

Why do our schools fail the majority of Maori children?

While you read these lines thousands of Maori children attending New Zealand schools are being subjected to a ten year process of schooling that very effectively and efficiently atrophies their potential growth as people. It degrades their culture and denies them the life fulfilment and expectations that most concerned pakeha parents expect and demand for their children.

If this statement is disturbing to readers a cursory glance at official statistics will confirm the above allegation viz. early school leavers, state examination results, tertiary education graduates, crime, unemployment, home ownership and health statistics. Should one discuss this tragic waste of human potential with a hundred pakeha, almost inevitably one hears a hundred variant put explanations and theories why this situation continues to blight so many young lives. Put the question to school principals, teachers, politicians, employers, lay people, and the answers will range from inherent laziness, lack of motivation, deprived or disadvantaged home backgrounds, language deficiencies to — dare one mention it! — “perhaps Maori students are intellectually inferior to pakeha students . . . and intelligence tests do seem to support this.”

The principal of one of our most well known secondary schools, John Graham is quite certain he has the answer to the lack of school success on the part of so many Maori pupils.

“The reason Maoris are failing is because they are lazy. But it wouldn't make any difference whether exam papers were printed in Maori because that's not the point. They're just lazy. If you attack a system because one section can't handle it, for God's sake look at the section rather than the system.”

N.Z. Times, February 12, 1984

This man, the principal of Auckland Grammar epitomises the lack of understanding that characterises so many people claiming to be educationists and his shallow sophistry smacks of the entrenched racism of the early colonists. He should know better. Unfortunately

Jack Ennis, the author of this article about the failure of our schools regarding Maori pupils spent 17 years as an Inspector in N.Z. schools. When presented with this article, Tu Tangata asked Mr Ennis why he took so long to say anything about the shocking state of N.Z. schools.

He says it was only after some years and a two year stay overseas that it hit him between the eyes. His return to this country made him aware of the enormity of the problem. He says he particularly saw the emphasis on failure in the Porirua district and tried to change

things by calling the school heads together. However he acknowledges it's a big one and hence this article. Ed.

He korero na tetahi rangatira i mahi ai i te Tari Matauranga mo nga tau tekau ma whitu. Ko Jack Ennis ia.

I tana wa e mahi ana, kei te ata titiro ia ki te kore tautoko i nga take Maori kei roto i nga Kura o te motu.

Koenei ona whakaaro i runga i tenei kaupapa, ara he pehea te akona o nga matauranga Maori ki te rangatahi whanui i te motu.

he is not alone in his views and there are so many people in influential positions offering solutions to mass failure in terms of the inherent defects of children and see little to criticise in the education system itself. Over the last century the Education Department has quite deliberately, albeit legally, followed the assimilation policy established by the 1867 Native Schools Act and J. M. Barrington writing in 1985 states:

“The assimilation policy had been ruthless in its repudiation of the indigenous culture attempting to divorce the Maori from every aspect of his culture, and had been exemplified by the complete abolition of all things Maori from the scheme of education”.

Ed Dept system to blame

This policy has over the past decades been somewhat modified, and we have seen the tentative insertion into the curriculum of such pakeha perceived solutions as Taha Maori and Maoritanga in those schools opting to introduce them. However, after a lifetime of teaching, lecturing and working as a Departmental Inspector I categorically blame the Education Department and its education system for the continued mass failure of Maori children.

During my seventeen years as inspector of schools one question troubled me greatly: What does the education system do to Maori children that causes so many of them to fail? My phrasing of

the question is quite deliberate, and I totally reject any view that lays the blame for failure on the child. From birth to school-age the great majority of children are bright-eyed and confident about themselves, and any causes of failure should be sought among external societal influences. Over the years I observed hundreds of teachers teaching in as many classrooms, some with predominantly Maori pupils and others containing only one or two. During teacher/inspector interviews I have asked teachers many questions: their views of the educational needs of Maori children, why so many drift into the low-achievement groups even in the junior school, the possible causes of this, why so many continue to fill the lowest places in educational statistics and leave school disillusioned, angry, feeling worthless or ‘dumb’, to face possible unemployment, prison or at best a low-paid, low-status job.

Problem not of school's making

The great majority of teachers are caring dedicated people, but their answers revealed a common view that the system or schools are not at fault, that the real “problem” of Maori failure was “something”, some “conditions”, or some “deficiency” inherent in the newly enrolled child; perhaps a “language deficiency” or a “lack of pre-school experiences”. Other teachers felt that the Maori pupils is “poorly motivated to