Reform of the New Zealand Education System and Responses by the Indigenous Maori of New Zealand.

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This paper examines the development of an innovative response by the indigenous Maori of New Zealand to the dual crises of educational under-achievement on the one hand and to the loss of Maori language, knowledge and culture on the other. In particular, this paper considers the critical intervention and change role played by Kaupapa Maori (Maori philosophy and practice), the significant component of which is centred on the use of traditional and contemporary notions of whanau (extended family) values, practices and structures.

Introduction

Since 1982, Maori people have developed several alternative education innovations within a variety of educational sites, from pre-schools (Te Kohanga Reo), primary schools (Kura Kaupapa Maori), and secondary schools (Whare Kura), through to the tertiary institution level (Whare Waananga). All of these initiatives have been based on Kaupapa Maori, the underlying Maori philosophy and practice of change and intervention.

These educational and schooling resistance initiatives (c.f. Giroux: 1983:72) have developed not only as proactive measures concerned for the revitalisation of Maori language, knowledge and culture, they are also reactive responses to an increasing disillusionment by Maori of state schooling. This pessimism is the result of a growing critical appreciation of the colonising and assimilationist tendencies of Pakeha (non-Maori) dominant schooling. In this latter sense there has been a political penetration by Maori parents of the structural impediments entrenched within state schooling which maintain the inequalities suffered by disproportionate numbers of Maori pupils as an outcome of their state schooling experience.
Educational Under-achievement and Cultural Erosion

The impact of colonisation on the Maori people has been disastrous. The cumulative effects of colonisation at the educational, political, economic and social levels have produced two predominant crises that afflict large numbers of Maori today. The first is a crisis related to the survival of Maori language, knowledge and culture. The gradual disappearance of fluent, Maori language speakers and the demeaning of Maori language knowledge and culture have marked this first crisis. The second crisis is related to schooling under-achievement. High and disproportionate levels of academic under-achievement are experienced by Maori pupils compared to the performance levels of Pakeha students.

I have argued elsewhere the correlation between aspects of Pakeha colonisation and these resulting twin crises (Smith 1997). Since the formal occupation of New Zealand by the British in 1840 through the Treaty of Waitangi, and subsequently the formal adoption of the Westminster form of democracy through the New Zealand Constitution Act (1852), Pakeha people have been able to systematically legitimate the maintaining of political, cultural and social dominance over indigenous Maori. Whereas the Treaty of Waitangi has attempted to establish an equal partnership agreement between Maori and the British Crown and thereby protect the interests of Maori in the face of the British occupation, it has been the New Zealand Constitution (in its co-option of a Westminster model of democracy) which has supported the Pakeha social, cultural and political dominance.

Prior to 1982, the remedy for these crises fell to government policy makers and official policy-making, which took for granted that the dominant Pakeha culture and values was the norm. The key agency for promoting change was the state education system. (It is compulsory for all New Zealand children to attend some form of officially sanctioned schooling from age 6 until age 15 - recently changed to 17.) Sadly, however, the education system was a disastrous failure with respect to intervening in these crises and protecting Maori interests - in fact, it can be shown that the situation has deteriorated rather than improved down the years. In 1978, following a national survey on the state of spoken Maori language, Richard Benton, the principal researcher, announced that the Maori language was facing imminent death. The key point is that, up until 1980s, Pakeha policy makers generally governed policy decisions related to Maori interests. Maori tended not to be in positions of power to influence key decision-making related to their
language, knowledge and culture, nor for that matter, in positions of influence related to schooling and education. Thus, schooling was seldom developed to cater for the specific interests, aspirations or needs of Maori. Those few Maori who were able to get into positions of power and influence were usually answerable to other ‘gatekeepers’ in the system and, more often, Maori were employed on the periphery, as ‘advisors’ and/or in low positions of influence.

The generalised picture of Maori society today is not a very healthy one in comparison with the Pakeha picture. Maori as a cultural group and the indigenous population of New Zealand occupy the ‘worst case scenario’ with regard to almost all negative social statistics; high levels of unemployment, poor housing conditions, high incarceration rates, significantly higher incidence of life threatening diseases, much lower average levels of income, high levels and widespread educational under-attainment etc.

