



Speech: Boys in Education Conference – Wednesday 19 April, 2006*

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As a linguist by training, I found myself coming to this conference questioning the concept of 'challenging boys?' Was it intended that this conference set up strategies to challenge boys, to fix them up, to solve the problem of boys?

Or was it, instead, intended that this forum grapple with the notion that we teachers, school leaders, whanau, youth workers, policy makers – might be ourselves challenged by the existence of boys in our world.

From either interpretation, it didn't rest easily with my reading of the world. I have been uncomfortable with the blaming game that has evolved around discussions about boys in recent years –

- blaming mums for making their sons school lunches,
- blaming dads for being absent,
- blaming the failure of boys on the fact that there are too few male primary school teachers and far too many female ones,
- blaming boys for having too much aggression or not enough communication skills.

In preparing for this hui, I've read articles entitled, 'The Problem of Boys in New Zealand Schools'; I've surveyed the vast range of think tank strategies that have been thrown at this problem – the call for an affirmative action campaign for boys, the establishment of a ministerial reference group on boys education, the courses run on 'Problems for boys' life skills.

And yet, I'm not convinced.

For I wonder, why it is that when I look at my sons and my male mokopuna (grandchildren) that the concept 'problem' never enters my head?

Or, when I think of the young men who have come through Hoani Waititi Marae, who have mastered the art of mau rakau, who have given so freely of their lives and passion to Te Roopu Manutaki or when I see the male graduates of our kura kaupapa Maori leading full lives, with two languages, two universes, confident and creating possibilities – that blame and shame simply don't fit.

This concept of 'what about the boys' is one that has been floating around now for many many years. The response of special provision for boys is also well established. Indeed, in February 1823, James Kemp and James Shepherd taught Maori boys in a barn at the Kerikeri Mission Station – the very early beginnings of our first single-sex school for Maori. As an extremely proud former old boy of Te Aute Maori College I'd be the last to say that special provision for boys isn't necessary.

But my contention is around the language in which we frame our discussions. If we construct boys as a group of people who lack equality, resources, opportunity, expectations, confidence, talents, achievement, communication skills, literacy skills, support, attention we are forever restricting the discussion to one around negativity, a discourse of disadvantage.

In very many ways it mirrors the same issues that surrounded the responses to the question, what about the girls? Jones and Jacka pointed out, some ten years ago, that girls are described in:

unrelentingly negative terms as victims who need assistance and special attention for something they lack....they are harassed, disadvantaged, ignored, devalued, 'at risk'.

With that in mind, then, I come to this conference wanting to offer five ideas for celebrating our rangatahi (our youth), our girls and boys, our future leaders. And in doing so, I am mindful of the various situations that have been revealed with regard to 'boys in learning'; for example:

- the news this morning that girls are achieving better than boys at school in mainstream subjects,
- that there is a lack of good role models for growing boys and young men,
- that there are more women teaching boys than men – and the accusation of teaching 'by girls for girls',
- that boys in single sex schools do well,
- that co-ed schools are learning teaching styles from boys schools,
- that new programmes are being introduced to counter the boys lower success rate, and of course
- the high suicide rates for boys and young men.

But also, I wish to speak today using my Maori cultural worldview and knowledge of Maori society to discuss the issues before us.

You will all be aware of the history of Maori in the schooling system of New Zealand. And here I refer to the creation of the first Mission Schools in New Zealand in the early 1800's – where missionaries learnt to speak Maori, and used the Maori social structure as the framework for teaching. The curriculum in those days was, of course, concerned mainly with Christianity.

Then followed the Maori Boarding Schools where Government assisted and changed the curriculum. This was followed by the Native School System. During the period of around 1850 to 1950 colonisation took its toll on Maori social, political and cultural structure: the Tohunga Suppression Act of 1907; the Education Department's policy of corporal punishment for speaking the Maori language at school; the influence of the single white (Pakeha) teacher and his family in each village; the marginalisation of Maori boys in school – keeping them in manual pursuits instead of maths and the sciences; the great loss of Maori leaders in two world wars; all lead to the loss of the Maori language and saw Maori hell bent on achieving Pakeha goals by mid 20th Century.

