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**Biculturalism in New Zealand Secondary Schools**

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**Introduction**

This paper draws from the research I did for my masters-level (M.Ed.) thesis. The research examined year 12 (sixth-form) students' attitudes & knowledge about biculturalism as it currently operates in New Zealand. Using multiple case studies in five different schools, the research explored a number of issues related to culture, biculturalism & multiculturalism. The findings of the research are inconclusive. Whilst the responses to some of the interview questions show evidence that students are engaging with bicultural & multicultural discourses, embedded in other responses are comments that allude to beliefs & values that are counter to the bicultural & multicultural agendas of social harmony & valuing diversity. Culture and identity are complex concepts and become more complex when situated in government politics, educational practices, media discourses and wider New Zealand society. In discussing that results of this research, these concepts and complexities will be discussed to illustrate the wider picture within biculturalism struggles to operate in New Zealand.

This paper is provocative and deliberately so. I make no apologies for this. It is important for Pakeha to critically & honestly think about our role in New Zealand society. As the dominant group, we use (and abuse) our position of power & privilege. Although this is not always true on a conscious and/or individual level, many times the interests of Pakeha collectively are prioritized at the expense of other groups (Vasil, 2000). Therefore, it is our ethical responsibility as members of the dominant group, and moral responsibility as partners to the Treaty of Waitangi to individually and collectively seek & implement strategies which allow for effective and collaborative models of power-sharing, of which biculturalism is one (Johnston, 1991: Schroder, 1993 in Spoonley, 1995: James, 2002: Stuart, 2002).

**Background & Rationale**

As a young Pakeha post-graduate student working within a Maori department in a New Zealand university, I was confused and perplexed by the contradictory messages I was given about many issues that were pertinent to Maori, but none more so than biculturalism. The arguments many of my colleagues had in favour of biculturalism were logical and commonsense. I was frustrated by what appeared at times as apathy on behalf of the government, ignorance on behalf of many of my Pakeha peers & society, and pure out-and-out academic point-scoring by some academics and government agencies. My confusion arose out of the difficulty in defining biculturalism, trying to implement biculturalism in daily life, the apparent gap between Maori agendas for biculturalism and Pakeha expectations and practice, and the overall yawning chasm between bicultural theory and practice; and this served as my motivation for selecting this topic for my masters thesis.

Biculturalism is a well-worn term in New Zealand (Pearson, 1990). The vast majority of New Zealanders are familiar with the term through its use in newspapers, magazines, on television, in museums, art galleries, government departments, schools & other educational institutions. However, if asked, many New Zealanders would find it difficult to provide a comprehensive & effective working definition of biculturalism. We use many terms in our vocabularies freely, and have a basic understanding of what they mean, but seldom are able to articulate precisely what they are or the philosophies that underpin them.

Education is a powerful tool in creating and reproducing ideas, values & beliefs. New Zealand education promotes values & norms through the curriculum, pedagogy & assessment procedures (Harker, 1985). For these reasons education is the most important context to incorporate bicultural policies & practices. Yet, there has been little research into effective bicultural teaching practices. The New Zealand Curriculum Framework (Ministry of Education, 1993) requires teachers to include bicultural perspectives in their teaching, yet some teachers do not know about these or there has been little professional development to help teachers develop effective bicultural teaching practices.

For many secondary school aged students who have grown up in New Zealand, biculturalism is a term that they have heard repeatedly through the media and the school system; e.g. *'New Zealand is a bicultural nation.'* Yet, how many students know what that means? This research examined year 12 (sixth-form) attitudes towards & knowledge about biculturalism, in order to provide a gauge not only for their understandings of biculturalism, but also as a gauge of how society as a whole understands biculturalism. Year 12 (sixth-form) students were selected for three reasons; firstly they are the future generation and will influence any further bicultural development; secondly they have grown up in a society that openly discusses biculturalism; and thirdly they will reflect whether government policies, schools and teachers are effectively teaching students about biculturalism.

This research sought to provide some answers to the following questions;

- How do year 12 (sixth-form) students perceive biculturalism as it currently applies to New Zealand?
- What practices have schools implemented to engage students in bicultural discourses?

### **Methodology**

In order to investigate the previous research questions, the case study method was employed. A case study examines what is happening in a given setting, with the focus on understanding the complexities of the social world (Feagin, 1991; Bouma, 2000). In order to begin to understand the complexities of how students perceive biculturalism, an investigation into the knowledge about and attitudes towards biculturalism was undertaken with a selected sample of students in five secondary schools. Conducting multiple case studies allowed a greater picture to be seen and strengthens the findings of the research. A number of schools in the lower North Island which were accessible due to time and/or money were approached to participate in the research, of which five accepted. Each school acted as a separate case with the boundaries of each case being the figurative school gates; the physical

setting of the school, the staff and students, the policies (both written & unwritten) by which the school operates, and any practices that occurs within that school. However, other societal influences, like the home and the media, were also included as they are influential forces in the development of young people's ideas, knowledge & beliefs.

