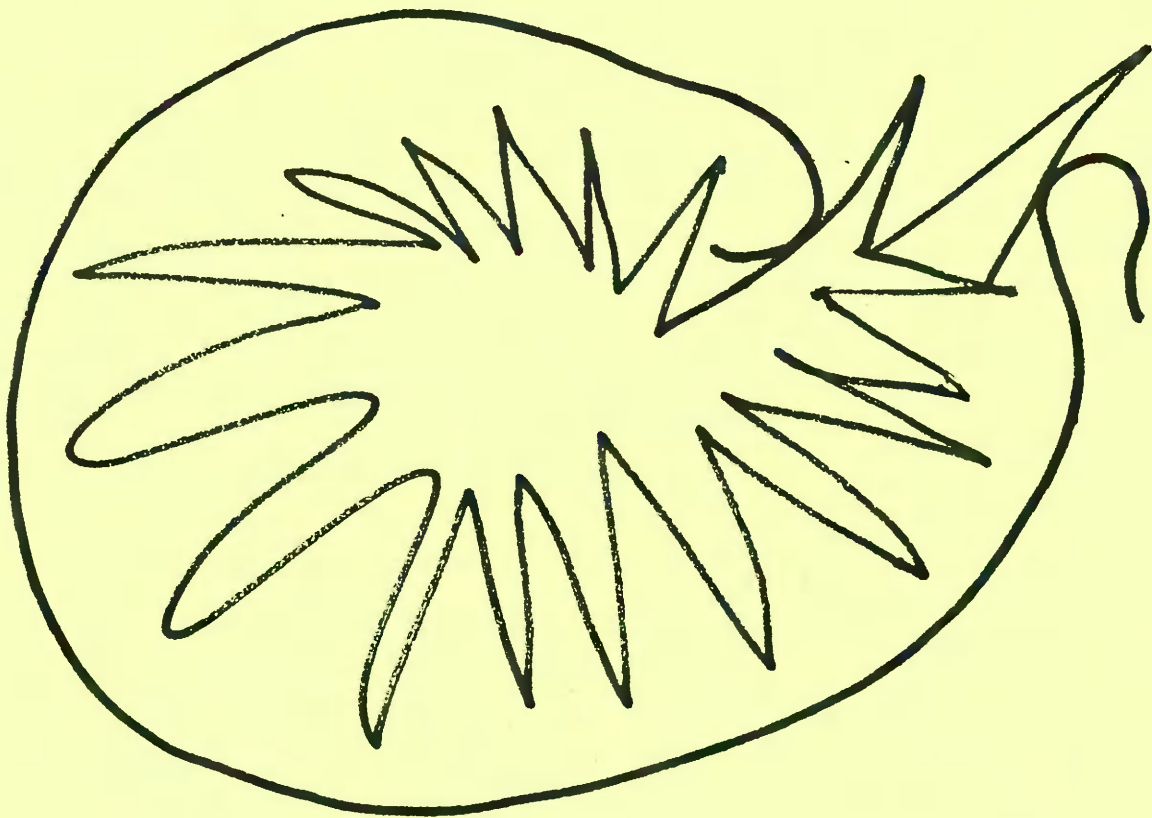


THE FRUSTRATIONS

OF BEING

A MAORI LANGUAGE TEACHER



ISSUES IN EDUCATION - number 7

Programme On Racism

NCC Box 9573, Auckland.

from

University of Auckland Centre for Continuing Education

Papers for Maori Education Development Conference, 23-25 March

Sponsored by New Zealand Maori Council

The frustrations of being a Maori language teacher are the same as being a Maori in our education system. To show you what I mean, when I was first hired as a high school teacher, I was not given a Maori language class. I was given a class of shattered youngsters to care for.

It seems to me that there are two big problems facing any Maori teachers who see their taha Maori as absolutely crucial to their students' development. The first big problem is that schools basically are designed to teach Pakehas, and middle class ones at that. Bringing the system across half the globe hasn't altered that in any way. So a Maori teacher and a Maori student is compulsorily part of a system designed to treat her as if she is Pakeha. And if she shows signs of forgetting that, to treat her as someone requiring to be made Pakeha, to be assimilated. Whatever term you want to use, it means the system wants Maoris to forget that they are Maori while they're in school. And when they leave school, too.

The second big problem facing a Maori teacher - or any teacher who wants to make changes - is that schools are divided up into 30 students with one teacher, each in their own room. For teachers to co-operate, plan together, evaluate together, plot revolution together, is utterly exhaustingly hard work. Furthermore, what the teacher is, is what the students get. The teacher's limitations are passed on to the students, circumscribe what the kids learn. If the teacher is monocultural - and almost all of them are - then so is the class's work.

Now the situation facing a teacher specifically hired to be a Maori language teacher is even worse. This teacher is expected to teach Maori language as if it were dead. That is, to teach it academically, to prepare their students for the exams of S.C. and U.E.

If the teacher is given any extra role in the school by the principal, that role is likely to be to hand on gimmicks and tricks to her Pakeha colleagues on how to control Maori kids.

The Maori language teacher is in a very delicate situation which makes it easy for that teacher to be sucked into keeping the system going. The Maori teacher is a highly visible part of the staff. The school's public relations and the head's mana in part depends on the school's success in the inter-school Maori and Polynesian contests. Furthermore, isolated as she usually is from other Maori colleagues, the Maori teacher is likely to find it easier to take on protective 'colouration' by adopting or pretending to adopt her Pakeha colleagues' views and attitudes towards students in general and Maori students in particular. In this situation, Maori teachers now exert far too little influence upon their colleagues, such as in the PPTA or NZEI. Even committees set up to look at Maori 'problems' are probably stacked with middle class Pakeha for whom it's all just another academic exercise.

That Maori language teacher may see that the school is actually working not to save Maori language or Maoritanga, but to preserve them in the same way as Latin and Greek are preserved - as academic studies that do no one any harm because they can challenge no one's thinking and self, because they are treated as irrelevant to real life.

To sum up, then, the Maori language teacher is likely to be feeling frustrated by being a member of a system she seems to be able to do very little to change. And even when the school has a taha Maori, it's probably merely a Maori Club or timetables periods for language and arts and crafts. But the school is

most unlikely to have changed its self so that it actually FEELS good to Maoris and actually works to give them an equal chance. Not an equal chance at Pakeha education only, but the same chance that Pakeha students get for their culture for their own culture.

The Maori language teacher every day faces the victims of the system. I want to talk especially about the Maori girls. These are the saddest victims. 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. I see these girls coming into high school with their selves battered and bruised after eight years in the system I've just described to you. 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. However, it is also true that some, a few, of these girls, are even at the third form level starting to work it out for themselves who they are, who they want to be. And to be proud. These are the girls who get on well with others, these are the elder sisters, the helpers, the hostesses. This is not necessarily to say that they are the students the teachers like. Their inner confidence may lead them to reject the school and its inherent racism. But these girls, too, are easily knocked down. And they have a huge variety of strategies to cope with rejection, boredom, confusion, ranging from inattention to dropping out. And, of course some girls succeed in using the system to their advantage. I'm one of them. And you have to be hell of a strong to do that. The frustrations of being a teacher of Maori language are just the same as those of being a Maori in New Zealand society. The frustrations of being a Maori language teacher are essentially summed up in the feeling that the education system has invited you to be a mourner at the tangihanga of your culture, your language - and yourself.

Maiki Marks