

(Calman, R., 2012)

Story: Māori education – mātauranga

Page 3. The native schools system, 1867 to 1909

Native schools

Following the New Zealand wars, the Native Schools Act 1867 established a national system of village primary schools under the control of the Native Department. Māori were required to donate the land for the schools, and contribute to the costs of a building and teacher's salary, although the latter two requirements were removed in 1871. In 1879 the 57 native schools were transferred to the Department of Education, which had been established in 1877.

The 1880 Native School Code standardised conditions for the establishment of a school, the curriculum, hours of instruction, governance and other matters. Schooling became compulsory for Māori in 1894. There was considerable demand for the schools, initially from areas where Māori had been neutral or 'friendly' during the wars.

Manual education

School inspector Henry Taylor, writing in 1862, said, 'I do not advocate for the Natives under present circumstances a refined education or high mental culture: it would be inconsistent, if we take into account the position they are likely to hold for many years to come in the social scale, and inappropriate, if we remember that they are better calculated by nature to get their living by manual rather than by mental labour.'¹ The belief in the suitability of Māori for working-class occupations was to persist in official circles well into the 20th century.

English language and manual instruction

From the outset the priority of the schools was the teaching of English. The plan was to phase out the native schools once English had taken hold in a community. Initially, the Māori language was allowed to facilitate English instruction, but as time went on official attitudes hardened against any use of Māori language. In later years many Māori children were punished for speaking their first language at school. For many years the insistence on English was generally accepted by Māori communities, who were secure in their Māoritanga and wished their children to be prepared for success in the Pākehā world. Beyond basic reading, writing and arithmetic, the curriculum was heavily skewed towards instruction in manual and domestic skills.

Problems with schools

The schools suffered from delays inherent in a centralised system run from Wellington. It could take years to establish a school, many had inadequate facilities and decisions relied on the annual visit of an inspector on horseback. Pupils often had to travel long distances and were at the mercy of bad weather. Families moving for seasonal work also disrupted attendance. Teachers were of variable quality and initially most were untrained. Initially most were Pākehā, although some schools had Māori junior assistants. Local mixed-Māori and Pākehā children, including the children of teachers, also attended native schools.

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As a result of the Māori cultural renaissance initiated by Apirana Ngata in the 1920s, and influenced by a British policy in Africa of cultural adaptation, Māori arts and crafts were introduced into the native schools in the 1930s, with mixed success. This innovation was significant in signalling the end of the hard-line assimilation policy.

Māori literature

Director of Education T. B. Strong wrote in 1930 that ‘The Maori language has no literature and ... the natural abandonment of the native tongue inflicts no loss on the Maori.’² When a request was made for the Māori language to be accepted into universities around the same time, the response was ‘Where is the literature?’ Those arguing against such attitudes were able to use George Grey’s collection of traditional Māori stories *Nga mahi a nga tupuna* and *Nga moteatea*, a book of traditional song poetry compiled by Apirana Ngata, to illustrate the existence of Māori literature.

Secondary education

Although secondary education became free in the 1930s, Māori had very limited access to secondary schooling, as high schools were in urban centres and Māori were still very much a rural people. In the late 1930s fewer than 1,000 Māori children attended secondary school – most of them at Māori boarding schools. Native district high schools were established from 1941 by adding secondary departments to existing schools; by 1956 there were 13. At first these were poorly resourced and heavily biased towards manual instruction, until the introduction of School Certificate, a national exam, in 1945.

The post-war period

After 1945 the Māori population grew rapidly and became increasingly urban. The number of Māori in mainstream schools began to far exceed those in Māori schools (as they became known from 1947). In 1955 Māori school numbers reached their peak of 166, but by this time department officials were planning the transfer of the schools to regional education boards. Māori communities, which regarded Māori schools as their schools, resisted the change. Advocates of Māori schools pointed to the fact that they catered more successfully to Māori needs than mainstream schools. However, the 1961 Hunn Report identified the extent of Māori disadvantage in the education system and advocated integration, which relied on Māori and Pākehā attending the same schools. In 1969 the remaining Māori schools were transferred to the control of the regional education boards.

Footnotes:

1. *Appendix to the Journals of the House of Representatives*, 1862, A-51, p. 38.
2. Quoted in John Barrington, *Separate but equal?: Māori schools and the Crown, 1867–1969*. Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2008, pp. 191–192.

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