The schools ranged from single-sex schools to co-educational schools, included both mainstream schools and schools with special religious characters, and both public & private schools. From each school a group of year 12 (sixth-form) students were randomly selected to participate in the research. Each groups of students ranged in number from 8-11 and were representative of the ethnic population of the school, to ensure that all groups had an opportunity to have a voice in the research, to ensure that a range of views of Maori, Pakeha and other ethnic groups were included. Including students with a range of ethnic backgrounds was important as it ensured that the results would not be biased by showing the knowledge and attitudes of one or two ethnic groups, as perspectives & perceptions of biculturalism vary between ethnic groups.

The interviews at each school consisted of a simultaneous oral and written group interview. Each student was given the opportunity to write down his/her responses to the interview questions whilst the oral interview was being conducted. This was to allow students to answer the questions in a way they felt comfortable and catered for students who preferred oral or written methods. The group interview was selected as the preferred interview method as it was less intimidating for students and allowed discussion around the topic to occur. The interview questions covered issues concerning students' knowledge of and attitudes towards their own culture(s), biculturalism, multiculturalism, Maori culture, Pakeha culture, school practices that enhanced or inhibited biculturalism and other societal influences that had affected that ways the students thought about or perceived biculturalism.

## **Results**

The responses from the interviews, and thus the results of the research produced rich qualitative data that was categorized into groups with similar themes. The four broad areas that the research data fell into were culture & personal identity, monoculturalism, biculturalism & multiculturalism, practices in schools, and societal influences. The selected responses below are a selection of the comments made in the interviews and are representative of reoccurring themes in the research data. Through using direct quotes from the students, analysis can be made of the embedded meanings in these comments and possible implications of these comments or this type of thinking.

### **Culture & Personal Identity**

In terms of culture & personal identity, there were several key themes that emerged from the discussions around what culture(s) do you identify with, what is Maori culture, and what is Pakeha culture?

*'To be Maori means ... (e.g. to do haka, poi, weave harakeke, eat hangi)'*  
All students were aware of what it means to be Maori, although this was often stereotypical (not all Maori can play the guitar!). Maori culture is often tokenized, as show by some students' lack of understanding of why protocols & traditions are

practiced. Maori were situated as a traditional or historic culture that has no relevance to today. To extrapolate this argument leads to a situation where Maori are seen as having little technology that is of value, especially economic. This claim that Maori culture has no contemporary relevance, devalues Maori culture and is reflected in teachers' attitudes and practices that minimise the role of Maori language and culture in the classroom (Simon, 1986). The ease with which students were able to identify aspects of Maori culture reinforces the degree to which Maori are seen as 'other' or different and thus abnormalised compared to Pakeha.

*'I'm Pakeha/European/New Zealander/whatever'*

As the culture of the dominant group is normalized in society and is the culture of our society, identity is not a crucial issue, as to be Pakeha is to be 'normal'. The ambivalence towards dominant group identity is evidence of confusion over the term and apathy towards prioritizing any engagement with discourses of 'race', identity and whiteness, as this could lead to potentially threatening challenges over the power & privilege the dominant group possesses (Bailey, 1999; Adams et. al., 2000).

*'Pakeha means negative things'*

Students' misconceptions and misunderstandings of the term Pakeha (e.g. Pakeha means white pig or white flea) has led some students to reject the label (Ranford, 2002; Dooley, 2003). The rejection of the term Pakeha leaves few other options (European, New Zealand European, New Zealander, Kiwi) which are also problematic as either irrelevant or assimilative.

*'I'm not European'*

For some students, the ties back to Europe are weak or no-existent. Europe is a vast continent with a diverse range of cultures. European is imprecise as it could refer to anywhere between Greenland & Turkey, Finland and Spain, and thus is problematic as a term of identity (as is the term Asian for the same reasons).

*'Pakeha culture is just busy bees, hokey-pokey ice cream and pavlova.'*

Whilst it is encouraging that students are able to identify a few aspects of Pakeha culture, Pakeha culture is reduced to festivals and traditions. This neglects to address issues of the key characteristics of Pakeha history in New Zealand; colonization, racism and breaches of the Treaty of Waitangi.

*'Pakeha don't' have a culture'*

The culture of the dominant group, through its use as the 'everyday', 'normal way' of doing things, has become invisibilised. As Roediger (1994 in Spoonley 2002) states *to ignore white ethnicity is to redouble its hegemony by naturalising it*. The pervasiveness and prevalence of Pakeha culture as 'normal' invisibilises Pakeha through normalization, just as air appears odourless and water tasteless. For one to be bicultural, that is comfortable in two cultures, one must first know their own culture. The greatest hurdle in achieving biculturalism in New Zealand is the lack of awareness and understanding of Pakeha culture

### **Monoculturalism, Biculturalism & Multiculturalism**

Through discussions about culture, biculturalism and multiculturalism, students' comments situate them around three main discourses; monoculturalism, biculturalism & multiculturalism.