The educational and cultural transformation of the 1980s

In 1982, Maori elders came together for a major hui (large gathering). One of the main concerns was the imminent prospect, as described by the Benton research, (Benton 1978) of the death of spoken Maori language. In the discussions that occurred at this 1982 gathering, an idea which suggested that Maori communities ought to pick up the challenge to revitalise Maori language by developing immersion preschool language nurseries was developed. As a result, Maori elders and leaders went back to their respective communities, families and tribal groups and began to develop what has become known as the Te Kohanga Reo initiative - to take pre-school children into total immersion Maori language nurseries, to surround them with ‘nannies’ and elders who were fluent speakers of Maori language. This idea, as a creative community intervention designed to arrest the rapid decline of the Maori language, immediately caught the imagination of Maori people generally and it quickly spread. It grew from around fifty Kohanga Reo sites in 1982 to over eight hundred sites by 1998. Thus, all over the country, Maori children of pre-school age (6 months to 6 years of age) were sent to organized nurseries to be totally immersed in Maori language from
What is important to understand here is that the idea, the initiative and the implementation of this language revitalisation revolution came from within the Maori communities themselves. There are some significant understandings here with respect to this transformative development;

i. The first understanding is the idea of naming your own world and developing change for yourself. This builds on Paulo Freire’s (1972) insight that oppressed people must also participate in freeing themselves; to be liberated by the oppressor is considered to be a contradictory sequence of events. The situation for Maori has usually been that, prior to the 1980s, Pakeha has usually initiated policies and initiatives for educational development for Maori. Hence, these policies reflected, protected and reproduced the cultural and social interests of dominant Pakeha society, which in turn ensured the continuance of Maori marginalisation within education and schooling. Furthermore, I would argue that it is this embedded process of the social and cultural reproduction of dominant Pakeha interests which has contributed significantly to the continued failure of the mainstream system in developing any meaningful change in these dire educational circumstances. It is important to also understand that Pakeha domination of schooling has not only been achieved by ignoring, marginalising or omitting full and meaningful participation by Maori within schooling; there has also been deliberate acts of exclusion. In summary, historical analyses clearly reveal that the schooling system has mostly worked to promote the interests of dominant Pakeha society and has worked both overtly and covertly to undermine and marginalise Maori language knowledge and culture. I would argue that the revolution of 1982 may be significant not so much as a language revitalisation initiative, but as a major, ideological shift in the thinking of Maori people with respect to no longer waiting for a benevolent Pakeha society to deliver on Maori aspirations but instead assuming increased responsibility for developing the social transformation of their own lives. Thus a significant rupture occurred with respect to the
-breaking of the cycle of Maori expectation that change would be developed by a dominant Pakeha society. In this sense, the revolution was a penetration of the hegemonies that constructed and held in place the notion of the benevolent oppressor.

ii. The second critical point is that Maori adults developed critical understandings and insights to the point where they resolved to take action for themselves with respect to changing their lives. Maori became increasingly aware of notions of power relations, economic disparities and ideological persuasion, and were subsequently more able to deconstruct the existing structural impediments implicit within schooling and education and then to take the further step of developing their own resistance initiatives. Maori communities, through the activities of Te Kohanga Reo became 'conscientised' and 're-educated' about the politics of these issues. The resulting actions taken by Maori looked to promote Maori social, cultural, and political transformation by designing and implementing their own interventions for change. This is the critical point and it is being replicated as Maori continue to forge more alternative educational strategies which emphasise the same self-determining structures and practices that have been successful at the pre-school level.

iii. The third understanding is that this initiative required a significant amount of re-learning by Maori people themselves. Maori needed to unshackle themselves from the hegemonies which held them to blindly support the schooling and education which was often directly antagonistic to their cultural aspirations. In the first Kura Kaupapa Maori schools, teachers who were trained in the conventional training colleges were asked to re-examine their practices and deconstruct many of the ways which they were taught to teach in these Pakeha institutions. A major component of this deconstruction was for Maori teachers to positively reinforce and validate what felt culturally appropriate in the Maori setting. (Since this was a Maori initiative, Maori parents, had to find resources from within their own communities to develop these language
nurseries. Consequently they were established in a range of settings; in church halls, in garages, in basements, in marae (Maori cultural spaces) and in disused buildings.)

iv. The fourth insight is that the pre-school resistance initiative has led to similar resistance initiatives all the way up the education ladder: in the Kura Kaupapa Maori primary schools (Maori medium primary schools - age 6 years to 12 years; Kura Tuarua (Maori Medium Secondary Schools - age 13 years to 18 years) and Waananga (Maori Universities).

In summary, the indigenous population of New Zealand has developed some interesting educational and schooling intervention strategies following the pre-school immersion model developed in 1982. Of significance is the extent to which the Maori experience in New Zealand might inform the situations of indigenous peoples in other parts of the world.