The 1960's then found Maori with their social and political structure dismantled, few Maori language speakers and sitting at the bottom of the New Zealand socio-economic ladder. The struggle to save Te Reo Maori and the culture began at this time. The reconstruction of the Maori worldview and success as Maori struggled through until around 1980 when a cultural resurgence took roots. A plethora of initiatives drawing upon traditional Maori knowledge and philosophies turned the reassertion of Maori language and customs into a renaissance. This period saw kaupapa Maori initiatives arise and move into mainstream New Zealand. Such programmes as kohanga reo, kura, wharekura, wharewananga, iwi runanga, Maori sports bodies, Maori radio, Maori television and the like.

In many ways, therefore, the journey of Maori within New Zealand's formal education programmes could lend assistance to developing initiatives which may enhance boys' participation in education, and in society at large.

What we can see happening in the Maori situation is that Maori are succeeding in education through the use of initiatives that are not necessarily only for Maori but are initiatives that are particularly 'user friendly' to Maori.

And here, perhaps, is the parallel with the 'boys in education' situation. The five ideas, or suggestions that I offer here - while not being solely for boys, may well be 'user-friendly' to boys and so enhance their educational performance and contribute to their general well-being within society. That is, these ideas which are proposed as 'positive activity' allow us to promote the development of boys while still celebrating all of our rangatahi (both boys and girls) as our future leaders.

The first suggestion I would like to make, is that faithful old truism, there's no place like home. We have a whakatauki in te Ao Maori which I think is useful to this debate:

Tangata akona ki te kāinga, tungia ki te marae, tau ana.

If a man is taught at his home, he will stand with confidence on the marae, conducting himself properly, confidently and competently.

If we want our younger generation to create a world fit for our mokopuna, we must invest the time and effort required to nurture their leadership.

In the days prior to colonial settlement, the education of Maori children was a thorough preparation for life, at the same time giving plenty of scope for individual expression and growth. The focus was on the ability to climb mountains, to grow food, to build a canoe, to make a mat, to weave garments, read the tides, offer appropriate karakia (prayer and incantations), look after siblings etc. Learning involved the whole whanau, and was a lifelong responsibility. Everyone had a say in providing opportunities to assist in shaping the young mind.

The story of Te Rangi Hiroa (also known as Sir Peter Buck) demonstrates this ably. Te Rangi Hiroa is renowned as a pioneering anthropologist, the first Maori medical doctor, a politician, administrator, soldier, sportsperson and leader of the Maori people. He attributes much of his learning to a kuia called Kapuakore, his great aunt by blood, a woman who imparted her treasured knowledge of Ngati Mutunga values onto this chosen son. Upon her death, Te Rangi received Kapuakore's paddle, which he described latterly, as his most precious heirloom, saying:

I have studied under learned professors in stately halls of learning, but as I look at that paddle I know that the teacher who laid the foundation of my understanding of my own people, and the Polynesian stock to which we belong, was a dear old lady with tattooed face in a humbled hut walled in with tree-fern slabs.

It was not, and is still not unusual, for grandparents to oversee the upbringing and education of their mokopuna, while parents may be busying themselves with the fact of economic and social survival.

Contrast that with Sheridan McKinley's research, 'Maori Parents and Education', which concluded that Maori secondary school students in English-medium settings, were more inclined than any other group to perceive learning as something that happens at school between the hours of 9am and 3pm.

In today's age of efficiency, we seem to pile so many demands on that six-hour window of opportunity whereas the other 18 hours in a day are left untouched. Yet in kura kaupapa Maori, both parents and teachers perceive the role of the school differently. As Sheridan again states:

The education of the child is not the sole responsibility of the school; they understand that they must continue their child's learning at home.

During the 70's when I was twelve years on a large mainstream secondary school board it was noticeable that Maori parents generally played a minor role

in their children's education. Very few attended school functions and the 'meet the teacher' occasions.

In kura kaupapa Maori, however, the opposite is the case. Family (whanau) dominate all facets of the school life. They share in the curriculum choices, the administration, the school functions, the full range of activities including producing lunches, sleep overs (live-ins), cultural trips etc. Also the kura itself is structured around the whanau concept (i.e., user friendly to all participants). All teachers are called Whaea (Mum) or Papa (Dad), or similar terms within Maori, and actually have the full parental rights during the school hours – the children operate as a large family with a strong emphasis upon 'group success'.

The whanau model is a successful model (at least within a kaupapa Maori educational model). It is inclusive and supportive. It supports the children's own family structure by involving them in all their sons' or daughters' education.

