteatea*. By 1951 when Maori became a subject for the Bachelor of Arts degree other forces were at work to bring about further transforming action. The urban migration of the Maori gathered momentum. Over the next generation Maoris learned the techniques of metropolitan society, initiated a resurgence of *taha Maori*, of which the most potent symbols are urban marae, and challenged Pakeha dominance and social prescriptions.

By 1958 the rural-urban shift meant that 71% of Maori children were being educated in public rather than Maori schools. Teachers in these schools are ill-equipped to deal with Maori children. In the past the education gap between Maori and Pakeha which had been concealed by the capacity of the rural tribal hinterland to absorb the failures could no longer be ignored in the urban milieu. In 1960 the Hunn Report identified a statistical "blackout" of Maoris in higher education.⁸ Only .59% of Maori children reached the 7th Form compared with 3.78% for Pakehas. Maori numbers at a university was only one eighth of what it should have been.

At this stage in their development within metropolitan society the Maori was concerned with operating within the parameters of the existing social structure. Accordingly a reformist strategy towards education was adopted. Strategies for bridging the education gap included vigorous fund-raising for the Maori Education Foundation, establishment of Maori Education Advancement Committees and enthusiastic adoption of the play-centre movement. By the mid-sixties play-centres were to be found in many urban and most rural Maori communities. Before it was abolished in 1969 the Maori quota for teacher training allowed over 400 Maori men and women to infiltrate the teaching profession. These teachers initiated transforming action from within the education system by stepping up the teaching content of *taha Maori* in social studies and promoting visits to rural marae. In response to these developments the Officer for Maori Education increased the size

of his team in the Department of Education and promoted a series of *Maoritanga* courses on maraes for secondary school principals.

The Maori presence in the teaching profession was reflected by three recommendations in the 1971 Report of the National Advisory Committee on Maori Education (NACME).

1. That cultural differences need to be understood, accepted and respected by children and teachers.
2. That the school curriculum must find a place for the understanding of Maoritanga, including the Maori language.
3. That in order to achieve the goal of equality of opportunity special measures need to be taken.

Maori pressure for educational reform was difficult to deny. In 1966 the Maori Education Foundation noted that 85.5% of Maori pupils left school without recognised qualifications.⁹ By 1969 this had been lowered to 79%, not a substantial gain considering a decade of effort and financial input.¹⁰ The 1970s were marked by educational reforms which substantially reversed the former policy of assimilation by cultural denial in schooling. By 1973 all seven teachers colleges had established courses in Maori studies. The “link system” between primary and secondary schools for teaching the Maori language created a demand for more Maori teachers. To meet this demand, the one year training course for native speakers of Maori was instituted in 1974.

Maori language and Maori studies became fashionable to the extent that the Education Department appointed 30 Itinerant Teachers of Maori to promote programmes in designated areas. By 1979 Maori was being taught in 171 of the 397 Secondary schools in New Zealand. At the primary level ITM staff was expanded to 40 to meet the demand from 250 schools offering Maori studies to 50,000 pupils. Field studies to both rural and urban marae became commonplace. Annual oratory contests in Maori and cultural competitions were promoted at both national and regional levels. These reforms served to strengthen the ethos of *taha Maori* but made no impression on Maori education failure which remains at 75%. Clearly there was something more fundamental at work in the nature of New Zealand society that was producing this constant negative result. While the expansion of *taha Maori* in the curriculum was a welcome validation of *tangata whenua* status, its previous denial and exclusion was not the cause of Maori under-achievement.

Pakeha Domination of Institutional Structures

So far this paper has demonstrated that Pakeha domination of the education system ensured that *taha Maori* was excluded from schooling for more than a century. Its inclusion in the last decade is a tribute to Maori resilience, but it was not the answer to Maori underachievement. It was Gadd who shifted the focus of the debate from *taha Maori* to *taha Pakeha*. Gadd’s paper “Ethnic Bias in School Certificate”¹¹ puts the blame for Maori underachievement on institutionalised racism.

Institutionalised racism has been defined in a series of statements extrapolated from a paper by Nairn:

Race relations is about attitudes, intentions, and the state of play between races in terms of how we are getting along together, and how cross cultural understanding can be improved.

Racism is about results and outcomes, what our policies and practices actually do.

Racism exists when one group views its cultural values, lifestyles and socio-economic self-interest as superior to or having priority over those of other groups and then (covertly or overtly) implements those assumptions through societal norms and institutions.

Institutional racism is the perpetuation by organisations, institutions or agencies of policies and practices which operate to the advantage of the powerful group and the disadvantage of particular racial/cultural groups.

In New Zealand Pakeha is the norm...the fact that Pakeha is the norm makes it a racist society.¹²

Gadd's claims that ethnic bias in favour of *taha Pakeha* is implicit in the assumptions underlying the school certificate examination, namely that the language of middle class *taha Pakeha* is the assumed norm and the vehicle for testing school certificate examinations. The heterogeneity of ethnic groupings and language usage is not allowed for. Racism, as Nairn states, is about results and outcomes of our policies and practices. The regular predictable outcome is, according to Gadd, an educational gap in favour of the Pakeha of 23.1%.¹³ Even more demonstrative of the middle class bias is the table of school certificate pass rates in English for Auckland secondary schools cited by Gadd. The table presents a clear correlation between social stratification and high passes. The twenty schools of the elite of metropolitan Auckland have pass rates ranging from 60% to 92%. At the bottom are schools with predominantly Maori and Pacific Island students with pass-rates ranging from 15-29%.