*'We're all New Zealanders'*

Although true on one level (we are all New Zealand citizens), this assimilative thinking has the potential to invalidate minority cultures in favour of the 'national culture'. Assuming that all New Zealanders share a common culture, values & beliefs is naïve and assimilative as it denies difference, reinforces the normalcy of the dominant group, and renders invisible the inequalities between ethnic groups (Bell, 1986)

*'Biculturalism means two, multiculturalism means more than two'*

This simplistic definition of biculturalism and multiculturalism is satisfactory as a rudimentary definition, however this shows little understanding of the deeper philosophical issues that underpin these complex concepts.

*'New Zealand is multicultural because of all the different cultures here'*

Whilst on the surface this may appear to be true, this statement negates some crucial points. The tangata whenua status of Maori, their indigeneity to New Zealand is unique. Unlike any other ethnic group in New Zealand, Maori have no homeland to return to where their language and culture is still practiced. The Treaty of Waitangi, signed between Maori and the Crown entitles Pakeha to reside in New Zealand on the condition that the obligations contained within the Treaty are met. This is yet to happen. However, Pakeha still claim residency status in New Zealand and as numeric majority are the dominant power-holders. The founding document of New Zealand, the Treaty of Waitangi, enshrines biculturalism as the relationship between Maori & Pakeha. To claim that New Zealand is, could or should be multicultural is to negate the Treaty of Waitangi and the tangata whenua status of Maori. Multiculturalism can be (and is) used to do nothing by focusing on plurality and diversity, while neglecting to address issues of racial oppression, inequality and exploitation (Spoonley, 1998; Seuffert, 2003).

*'Biculturalism is a Maori thing'*

While the origins of the perception that 'biculturalism is a Maori thing' are likely to have emerged in the 1970s and 1980s and the pro-bicultural arguments of many Maori academics and activists, the inference that biculturalism is not a 'Pakeha thing' has serious implications and consequences. For Pakeha to feel excluded from or deliberately position themselves as not a partner in biculturalism effectively forestalls any effective bicultural working relationship, and thus negates all the associated responsibilities as a signatory to the Treaty of Waitangi and power-holder in New Zealand society. If Pakeha reject taking any action towards biculturalism, Maori are forced to becoming the motivating and driving force for biculturalism and as a minority lack access to the necessary political and economic resources to effectively petition for biculturalism. In rejecting biculturalism, Pakeha are arrogantly stating that there is nothing that they would gain from a bicultural relationship, and therefore refusing to engage in dialogue about power-sharing and the nature of bicultural relationships in New Zealand. The refusal by Pakeha to take ownership and active responsibility for biculturalism is a immoral and unethical as it is Pakeha, not Maori who are not bicultural (Cazden, 1988).



*'Biculturalism is important so that we all get along and live together'*

While it is important that students are able to recognise some of the benefits of biculturalism, the vast majority of student responses reflected warm, fuzzy, politically correct aspirations, that hold little in terms of making lasting changes in the power structures in New Zealand institutions and society.

*'Biculturalism is/isn't important'*

The question 'do you think biculturalism is important in New Zealand at this time' created emphatic replies and heated debates. Students were split (almost 50/50) on whether they personally perceived biculturalism to be important, with students taking one of the previous arguments; either biculturalism is important because it will create better (warm, fuzzy) relationships between Maori and Pakeha or that biculturalism is not important because New Zealand is a multicultural society and this must take precedence. Thus the results regarding the question whether biculturalism is important in New Zealand at this time are inconclusive.

### **Practices in Schools**

Through discussion about issues, events and practices in their schools, students were able to identify a number of practices that either at an individual level, class level or whole school level influenced the way the thought about and actively engaged in bicultural discourses and practices.

*'I was offended that I had to go to the powhiri when I don't understand Maori; having people from different races and having to accept it'*

A small minority of students objected to being forced to attend powhiri or having to accept the presence of students from different ethnic groups. While objections to attending powhiri were based on the length of the powhiri (more than one hour) and being unable to understand the Maori language and thus what was being discussed, the later comment alludes to more racist sentiments, yet these students were in the minority.

*'The aspects of our school that are bicultural are karakia in assembly and the principal greeting us in Maori'*

Students were able to easily identify where/when te reo Maori was used and quick to label gestures (like saying kia ora) as tokenistic if that was the only effort their teacher/principal made towards including te reo Maori in lessons/assemblies. Many students, especially Maori or second-language students, stated that they felt more included in the school by the use of bilingual greetings. However the students were critical of the gesture of using te reo Maori if it was not supported by the teacher/principal continually developing their Maori vocabulary or supporting Maori students in other practical ways.

