

Maori in Australia: education issues

Speech to Te Whanau o Waipareira's '21st Century Education – Summit 2008', 16 April 2008

There are today around one in seven Maori living in Australia, up from one in 16 in 1986 and one in 50 in 1966. That's a rise from 4000 forty years ago, to 30,000 twenty years ago, to what will be 110,000 or more today.

Looking out to the future, if this kind of absolute and proportional increase continues unabated there could, by mid-century, be between a quarter and a third of all Maori in Australia, or easily upwards of 200,000 people.

Even if the sharp upward trend starts to taper off we are still looking at a situation where Maori society has an increasingly Australian future. Bear in mind that migrants are typically in the young adult age bracket, and so even a modest amount on ongoing net out-migration will see that Australian proportion rise quickly, because of course those young adults will have children in Australia rather than here.

It seems a staggering statistic but of course it's no different to what's happening with other New Zealanders. The difference is that, within a generation, most of the children of those other New Zealanders have ceased to be identifiably from New Zealand. They may, for example, have become white Australians. But Maori retain their New Zealand connection, for obvious reasons, through each succeeding generation. They are, if you like, the most enduring and highly visible component of the New Zealand diaspora.

Why are they going? A survey I carried out for Te Puni Kokiri in 2006, which was answered by 1200 Maori around Australia, revealed the reasons, which are set out in my report published last year. There are essentially a range of what you can call 'push' and 'pull' factors.

The pull factors are things like the wages and economic opportunities Australia offers (which seem to be clearly the biggest motivation). Then there are the so-called 'lifestyle' factors such as the sun, the multiculturalism, the shopping and the entertainment options. Then there's the desire to join whanau who are already in Australia – such as grandparents going over to be with their Australian-born mokopuna. Sometimes 30 to 40 members of one whanau will all move over in a kind of chain migration to keep the whanau together.

Then there are the push factors – the negative aspects of life in New Zealand that make people want to leave. These include the constant media focus on negative news stories about Maori, and the perception that Maori suffer from stereotyping and prejudice. Maori climb a few rungs up the race ladder in Australia and the negativity there is largely directed at other groups.

Then there's a desire to get away or keep one's children away from the influence of gangs, the impact of crime and domestic abuse, and the dangers of drugs like P. Australia is simply the place people go to get away from their bad habits or bad company, and to make a clean start.

Then there are reasons which you could describe as wanting to step away from negative Maori factors. Some said things like success wasn't celebrated within their whanau and if one tried to get ahead one was accused of being 'too Pakeha', or they resented the notion that the whanau's interests had to come before their own, or that Maori were 'stuck in a rut', with Pakeha seeing no potential in them and Maori themselves not being able to step outside this limiting paradigm.

Now if you've been reading Muriel Newman or the Truth recently you'd be forgiven for thinking some of those push factors are the only reason I said people were leaving. That's not the case at all, but then neither do I want to downplay that kind of sentiment.

Overall there will be a mixture of reasons in every individual's decision to leave – or to return to New Zealand, for that matter. Economic factors are the key reason for leaving, but if you want to understand the full picture of why Maori are going you have to look at the push factors too.

How are they getting on in Australia? Essentially, there are pluses and minuses.

They tend to maintain a strongly New Zealand-focused outlook and have minimal participation in the Australian polity – 75% do not become Australian citizens and they are massively disenfranchised as a result. Those who do become Australian citizens grit their teeth and call it 'having the operation'. A lot of Maori in Australia don't even realise that they might be eligible for the kind of support the Australian Government provides to help settle ethnic migrants.

They're fighting an uphill battle to retain knowledge of their culture and language. They simply don't have the number of kaumatua and cultural experts that are needed.

They suffer a lack of community cohesion arising from the problematic nature of pan-tribal and kaupapa-based (as opposed to whakapapa-based) representation and governance. It's very hard to claim to represent the Maori of a particular town or city, and fragmentation of effort is a perennial problem.

They lack communally-owned cultural space and face many difficulties, culturally-speaking, when a death occurs. Tangis invariably take place in people's homes, which can be a cause of much added stress to the whanau at a difficult time.

But despite all this, they predominantly report that their finances, employment, housing and social life have all significantly improved since they left New Zealand. With that, a lot of them said they were happier too.