I guess the main point here is the learning delivery structure changed with kura and permitted easy ownership and involvement of parents and family in the whole process. I believe that our mainstream schools also have to reach out to include the parents and family in the process of educating their sons (and daughters) and to cause the whole learning and caring situation to spill out into the homes. Correspondingly the learning curriculum needs to relate directly to our youth, to our families – to be meaningful, relevant and useful for them – even if it means we set for ourselves the challenge of mastering the iPod, handling DVDs and slipping easily into a MSN chatroom.

The second suggestion I have is that as parents, as teachers, as analysts, we take time to study the child before us. Charles Ahukaramu Royal has written in some depth about the practice of our tupuna, who would study the unique features of every child born into the whanau, to understand the special gifts that would distinguish that child.

They believed that if it was correct, tika, for a person to receive certain knowledge, then that person would be blessed with the appropriate talent. Upon identifying that special gift, perhaps gifts which bore resemblance to characteristics of those who had passed on before them, the whanau would undertake to nurture and create opportunities to enhance their natural abilities.

I often think how awesome it would be that if instead of a whanau receiving the traditional report card on their child's progress, the whanau instead took on the responsibility of monitoring and assessing how well the school was assisting them in meeting the unique needs of their child.

The whole business of the school meeting the needs of the individual's own gifts was demonstrated dramatically to us in the 1980's – we sent graduate children from our Kohanga Reo into state schools at the age of five. We had nurtured them to speak Maori language, to pray in the morning, to be cuddled

often during the day, to share their lunches, to hear the kaiako (teachers) call their own names several times a day, to sing and perform Maori performing arts, and to be regarded as sons and daughters of the kaiako and as brothers and sisters to the other kohanga children.

How wrong we had prepared them for a state school culture – where none of the above happened – we had deceived the children – told them the world was like a kohanga, that schools would recognise their individual talents – how wrong we were.

So, we then created Kura Kaupapa Maori to continue to nourish and care for, and focus on the individual's special needs, but still within a whanau milieu. This is rather an extreme example of a school not matching up with the student's needs but it illustrates the point.

The third suggestion I have is that instead of singling boys out as an exclusive group, with which we throw strategies at to address crime, suspension, truancy, drug and alcohol, underachievement problems; instead we think of developing and enhancing relationships as a key resource for boys to turn to, when issues arise.

The tuakana/teina model, which brings with it both responsibility and ownership of whanau knowledge, is a model which is nurtured and promoted at kura kaupapa. Tuakana/Teina – loosely translated as older brother/younger brother or older sister/younger sister – is drawn from the learning styles of traditional Maori society. Translated to today's times it simply means – older nurtures younger – or the one who knows helping the one who doesn't know – or the 'able' helping the 'unable'. It combines the wisdom and strategic edge gained through experience, with the enthusiasm and energy of the teina, to create a powerful driver for social change.

The process of learning becomes reciprocal – both tuakana and teina learning from each other. And with that, success may be sustained for both parties in the relationship. Tuakana/Teina, however, belongs firmly within the whanau concept and is only a part of many relationships offering security and support for boys to turn to. Such key supportive relationships should be encouraged from the wider community – such as the church community, sporting clubs, marae whanau, kapa haka, and the whole range of social organisations familiar to the families.

My fourth suggestion, is that our attention becomes focused on creating conditions ripe for success. Kaupapa Maori education has enabled us to redefine success in our own cultural terms. Equality does not equate with uniformity.

I believe the greatest challenge that confronts New Zealand at present is to enable the optimum conditions to ensure all groups are able to flourish in the ways which best respond to their cultural needs. To this end, I was so

disappointed with the way in which the Government responded to the report from the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights and fundamental freedoms of indigenous people. Included in the United Nations report was a key recommendation that entrenching the Treaty of Waitangi constitutionally will create positive recognition and meaningful provision for Maori as a distinct people, possessing an alternative system of knowledge, philosophy and law. Throughout the land, Maori breathed a huge sigh of relief, that at last our situation was understood - and our distinctive and unique identity celebrated rather than treated as 'the other' or the problem.

