

Failure in maori terms

A highly educated young maori woman faltered with emotion when she told a maori education conference that although she was a success in pakeha terms, she felt a failure in maori terms.

Kathy Cameron is a lecturer in maori education at Palmerston North's Massey University. She was taking issue with a speaker who said every person at the conference was an example of how well the education system had catered to maori people's needs.

"If it weren't for the education system, we wouldn't be here," he said, referring to the fact that most of the delegates were well qualified people.

In view of this he said he was surprised by all the talk of how much the system was failing maori children.

"All I heard yesterday was failure, failure, failure," he complained. "I do not think the Education Department should be downgraded for the very sincere efforts it has made for us in the last 10 years."

The speaker was opposing a motion that maori people be encouraged to set up an alternative education system.

But Ms Cameron said she did not agree that success had to be measured in terms of pakeha academic achievement.

Fighting back tears, she said she felt whakama that she did not know the maori language well enough to understand or respond in maori to people who spoke it fluently.

But that, she said, was because she had never been taught the maori language, although she was trying to learn it.

"I am a product of the system we are talking about today," she told delegates.

"Everything I know of my taha maori, I learnt through my own efforts or those of my family," she said later. "I did not learn it through the education system."

Delegates said after the conference that the overall feeling emerging from the hui was that the education system should offer more taha maori to its pupils.

One woman said she wanted a system which offered children "quality education in both" — taha maori and taha pakeha.

Because she knew her children's taha maori would not be catered for at a state school, she had sent them to a maori boarding school.

Now, no matter how they spend their lives, "I can die happy knowing that my children will never have to feel

whakama about their taha maori," she said.

Waikato University research fellow Ted Douglas said although most of the people at the hui had done well out of the present education system, they were rejecting it because it had rejected their taha maori.

He said all the maori university graduates now living would not fill the Kimiora dining hall at Turangawaewae marae.

The country had had universities for more than 100 years, but no maori women graduates until 1949, and no maori women doctorates until the 1980s.

Green Bay High School head of maori studies Pat Heremaia said: "What they are wanting is public debate on these issues, and a new system which does not label them as failures."

Maori girls worst off

Maori girls were the saddest victims of New Zealand's middle-class pakeha-dominated education system, according to an Auckland maori language teacher.

And maori language teachers felt as if the education system had invited them to be mourners at the tangi of their own culture and language.

Hillary College, Otara teacher Maiki Marks wrote this in a discussion paper

for the Maori education conference at Ngaruawahia's Turangawaewae marae in March.

"It's often said that the worst sins in New Zealand society today are to be young, to be Maori, to be female, and to be the child of working-class parents," Mrs Marks wrote.

"I see these girls coming into high school with their selves battered and bruised after eight years in the system..." she said.

"They have little confidence. Their behaviour often reflects their inner pain and confusion. And all the school does is to yell at them, to punish them, to expel them."

But Mrs Marks said some third-form maori girls managed to work things out, be proud, get on well with others, and help others.

"That is not necessarily to say that they are the students the teachers like," she added. Despite their inner confidence, they could still easily be knocked down. Their strategies for coping with rejection, boredom and confusion ranged from inattention to dropping out.

"And, of course, some girls succeed in using the system to their own advantage. I'm one of them. And you have got to be hell of a strong to do that," Mrs Marks said.

But maori language teachers had the feeling that "the education system has invited you to be a mourner at the tangihanga (funeral) of your culture, your language — and yourself."

Mrs Marks said the system which produced these feelings required maori language teachers to teach the language as though it were dead, and only for passing exams with.

The system did not aim to save the language, but to "preserve" it like Latin and Greek. Schools were designed to teach pakeha pupils, "and middle-class ones at that".

Maori teachers given an "extra role" in the school were likely to be asked to hand on "gimmicks and tricks to their pakeha colleagues on how to control maori kids".

If the school had any "taha maori", it was usually confined to a maori club or times for languages, arts and crafts. But it was unlikely the school had changed itself so that it felt good to maori pupils and worked to give them and equal chance.

Mrs Marks said teachers' limitations were passed on to their pupils.

"What the teacher is, is what the student gets. If the teacher is monocultural — and almost all of them are — then so is the class's work," she said.

She complained that even committees set up to look at maori problems were "probably stacked with middle-class pakeha for whom it's all just another academic exercise."

