

Indigeneity and Reconceptualising Māori Education Policy

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Abstract: This paper discusses indigeneity as a theoretical idea which gives one possible conceptual framework to G. Raumati Hook's model for Māori education.

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G. Raumati Hook rhetorically asks: 'why cannot Māori be content with mainstream education?' and: 'What is it that Māori want (Hook, 2007, p.4)? His answers address the connection between culture and education and a need for the 'reintegration of Māori education with Māori culture' (Hook, 2007, p.1). There is also the purely pragmatic consideration that mainstream schooling has not delivered Māori the levels of success required to participate fully in the modern economy.

For Hook, then, there are three problems to consider in the construction of an education system that reflects 'what Māori want'. The first is to address the loss of culture arising from 'the belief within government and mainstream society that only a single culture exists within this nation'. The second concerns the disengagement of Māori from mainstream secondary schooling, and the system's failure to respond. The third, 'concerns the development of Māori education to the heights of international scholarship, but reflecting those unique elements born from a Māori framework. Reinvigoration of Māori culture and education is essential for Māori, and one might think essential for the nation as a whole' (Hook, 2007, p.2).

Essentially, Hook seeks to wrest from the nation state its neo-colonial assumption of power and authority over Māori in the educational sphere. This ambitious project, attracting widespread Māori support, requires a reconceptualisation of the theoretical basis of Māori/Crown relations and of the Māori position in the modern pluralist democracy. It is therefore instructive to think about the Canadian political scientist James Tully's question: 'What theoretical and political space exists for indigenous peoples to establish terms of engagement on the basis of non-colonial relationships?' (Tully, 2000, p.50) The politics of indigeneity is one such emerging theoretical space, with significant implications for how one might think about education policy.

Indigeneity serves a transformative role in allowing indigenous peoples to think about the terms of their 'belonging' to the nation state with reference to their own aspirations. It is a discourse of both resistance and transformation responding to what, Hook for example, describes as 'the attempts of mainstream to impose Eurocentric cultural values and education on Māori' (Hook, 2007, p.1). It constitutes 'a fundamental challenge to the prevailing social and political order' requiring colonial ideas about public policy, authority, and power, to make way for political spaces of indigenous autonomy' (Fleras, 2000, p.12). Indigeneity emphasises the right to be different in some senses and the same in others – the opportunity to live in the modern world while at the same time preserving one's ancient cultural heritage (Fleras & Elliot, 1996, p.191). Although indigeneity requires pragmatic acceptance of the limits to minority power and influence in the pluralist democracy, it can approach policy questions from an unapologetically Māori-centred position. Answers to what Māori want from education can therefore be considered

beyond a compromise co-option of western ideas, and from a coherent set of pragmatic principles as indigenous paradigm.

Among the tangible outcomes of the politics of indigeneity are the Māori educational institutions which have contributed to the revitalisation of language and culture. Indigeneity assumes that Māori ought to take control of the education of their children, even though the school has consistently been a 'contested site of struggle and resistance' (Maaka & Fleras, 2000, p.114). Like the former native schools, contemporary schools are not necessarily 'politically or intellectually neutral sites of learning' (Walker, 1986, p.2). They are simultaneously coercive tools of assimilation and sources of new knowledge and skills contributing to cultural protection and advancement, and facilitating engagement in the post colonial order, but on one's own terms. Māori seek authority over education so that they are better placed to have their expectations of schooling addressed by a system that is presently largely unresponsive to the higher quality education that Māori require. At the very least, Māori seek educational opportunity that is not diminished, relative to others, by race.

Indigeneity is 'the responsibility of indigenous people to reproduce their social order with the responsibility of governments to assist them' (Rowse, 1998, p.95). Reproduction of the social order logically requires considerable authority over education, because education profoundly influences the social order. Māori opportunities to exercise authority and influence have been limited by the bureaucratic tendency towards centralised decision-making and the totalitarian nature of a closed education market (Benton, 1990, p.177). Yet in spite of the state's control over curriculum, pedagogy, and financial resources, it is also true that it is in education that governments have been most willing to allow limited self determination. This creates a political and intellectual tension for conservative liberals, like the former leader of the opposition, Don Brash, who recognised the inconsistency of the liberal emphasis on choice as a right of citizenship with the prospect that the Māori exercise of choice might be seen as arising legitimately from the politics of indigeneity, drawing authority from the Treaty of Waitangi. Brash did not, however, admit that liberalism cannot secure individual freedom if it is not concerned with group rights. People whose group membership is fundamental to their social being cannot be free without access to the group's language, property, and culture. Group membership can only be challenged if it occasions injustice to others. Being affronted by prejudice to the wish of others to speak their own language and live in their own way does not constitute injustice, because:

In developing a theory of justice, we should treat access to one's culture as something that people can be expected to want whatever their more particular conception of the good. Leaving one's culture, while possible, is best seen as renouncing something to which one is reasonably entitled. This is a claim, not about the limits of human possibility, but about reasonable expectations (Kymlycka, 1995, p.86).

The broadening of the focus of Treaty of Waitangi policy, during the 1990s, to include implications of indigeneity, rather than just material disadvantage, assisted the emergence of a fear that Māori might receive material privilege on the basis of race rather than need, in contravention of principles of individual equality. Indigeneity responds to the political question of whether Māori are indigenous peoples with rights, or poor people with the same needs as any other poor people. Māori have a reasonable entitlement to have needs, even when they are the same as the needs of others, met in preferred cultural context. Yet need, can only be judged with reference to culture, which means that the cultural norms of another group cannot be the benchmark for the progress of one's own. Needs based public policy also invites comparisons

which ascribe deficits to Māori, which makes Māori, rather than their political history, the problem.

Arguments of justice are rarely sufficient on their own to realise political objectives, so the New Zealand economic 'need' for improved Māori educational performance gives Māori quite considerable political leverage. It means that Māori are better placed to extract concessions from the state in pursuit of independent aspirations. So the outlook for Māori is by no means as bleak as Hook suggests. There is, nevertheless, a conflict for the state. The national interest requires Māori development, but preferred Māori paths to development require a particular recognition which populist politics interprets as separatist and racial privilege. Where need contests indigeneity, the 'mainstream's' preferred culturally homogenous public policy competes with the notion that cultural preservation is a legitimate right and reasonable preference for Māori. This is not a special privilege, nor is it additional to elementary rights of citizenship. If citizenship is inclusive, Māori do not need privileges or extra rights. Indeed rights of humanity, inherent to inclusive citizenship, are diminished when sought or granted as privilege.

Although indigeneity does not require privilege, it does add a purpose to formal education beyond equipping individuals for participation in wider society in the same way that all citizens would expect. Indigeneity requires education to contribute to the preparation of Māori to participate in Māori society. This challenges the state's use of schooling to advance assimilationist objectives. Instead, as Durie argues, the education system must recognise that:

Māori progress, whether in commerce, education, or science could not be accomplished without taking cognisance of Māori values and the realities of modern Māori experience. In other words, Māori development was not solely about making economic progress or reducing state obligations towards Māori; it was also about being able to retain a Māori identity and formulate development according to Māori aspirations. (Durie, 2003, p.304).

In summary, Hook's plan for educational reform requires attention to the conceptual basis of power relationships between Māori and the Crown, and to how Māori position themselves as indigenous citizens of a pluralist democracy. The politics of indigeneity offers theoretical space for thinking about these questions, which are preliminary to the creation of an education system that integrates culture with education and better equips Māori to achieve their material aspirations.

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