

MEANINGFUL INCONSISTENCIES:
BICULTURAL NATIONHOOD, THE FREE MARKET AND SCHOOLING IN
AOTEAROA/NEW ZEALAND

by Neriko Musha Doerr

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This research monograph reports an ethnographic case study focussed on the discursive construction of identities and intercultural dynamics in a secondary school in a provincial town in the North Island at the end of the 20th century. Having spent time in the district earlier, firstly as a school exchange student from Japan in the late 1980s and again as part of a Master's project in the early 1990s, Doerr returned in 1997 to do fieldwork for her doctorate with Cornell University. For nearly a year she lived in the community she called Waikaraka to protect the privacy of participants (although is not too difficult to identify) and immersed herself in the school as a researcher and informal teacher's aide.

Introductory chapters relate the study to the context of Aotearoa New Zealand, lay the theoretical framework for method/analysis, and situate the work within its provincial political economy. The take is acute, with the outsider eye candid and unwavering in its critique, locating the educational focus within a wider politics of colonial Maori–Pakeha relations, as well as providing a compelling reminder of how our society was so radically re-ordered by the neoliberal shift of the 1980s and 90s.

Data were gathered from a wide range of Maori and Pakeha informants, utilising a mix of interview and observation throughout the study period which coincides with the bedding-in of the neoliberal reforms to the education system. This context is important because it saw the growth of a range of Maori education options including, Whare Kura which, in the case of Waikaraka High School, was the focus of key Maori educational practices that lay at the heart

of the dynamics under study. The data presented seem strong and authentic, with diverse participants giving detailed responses to what might be termed 'sensitive issues' – the 'separatism' of Maori education, Maori educational performance, identity and culture in the context of a colonial society.

The analytic work turns on the concept of 'regime of difference' drawn from Bourdieu and others, contrasting understandings of the social world – such as between English and Te Reo or mainstream schooling and Whare Kura – that Doerr prefers for its articulation of dominance. This works reasonably well for institutional/empowered speakers, but seems less useful when applied to the expression of alternative views by outgroup members who struggle to have their dissenting voices heard. Compared to concepts such as discourse or ideology, the term seems cumbersome and by placing competing 'regimes' on the same footing, carries the risk of obscuring the power relations implicit and explicit in the dynamics under study. On this point of power Doerr surprisingly diverges from theorists of this area (Hall, Althusser) to assume that speakers have choice as to how they relate to societal regimes of difference.

I do not take individuals to be always already a subject nor inescapably interpellated (p19)

Again this may be valid for the empowered but highly problematic for the marginalised. Huge amounts of Maori energy go into creating and maintaining spaces in which they can legitimately and proactively enact their preferred structures and practices.

One of the critical events that Doerr analyses illustrates the difficulty for this theoretical frame. She observed an incident in which Maori students laughed pointedly when a Pakeha teacher mispronounced Maori names at roll call. This was quite reasonably interpreted as an act of resistance and even subversion (laughter is very difficult to discipline) but this conclusion would repay more critical analysis. Doerr seems to treat the laughter as the decisive act in this encounter but the teacher simply ignored it and apparently would have continued to do so but for Doerr's intervention informing the teacher about Maori pronunciation. Students are subject to teacher (and ultimately State) authority and so have limited avenues to express dissent from and rejection of, hegemonic practice. They were unable on the basis of their credentials (age, experience, eloquence, rights) to engage in egalitarian debate over the mispronunciation. They were also prohibited from other displays of resistance (walkout, aggression) at the manifest disrespect of culture, so the Maori students took the only option left to them. They were not 'choosing' their path

(since silence means acquiescence with monocultural colonialism) but taking the only option available to them to express their resistance.

In contrast, the theoretical schema works well when analysing the discursive construction of Maori educational performance by Pakeha teachers and parents. As Doerr points out when discussing the streaming system, these speakers report an absence of Maori in the upper class because their marker of Maori identity – attendance in the *Whare Kura* – means they see Maori who are in the upper class as mainstream students. At the same time they see *Whare Kura* (which is non-streamed) as comparing unfavourably in terms of the educational outcomes of the upper class. Together the operation of these regimes of difference construct discourses of Maori educational under-achievement. Diversity of perceptions and opinions among Pakeha informants supports the notion that they are indeed free to choose which discursive resources they will draw on in accounting for Maori educational performance.

The accounts of selection of students into the streamed system that was being phased into the school is a rich seam of data showing the ways in which differing constructions of the processes and structures are worked to construct creditable accounts of the actions and positions of staff. Again although regimes of difference (mainstream vs. Maori medium education) are evoked, her strength lies in deconstructing the discourses in her data to reveal the interests, pressures (especially from middle-class parents) and tensions in the accounts her informants offered of their performance in these processes. Equally insightful are Doerr's analyses of the ways in which the arrangements operated to limit the choices and possibilities available to Maori children, particularly if they were in Maori medium education in the catchment schools that *Wai-karaka High School* served. Such children were routinely not offered places in upper-track classes and automatically went to either lower-track or *Whare Kura*, whatever their abilities and aspirations might have been.

A further chapter focuses specifically on the ways in which informants interpreted and understood the *Whare Kura*, exemplifying the regime of difference in 'Maori vs mainstream education.' Parents, staff and students articulated accounts that stressed the exclusive, unwelcoming features of this structure in ways that resonate very strongly with the hegemonic Pakeha discourses about privilege that are part of a generic Pakeha common sense in the realm of Maori/Pakeha relations. There was an opportunity here (and at other points) to have linked the findings to other local studies of Pakeha discourse such as those of Wetherell, Liu, Nairn, Huygens, Tuffin and others but, even on its own, this analysis makes a helpful contribution to this domain, especially with its

educational focus.

Perhaps these characteristics contribute to a certain softness in terms of the conclusions, which suggest variously that Pakeha need more information so that they do not use terms like 'separatist' of the Whare Kura and that Maori students could educate staff and others about correct pronunciation of Te Reo. Such options contrast sharply with the comprehensive approaches that Maori are advocating and implementing in relation to the colonising aspects of the Pakeha education system which curiously get very little mention despite the acknowledged presence of the waananga in the town. The sovereignty-based history and politics of kohanga reo and kura kaupapa that created Maori educational institutions apart from Pakeha schooling are given only passing mention. Similarly the Kotahitanga approach pioneered by Russell Bishop is absent and yet it is responsible for a change programme that, by changing Pakeha teaching practices, is revolutionising Maori primary school outcomes (and producing gains for social cohesion), through the adoption of an overtly self-determining political stance that is highly critical of colonial education practices.