One respondent to the 2006 survey, a woman from north Queensland, put it all like this:

The Maori people have more success in this country than New Zealand. They can afford to educate their children, buy homes, cars and get themselves out of gangs, drugs and alcohol. Whereas in New Zealand they can barely afford to survive and turn to crime or dig themselves into a deep hole of self pity. When we go back to visit friends and whanau after 10 or more years we find our people are still doing the same old thing we were all doing 20 years ago and they are still broke.

We love and miss our country, our land, our water, our people, our culture, our Maoritanga, our friends and whanau, but we've all had a taste of the good life here, and success, and we don't want to come home to New Zealand only to end up struggling and broke again.

This all brings me to the theme of this summit, which is around education, achievement and realising potential.

There's been a lot of media comment about whether Maori are doing better in Australia, and if so why. My research makes clear that many Māori in Australia do see themselves as better off for the move. My own view is that living in Australia does involve a trade-off – there's a material benefit, but a clear deficit in terms of access to traditional Māori culture. It seems overall that Maori over there think the material advantage wins out, but they know it comes at a price, because a lot of them really do begin to long for the things they feel they took for granted in New Zealand. Many told me they really found themselves as Maori when they got to Australia and in fact one survey result was that Maori in Australia believe they feel a greater need to connect with their culture than Maori in New Zealand.

It all begs the question as to how Maori children are faring in school in Australia compared to New Zealand. Adult Māori in Australia have usually gone there for the purpose of work and are thus able to define their success in those terms. But what about those who have had no choice in the move or were born in Australia themselves?

One might assume that the loss of Māori cultural knowledge experienced by many of these tamariki will have an impact on their sense of identity, self-worth and on their learning. One certainly does hear stories of rangatahi in Australia who go 'off the rails' because they lack the extended whanau support structures

and feel they don't 'fit in' in Australia, and are thus more susceptible to the many temptations.

However, it is possible that they are actually doing better at school than here. In multicultural Sydney, for example, they may not carry the baggage they do at home of low teacher expectations or low expectations of themselves. I met Māori who'd been to university in Australia who were convinced that their parents' move there had been what had allowed them to 'break the mould'. It freed them, they said, from an environment where they didn't believe their potential would have been nurtured. One woman even said she had moved because she didn't want her children 'held back by other Maori kids putting them down for wanting to be something more'.

The teachers of Māori children in Australia may well also see them as 'Kiwi kids' and not specifically as Māori at all. Some Māori get frustrated by the extent to which Australians tend to see them as undifferentiated New Zealanders, for obvious reasons, but for others it is something to celebrate, for it at once removes the prospect of any negative racial stereotyping. As one woman in Sydney put it, 'One of the benefits in moving to Australia is the Maori and Pakeha cultures are NOT segregated, Australians refer to ALL of us as Kiwis.'

One crucial difference is that Maori in New Zealand are an involuntary minority and Maori in Australia are not. Being a voluntary minority inevitably leads to a change of mindset. There certainly will be, amongst many Maori in Australia, the immigrant's motivation to do well for themselves and their whanau and for their children to achieve as well. This is partly a reaction against what society perceives as Maori failure in New Zealand. People have the idea that, if you do well in Australia, no one will be able to accuse you of having had a hand-out to get there, and no-one – including your own relations – can detract from your success. Australia's also seen as the so-called 'Lucky Country', and so many leave with the full expectation of bettering their lives.

Despite all this we obviously can't make any conclusions with respect to education until we have collected good data on key indicators in educational achievement to compare Maori across the Tasman with Maori here. In general that sort of data isn't kept on an ethnic basis in Australia. One place to start, though, would be to extract some figures from the Australian census on Maori participation in education and highest school qualifications.

Whichever way you look at it, therefore, Maori have become a trans-national people. I concluded my report with the suggestion that the Government engage more with Maori in Australia – through the moderate extension of cultural benefits and support to them – in order to help maintain the strength of their connection and potentially to reap an ongoing benefit to New Zealand. This is much in the same way that all kinds of states around the world engage with their diasporas because they see them as important sources of development money, facilitators

for home businesses entering the global market, and vital contributors to the national image abroad.

As I say, Maori in Australia should in theory remain strongly linked to New Zealand in identity and outlook. And I think that's something Maori in New Zealand can leverage off. I don't think we should act out of obligation, but rather because of the opportunity – and I think both the Government and iwi organisations should reach out more to Maori across the Tasman. It will help ensure that Australian-born Maori children can be part of New Zealand's future as well as Australia's.