In this next section, I examine some of the core transformative elements that are contained, to varying levels, within all of these Maori educational initiatives. The issue here is to develop an understanding of the key intervention principles, which are common to all of these Maori initiatives and which might be more widely applied to other indigenous contexts. One of the critical elements to be discussed in more detail relates to the participation of Maori adults in these new initiatives. Such participation often necessitates a re-commitment from many of the parents to schooling and education, given that many of them have misgivings, fears and resistance to dominant Pakeha state schooling, based on their own bad experiences.

**Kaupapa Maori intervention elements**

Maori people recognise that there are some common intervention factors that are shared across all of these initiatives - these common factors are often referred to as Kaupapa Maori. These Kaupapa Maori intervention elements have been further described as a ‘theory of transformative praxis’ (Smith 1997).
Maori communities, building on the successful elements of the *Te Kohanga Reo* pre-school example, have produced a range of other educational and schooling resistance initiatives. In terms of the two major aims of these interventions, that is, the revitalisation of language, knowledge and culture, and the development of increased levels of academic achievement, all of these initiatives have been quite successful. This is especially so when measured against the combined cultural and learning experiences of many Maori children who remain caught within mainstream (status quo) state schooling. Some of the key intervention elements which have been developed in the Maori context and which have a wider application within an international indigenous context are briefly outlined here.

1. **The principle of self-determination or relative autonomy**

The perceived need by Maori related to increased control over one’s own life and cultural well-being has made gains within the relatively autonomous development of Maori schools organised by Maori teachers and decision-makers. Greater autonomy over key decision-making in schooling has been attained, for example, in regard to administration, curriculum, pedagogy and Maori cultural aspirations. Key points are that because Maori people are in charge of the key decision-making, they have made choices and decisions that reflect their cultural, political, economic and social preferences. Furthermore, when Maori make the decisions for themselves, the ‘buy in’ and commitment by Maori participants to making the ideas work is more certain and solid.

2. **The principle of validating and legitimating cultural aspirations and identity**

In *Kura Kaupapa Maori* (primary schools), to be Maori is taken for granted; there is little need to justify one’s identity as is the case in most other mainstream educational settings. In *Kaupapa Maori* educational settings, Maori language, knowledge, culture and
values are validated and legitimated – this is a ‘given’, a ‘taken for granted’ base in these schools. Maori cultural aspirations are more assured in these settings, particularly in view of the wider societal context of the struggle for Maori language and cultural survival. One of the common faults of previous schooling interventions has been the inadequate attention paid to this aspect of supporting the maintenance of Maori culture and distinctive cultural identity. In incorporating these elements, a strong emotional and spiritual factor is introduced to Kaupapa Maori settings, which gains the support and commitment of Maori to the intervention. In particular many Maori adults have been convinced that schooling might now have some relevance and, consequently, many Maori parents who were put off schooling by their own personal experiences have become re-committed by the emotional and cultural pull of the Kaupapa Maori approach.

3. **The principle of incorporating culturally preferred pedagogy**

The teaching and learning settings and practices have been selected on the grounds that they closely and effectively connect with the cultural backgrounds and life circumstances (socio-economic) of Maori communities. However, other pedagogy is also utilised, including general Pakeha schooling methods and some cross-cultural borrowing, such as the Japanese maths and language teaching programmes. The move towards Pacific/Asian cultures and language is a logical development given the cultural similarities, and given the commonalities of the Austranesian group of languages.

4. **The principle of mediating with regard to socio-economic and home difficulties**

The Kaupapa (philosophy) of Kura Kaupapa Maori is a powerful and all embracing force. Through its emotional (*ngakau*) and spiritual (*wairua*) elements, it culturally commits Maori communities to take seriously the schooling enterprise, despite social and economic
impediments. In this sense, there is an impact at the ideological level with respect to 'buy in' by Maori parents. Such cultural commitment assists in mediating in a societal context of unequal power relations. In adhering to this culturally inspired Kaupapa, schooling and education become a priority consideration, despite debilitating social and economic circumstances.

5. **The principle of incorporating cultural structures which emphasise collectivity rather than individuality such as the notion of the extended family**

The extended family structure supports the ideological support won in the previous category. It does this by providing a collective and shared support structure to alleviate and mediate in social and economic difficulties, parenting difficulties, health difficulties etc. Such difficulties are not located in individual homes but in the total whanau (extended family structures and networks); the whanau takes collective responsibility to assist and intervene. While the whanau structure implies a support network for individual members there is also a reciprocal obligation on individual members to invest in the whanau group. In this way, parents are culturally 'contracted' to support and assist in the education of all of the children in the whanau. Perhaps the most significant aspect of whanau administration and management is that it brings back into the schooling setting many parents who were once extremely hostile to education given their own unhappy schooling experiences. This is a major feature of Kura Kaupapa Maori schooling intervention - it has committed parents to re-invest in schooling and education for their children.