The position espoused by Gadd exposes an inherent contradiction of the value placed on equality of opportunity in New Zealand society. It is argued by Simon that this contradiction is disguised or concealed by the rationale of ideology. The cultural deficit model was advanced in the sixties to explain underachievement. Its proponents included Bernstein, who advanced the notion of restricted language codes, and Reissman, who conceived the educational failures as being culturally deprived. Simon argues that the application of the deficit model to Maori education is an ideological rationale that produces a distorted consciousness and functions to maintain the structure of Pakeha dominance in New Zealand society.¹⁴

Attempts by the Maori to have *taha Maori* included in the curriculum while appearing to be gaining ground are in fact subverted by Pakeha teachers who resort to ideological rationale to delay or block its implementation. Despite official sanction at the Department level for inclusion of *taha Maori* and the clear statement of objectives in He Huarahi, the 1900 report by NACME, negative attitudes to *taha Maori* as the legacy from our colonial history of cultural imperialism remain. Simon adduces empirical evidence to attest that those attitudes are still deeply entrenched. Thus teachers claim "we are all New Zealanders", "we are all one people", "I think of people as individuals", the inclusion of Maoritanga smacks of "separatism" etc. as grounds for leaving *taha Maori* out of their programmes.¹⁵ Alternatively *taha Maori* can be sabotaged by offering it as a club option in competition with other appealing activities such as sport, art or cooking. *Taha Maori* can also be down-graded by offering the language as an option with non-prestigious subjects such as technical drawing, art, typing etc. This technique makes it difficult for children in academic streams to take the subject.

Recently Mr. Renwick, Director General of Education, in the keynote speech to the Maori Education Development Conference at Turangawaewae, made reference to policies being implemented to raise the educational attainments of Maori children, young people and adults; the maintenance and development of Maori language and Maori culture; and greater respect for and understanding of *taha Maori* by Pakeha New Zealanders.¹⁶ Within days of Mr. Renwick's optimistic statement it was revealed in the press¹⁷ that a coterie of principals assembled by the Minister of Education had watered down *taha Maori* in the first draft of the secondary school core curriculum review. This unilateral action by the Minister is a public revelation of the asymmetry of power between *taha Maori* and *taha Pakeha* as well as an affirmation of Pakeha cultural dominance.

The Maori Response

One of the most obvious effects of Pakeha cultural dominance has been the retreat of the Maori language alluded to earlier. The work of Benton¹⁸ shows that the language has passed through four well defined stages known in comparative studies of language: namely, security, bilingualism, decay, and language death. Benton's socio-linguistic survey revealed that 501 of the Maori

population is under 15 years of age. Only 15% of this age group speak Maori. The fluent speakers in the 45 year age bracket comprise the 12% of the population that is dying out.

Maori people responded to the imminence of language death at the 1981 *Ilui Whakatauria* of Maori leaders by proposing the establishment of *Kohanga Reo* (the language nest). The aim of the Kohanga Reo programme launched by Maori communities in partnership with the Maori Affairs Department is to engulf every one of the 6,500 Maori babies born each year by establishing 300 Kohanga Reo by 1985.

Kohanga Reo is one of the most dynamic and innovative education programmes in the country. It is, perhaps, next to the New Zealand Party one of the fastest growing political movements. Ostensibly the Kohanga Reo exists to teach preschoolers the Maori language. The unforeseen side effects include many young mothers not only learning their own language but also becoming politically active as they grapple with constraints imposed by Pakeha bureaucracy for a fair distribution of resources needed to attain their goals. Symptomatic of this politicisation was the attendance of 1,000 people at Turangawaewae Marae for the Kohanga Reo conference in January this year. As children leave the Kohanga Reo mothers shop around schools to seek out those that offer bilingual continuity. Where no bilingual programme is offering some parents hold back their children in the Kohanga Reo for a further year. As we enter into the era of declining rolls because of the falling birth rate, primary schools will be forced to go bilingual to attract Kohanga Reo children and maintain their grading and staffing levels. Maori people are at the cutting edge of social change in New Zealand society. It is time we as a nation heeded the radical potential of the Maori for creative and innovative change by harnessing rather than suppressing it as has been done in the past.

The radical potential of the Maori surfaced again recently at the Maori Educational Development Conference at Turangawaewae Marae in March. The majority of the 200 or so delegates at that conference were in agreement that 25 years of attempting to reform an education system designed to assimilate *taha Maori* had failed. In a poignant paper by Marks, the frustrations of a Maori language teacher were summed up in the feeling that the education system invites the Maori to be a mourner at the *tangihanga* (funeral) of his own culture.¹⁹ Similar feelings of anger, pain and frustration were expressed by many Maori teachers at the conference. The Minister's emasculation of *taha Maori* in the curriculum review provides concrete evidence that the strategy of reform had failed. It was confirmation *par excellence* of the position outlined in the conference papers by Simon and Gadd.

Accordingly the conference sought a wholistic, global solution to the question of Maori education which was encapsulated in the following resolution at the final plenary:

The conference declares that the existing system of education is failing the Maori people and modifications have not helped the situation, nor will they. Therefore we urge Maori withdrawal and the establishment of alternative schooling modelled on the principles underlying *Kohanga Reo*.

In the months that lie ahead the dialogue concerning the proceedings of this conference and the resolution to pursue the strategy of alternative schooling for *taha Maori* will be discussed on numerous marae throughout the land. By this praxis the Maori will generate the political will to proceed and undertake the humanising task of the liberation of *taha Maori*. Only when that liberation is accomplished will *taha Maori* and *taha Pakeha* realise the dream of co-equal partnership entered into by the signatories of the Treaty of Waitangi 144 years ago.

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