*'Our history, social studies, geography & English teachers are good'*

When asked to identify the subjects or teachers that incorporated biculturalism in their classes, students identified history, social studies, geography & English as the only classes where they engaged in bicultural dialogue or practices. While it is great that these subjects/teachers are engaging in biculturalism and it is logical that these are the subjects that are doing so, this sends a dangerous message that biculturalism has no relevance to any other subject, which is untrue. In these discussions it also became clear that most bicultural discussions and practices are

initiated by individual teachers. The lack of support for teacher implementing bicultural practices at a school level and a national level, through training and resources, clearly expresses the ambivalence and lack of commitment on behalf of the schools and government towards biculturalism.

*'We had a great overnight stay in third form'*

Of all the bicultural practices, if students had the opportunity to (and took it or were forced to take it) to participate in a noho marae (stay on the marae) for any length of time from 1-3 nights, it was the most memorable bicultural experience they had at school. The vast majority of students (90%+) enjoyed their marae experience and reported feeling more comfortable in a marae, with Maori peers and generally had a greater understanding of Maori culture, while the minority found the experience threatening or uncomfortable for religious reasons. While a noho marae is valuable for students as it is a positive and enjoyable experience for the majority of students, the way that anything Maori is seen as bicultural (as everything Pakeha is seen as normal) is concerning. Yet, this is an important step as it is Pakeha (individuals and institutions) who are monocultural and needed to take steps to educate themselves about Maori culture and to include Maori culture in their daily lives, as Maori generally (as the minority) are already bicultural.

### **Societal Influences**

In the discussions about where they have learnt about biculturalism, students described a variety of media as influential, yet all agreed that the most influential context where they had learnt about biculturalism was through the discussions they had at home and the attitudes of their families.

*'At home we don't talk about Maori things'*

Whilst this comment appears problematic because the family does not engage in discussion about 'Maori things', without knowing more details further comment can not be made.

*'My family just fights over the Treaty of Waitangi'*

Some students referred to the fact that at home they discussed (and fought about) the Treaty of Waitangi and other topical events/issues. Discussion of these topics is positive and healthy, as long as all family members are able to express their opinions safely. Whilst some families had significant differences of opinions, all students enjoyed learning about how other family members viewed issues like the Treaty and none felt pressured to accept their parents' opinions.

*'I've learnt a lot through T.V.'*

This statement is evidence that television is a powerful media that students are receptive to. However, given the variety of material available through this and other easily accessible media (e.g. internet, radio, advertising), this powerful and influential forum needs to be carefully monitored to ensure correct information is being presented and derogatory views of any group are not being portrayed.

*'My family tell me to accept everyone'*

This liberal view was popular in the majority of students' homes. Most (90%+) students were empathetic towards the feelings of others, especially in terms of racist comments, jokes or remarks. These type of comments suggest that early

multicultural discourses (accept everyone, value diversity) have been taken onboard by students and are evidence that recent bicultural & multicultural education initiatives are successful, to a degree.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion I wish to refer back to a question raised in the abstract; to what degree can New Zealand claim to be bicultural and where does this situate us in terms of multicultural discourses? Using this previously discussed research as evidence, I would argue that New Zealand's claim to biculturalism is superficial. New Zealand society is aware of biculturalism sufficiently for it to become a part of our national identity in the combining elements of Maori and Pakeha culture in national 'Kiwiana' culture. The use of haka, hangi, harakeke, poi & moko alongside buzy bees, hokey-pokey, pavlova, gumboots supports this assertion that biculturalism is a part of our national psyche. However this research also shows that the gap between bicultural theory and practice, particularly that of power-sharing, is an indictment of the apathy or lack of commitment to 'true biculturalism' by the power holders in our society. Biculturalism can be considered a stepping stone towards multiculturalism. The aspects of bi/multiculturalism, like sharing power, respecting other culture(s) or valuing diversity, must be effectively negotiated between two cultures before attempting to negotiate them with three or more cultures. Whilst the presence of ethnic cultures other than Maori & Pakeha in New Zealand gives mandate to multiculturalism, the bicultural relationship in New Zealand is not sufficiently robust for us to be engaging in multicultural discourses, and as the old argument goes every culture other than Maori has a homeland to go back to – Maori don't (Nairn in Ministry of Education, 1990). They are tangata whenua. As partners to the Treaty of Waitangi, the dominant group in New Zealand society and thus the power-holders, Pakeha have ethical & moral obligations to ensuring the continuing development of biculturalism so effective, equitable relationships between Maori and Pakeha can be established.

### **Contact Details**

As this is an in-progress paper, I would value any comments, questions or feedback on both the content and presentation of this paper. Thank you.

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