6. **The principle of a shared and collective vision and philosophy**

The Kura Kaupapa Maori have a collective vision that is written into a formal charter entitled ‘Te Aho Matua’. This vision provides the guidelines for excellence in Maori; what a good Maori education
should entail. It also acknowledges Pakeha culture and skills required by Maori children to participate fully and at every level in modern New Zealand society. ‘Te Aho Matua’ builds on the Kaupapa of Te Kohanga Reo, and provides the parameters for the uniqueness that is Kura Kaupapa Maori. Its power is in its ability to articulate and connect with Maori aspirations, politically, socially, economically and culturally.

This list is not a definitive one in that it only suggests some of the key elements that contribute to the success of these schools.

**Lessons in Transformative Praxis**

Underpinning the Maori intervention elements are some important understandings about transformative praxis and, by extension, critical pedagogy. The intervention strategies applied by Maori in New Zealand are complex and respond simultaneously to multiple formations of oppression and exploitation. This expansive resistance approach is important in responding to the new formations and re-shaping of cultural oppression(s) and economic exploitation(s). The Kaupapa Maori educational interventions represent the evolving of a more sophisticated response by Maori to freeing themselves from multiple oppression(s) and exploitation. In particular, the very emergence of Kaupapa Maori as an intervention strategy critiques and re-constitutes the western dominant resistance notions of conscientisation, resistance and transformative action in different configurations. Maori re-configuration rejects the notion that each of these concepts stands individually; nor are they necessarily to be interpreted as being a lineal progression from conscientisation, to resistance, to action. That is, one state is not necessarily a prerequisite or contingent on the other states. Thus the following popular representation of transformative praxis (based on a predominantly western type of thinking) needs to be critically engaged;

**Figure 1.**

| Conscientisation | Resistance | Transformative action |

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The position implicit within the new formations of Maori intervention, and which may have wider significance for other indigenous populations, is that all of the above components are important; all need to be held simultaneously; all stand in equal relation to each other. This representation might best be understood as a cycle. For example:

**Figure 2: Cyclic representation of transformative praxis**

A further point here is that individuals and groups enter the cycle from any position and do not necessarily (in reflecting on Maori experience within Kaupapa Maori interventions) have to start at the point of conscientisation. In other words, individuals have been caught up in transformative action (eg taking their children to Kohanga Reo), and this has led to conscientisation and participation in resistance. This is a significant critique of much of the writing on these concepts that tend to portray a lineal progression of conscientisation, resistance and transformative action. Maori experience tends to suggest that these elements may occur in any order and indeed may all occur simultaneously. It is important to note as well that the arrows in the diagram go in both directions, which reinforces the idea of simultaneous engagement with more than one element.

One of the most exciting developments with respect to the organic resistance initiatives of Maori in the 1980s and 1990s, has been the discernible shift and maturing in the way resistance activities are being understood and practised. Now, a greater emphasis is
placed on attempting to take account of structuralist concerns (economic, ideological, and power structures) as well as culturalist responses (related to changing school policies and structures). Some of the important factors, which the Maori resistance initiatives recognise need to be accounted for in relation to the economic, ideological and power dimensions, derive from the nexus of state: dominant: Pakeha interests.

Finally, and with respect to the aims of the Pacific educators conference and the challenges for Pacific teachers, I would argue strongly for a teacher training which supports and reinforces indigenous, language, knowledge and culture as well as other international forms of knowledge. In this sense, cultural erosion should not be underestimated, even in the Pacific. I would also argue strongly that effective teachers are those who not only have classroom skills; they also understand the politics of education. This issue of politics is very important in making space for the validity and legitimacy of indigenous knowledge(s) in an increasing climate of western technocratic and scientific rationality. Where indigenous people are in educational crises, indigenous educators and teachers must be trained to be ‘change agents’, to develop transformation of the undesirable circumstances. They must develop radical teaching approaches which lead to change. Such pedagogy must be critically informed to the extent that they adequately speak to structural issues such as economics, power and ideology, as well as issues of cultural maintenance and good classroom practice. This paper is concerned to share the lessons based on our Maori experience in Aotearoa. These words are shared humbly – and Pacific educators can consider taking ‘bits’ out of what I have said here which are relevant to their particular context, needs and aspirations. I believe there is much to inform other indigenous situations from the strategies developed by Maori in Aotearoa, in particular, the need to sharply focus on the notion of transformation - What is it? How can it be achieved? Do indigenous needs require different approaches? Who benefits? Such questions focus attention on the critical task of teachers being change agents and it is this role which indigenous educators must concentrate on now and in the immediate future.
References

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