

Profile

Newly appointed Maori and Island education director Wiremu Kaa grew up in an East Coast farming community where English was rarely spoken except by the schoolteachers — even their children spoke Maori to their schoolmates.

Despite this, Maori was banned in schools and the children strapped for using it.

Though outlawed Maori remained the playground — and underground — language.

"Kids used it for instance, when they were having problems with their sums, and they would ask another child the answer in Maori," Mr Kaa said.

The memory of being punished for speaking Maori remained vivid, he said. But unlike some of his contemporaries he does not feel bitter.

"I should be bitter. But really I am not. The common belief, even among Maori leaders at that time, was that everyone must learn English."

He quotes Sir Apirana Ngata's saying; "English first, English second, English third."

Status

At 48 Mr Kaa exudes a reassuring tolerance, coupled with a youthful zest for life.

"We should look forward with hope," he said.

His upbringing, in the Ngati Porou stronghold of the East Coast, and then at the renowned Te Aute Maori Boys College, was so thoroughly Maori he was barely aware of his minority culture status till he went to Ardmore Training College in Auckland when he was 18.

"That was traumatic. It was the first time I'd been a minority. There were only about 60 of us out of 700 students there."

His benignly rounded features are unlined and a smile hovers at the corner of his mouth. His life-long philosophy of "taking the world as it comes" and finding it full of exciting things has stood him in good stead.

Working side by side with girls was another new and strange phenomenon — but an enjoyable one.

When he left training college he was determined to see as much of New Zealand as possible so he worked his way through schools in North Auckland down to Wairarapa, ending with a headship at his own Rangitukia Primary School.

Fluent

"Twenty years on it was a totally different scene.

"I had my own policy and the department had an open view."



His policy, in this and other overwhelmingly Maori schools, was to allow children to speak to each other in whichever language they chose, provided they were articulate and kind and did not abuse this right.

However Maori was seldom used for teaching, though many of the teachers in these isolated schools were fluent speakers.

"I guess we did not see fit at the time to use it. The climate in schools was not open to accepting it."

Given today's environment, and a school with the same proportion of Maori speaking youngsters, he would probably use Maori for most of the curriculum, he said.

In 1974 he shifted to Wellington and a position as adviser to the Education Department's Maori and Island division.

He and his wife Jossie — an itinerant teacher of Maori — wanted to give their five children, now aged 18 to 26, the best possible educational choice.

In 1981 he moved to the division's head office and was appointed education officer last year, taking over as acting head following the death of the previous director, Mr Allan Smith, in May this year.

"Multi-cultural" describes the make-up of New Zealand schools, which include children from Pakeha, Maori or Island backgrounds, said Mr Kaa.

But the language, subjects and the ways of teaching are mainly European.

Mr Kaa said a Maori child is often regarded by the teacher as "slow" because he does not volunteer answers as readily as a European child.

This may be because the Maori child is used to the "turn-taking" system, where only one person at a time speaks and the others wait, he said.

Mr Kaa said such misunderstandings occur because of the cultural gap between a Pakeha teacher and a Maori student.

The Maori and Island Education is trying to "modify" the education system to be aware of cultural differences and to accept ways of learning different from the European norm.

Mr Kaa said that since 1971 a target group for the section's efforts has been the senior administrators in education, such as school principals and their deputies.

Its work has been largely successful in convincing this group of the importance of multi-cultural education in schools, he said.