This is not a new idea of course. I was looking back at the Annual Report of the Education of Native Children in 1922, when the Honourable Apirana Ngata, had this to say:

Those who made a study of the education of the Native children would bear out the opinion that there was also a Native mind and a method of reasoning ingrained by centuries of race upbringing in the average Maori child that required to be reached in a particular way.

Internationally, the proposal to reach outwards to embrace different and distinctive world views is acknowledged as a critical factor in educational success. Trinh T. Minh-ha, filmmaker, essayist and musician, born in Vietnam, raised in the USA, trained in Paris, the Philippines, America, working in Africa, teaching in Berkeley – is a classic example of someone who has embraced the opportunity to demonstrate that west is not always best; or that white is right. She says:

The understanding of difference is a shared responsibility which requires a willingness to reach out into the unknown.

Within New Zealand we have been preoccupied with perpetuating a mono-cultural (Western) approach to many facets of our daily life. The richness of one culture hardly flows over into the other culture. After my Maiden Speech to Parliament, I was shocked to feel the reaction of surprise that many non-Maori felt as they realised that Maori really did have a long history of living in these islands.

Sharing and promoting each other's cultures not only promotes peace and goodwill within the communities but it creates greater opportunities for meaningful relationships to be established.

Finally, my fifth strategy, is to appreciate that 'sex' may not automatically be the most definitive way of explaining a student's situation – as opposed to culture, to class, to whanau and hapu identity, to the notions of gendered identities by which we understand that both girls and boys have possibilities to develop masculine or feminine traits.

Thinking about Te Aute for instance - although I acknowledge the initiatives that school is making at implementing boys education strategies, supported by Dr Joseph Driessen, one of the speakers at this conference; their emphasis is also very much on Maoritanga. Their school prospectus states: 'It is our aim that Maoritanga be seen as a way of life, that it is alive and relevant to our lives, that it has practical application in everyday life'.

Learning must not be restricted or reduced by arbitrary boundaries. Inevitably the disadvantage of racism must be unbroken if we are to ever achieve progress.

I was really shattered to read some research about the Arts curriculum in New Zealand which reported that boys from pre-school to Form 5 who do arts subjects may be bullied because of their association with feminine curricula, and that this is particularly so for Maori boys. When I think of the proud history throughout this land of Ngapuhi men performing karanga, of women leading haka or mau rakau, of men performing poi, of women mastering the art of whaikorero, I am saddened to think that options and opportunities are being restricted on the basis of sex-role stereotypical assumptions.

Mason Durie has noted that:

Maori live in diverse cultural worlds. There is no one reality nor is there any longer a single definition which will encompass the range of Maori lifestyles.

We have a word in te reo, wheiao, which describes a state of transition. I believe Aotearoa is in a state of transition which can see us move from a nation fixated on problems and deficit analysis; obsessed with punitive approaches such as locking young offenders up in adult jails; to a nation which looks to study the potential in our children; to actively seek to involve the whole whanau in the science of learning; which looks for opportunities to create solutions.

I hope this conference will be a key forum to lead this debate forward, to reach out into the unknown, and we in the Maori Party look forward to working further with you.

[*Manuscript provided without macrons]

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Pita Sharples comes from the tribe of Ngati Kahungunu of Hawkes Bay, his sub-tribes are Ngai Te Kikiri o te Rangi and Ngati Pahauwera. Pita was Chairman of the Ngati Kahungunu tribe from 1982-1990. He has a doctorate in anthropology/linguistics and is formerly Professor of Education at the University of Auckland.

His lifelong passion has centred around Hoani Waititi marae, one of Aotearoa's first intertribal marae for urban Maori, which he built. Dr Sharples founded the first kura kaupapa Maori in the country at Hoani Waititi in 1985, and later developed the first whare kura (secondary school) for graduates of kura kaupapa.

Dr Sharples has also created the New Zealand National School of Maori Weaponry, which he was appointed to as Tumu Whakarae (Master). He has established Te Roopu Manutaki Maori Cultural Group, which he has led, composed and choreographed for 38 years. He is the only man to have competed in all Aotearoa Maori festivals since their inception in 1972 and has won the national male leader trophy a record 5 times.

Dr Sharples pioneered the development of the Race Relations Office in NZ and was appointed the inaugural chief executive officer from 1972-1980.

He is co-leader for the Maori Party and was elected to Parliament in 2005 as the Member of Parliament for Tamaki Makaurau.

Pita is proud father of five children and eight mokopuna.