

George, N. B. & T. B. Graves, R. K. Harker and Sylvia Ashton-Warner. By the end of the second year a child's feelings of failure have become so internalised and irreversible that his/her next eight years of schooling simply confirms his/her personal view that somehow she/he is not making it. By standard one she/he thinks and talks of him/herself as "dull", "slow", "dumb", "stupid", "a thicko", "heavy", or "unteachable" and to my dismay I have heard teachers use all those words when describing low achievers. So often I have listened to well meaning infant teachers describing a child (within hearing) as "a bit dull, or slow" or "not very bright". The wide-eyed trusting infant says to him/herself, "If the teacher thinks I'm a bit stupid then I must be, for she/he's never wrong."

An almost universal belief among teachers that does inestimable damage to children is the belief in their own ability to make infallible judgments about a child's intellectual potential, and a judgment once made seems to become absolute and irrevocable. These judgments are usually made on the basis of language facility, home background, ethnicity, conformity, dress, grooming and social behaviour. I have heard scores of teachers discussing their estimate of the "brightness" or "dullness" of a child as confidently as they would discuss a change in the weather. No psychologist of any standing would make such a claim even after administering a battery of so-called intelligence tests. This tendency of teachers to categorize children into groupings of "bright, average and dull" is probably an organisational compromise that they feel enables them to better service the individual needs of children. However once the judgment is made, no matter how equivocal, it tends to stick, and all subsequent assessments seem to be based upon that very first ranking. Another personal incident that reveals special difficulties the Maori child faces all too often in our schools, occurred during a grading interview with a middle-aged teacher of a new entrant class. In answer to my question "When a five year old Maori child says something you consider to be grammatically incorrect (e.g. youse fellas, two feets) do you point this out to him?"

"Oh yes!" she replied as if my question was a bit stupid.

"That's my job as a teacher to constantly correct bad speech. They must learn to speak good English before learning to read."

I felt sympathy for the Maori children

in her class knowing that the increasing shame of each "put-down" would quickly cause the individual child to seek safety in silence. She/he soon learns that silence is safer than risking a response that may bring humiliation in front of his/her peers. And non-response to teacher questioning is one of the negative categories the teacher employs to assess intelligence.

Couldn't hack school

One could go on and on about the beginnings of failure in the junior classrooms. One could mention the dissonant value systems of the pakeha teacher and the Maori child, the differing views of physical contact and "body space", embarrassing eye-contact, the pakeha teacher's obvious distaste (barely disguised) at the sight of runny noses, loud sniffs, or the odd scab and body smell. In the extended family the Maori child's orientation tends towards many adults, aunties and uncles whereas the classroom is a fearful place where individual effort is rewarded, competition is encouraged and the things she/he learned at home seem somehow all wrong. It is little wonder that the school comes to mean humiliation, shame and cumulative failure for the great majority of Maori children and age fifteen comes as a blessed relief. So often I have heard young Maoris describe an unhappy ten year period of schooling as: "Couldn't hack school so I left as soon as I turned fifteen."

Of course not all pakeha teachers behave in such ways and many are genuinely fond of their multi-racial pupils. However, most never question the pakeha belief that their culture is superior to that of the Maori, that the English language is the only correct and proper teaching medium, that a pakeha curriculum is suited to all children, that the Maori must lift him/herself to our standards to ensure acceptance and success in a pakeha dominated world. Most teachers are blithely unaware that they are unwitting collaborators in a system that is so manifestly unfair and unjust to a large section of our New Zealand population.

A ghetto of collective failure

For some years my job as an inspector obliged me to spend a fair amount of time visiting and observing the Porirua schools, where Maori and Polynesian children greatly outnumber their pakeha peers. Despite the efforts of well-intentioned, dedicated teachers and principals there was a very high population of Maori and Island children

with severe retardation (up to three years) in the basic subjects: language and mathematics. Even though notional rolls applied, extra staff appointed, good support services available and concerned teachers, somehow the Porirua schools seemed to be a spawning ground for failure on a mass scale, and a pervading sense of educational malaise permeated the area. Teachers had come to the point where they regarded educational retardation as the norm, and was inevitable. A common view prevailed that many of the children would spend a large part of their lives unemployed so "why bust your guts trying to bring the kids up to scratch?" Going from a Karori or Khandallah school to one in Porirua was like going to a different world, and it is little wonder the teachers become demoralised by the sheer enormity of the task of trying to raise achievement levels when surrounded by vandalised gardens, play areas, broken equipment, graffiti, seeming parental indifference, and masses of children who just cannot read.

In desperation many schools had introduced a diluted curriculum where the basics was replaced by an "activity programme" that kept children occupied rather than learning. The Porirua intermediates, frustrated by the annual intake of eleven-year-olds, who were ill-equipped to undertake the normal intermediate programme, had devised their own curriculum consisting of large chunks of Maoritanga — action songs, guitar playing and marae procedures. This kept the students happy and occupied, but the subjects most likely to go by the board were the very ones that could enable Maori pupils to win employment competitively, viz. language, mathematics, and science.

Haka boogie not an answer

By kind permission of a local secondary principal, I interviewed a group of Maori and Island seventh formers who had received all their schooling in the Porirua area. With considerable anger and indignation they told me that as pupils of the local primary and intermediate schools they had "gone along with the Maoritanga programmes", knowing that participation meant legitimate sanction to avoid the basic subjects. It was not until entering the third form at secondary school that they realised their retardation in these curriculum areas, when assessed alongside pupils from neighbouring suburban schools with few Maori and Island pupils. Only a conscious decision to make up the lost ground and a great