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INTERCULTURAL RELATIONS

1. RACIAL MISUNDERSTANDING OR THE PAKEHA'S DILEMMA

Marks Donovan and his young teacher wife had quickly adjusted to many of the new demands of life in an extremely isolated, rural district deep in the King Country. The small, two teacher school of Kohunui was a challenge and to a young man fresh from teachers' college, university and two years of teaching in a provincial centre a considerable step on the upward promotional ladder.

It was strange and unfamiliar too, to a young man accustomed all his life to the European society of a southern city where someone of another race was a rarity, to be a man of some importance in a small rural community for the most part Maori. His duties as registrar of deaths and births, postmaster and school teacher involved him daily in differing associations with a people he had hitherto had no contact with whatsoever

Marks could still with great clarity remember the long drive in their small fragile car, baby son in a basinette in the rear, from the provincial city where he and his wife had spent their first two years of marriage. After leaving the main tarsealed route they had travelled a further twenty miles along a rough stone strewn road through bush, blackberry, shrub and marginal hill country to arrive at a vantage point looking down on a narrow valley. This cleared area was marked by a single group of buildings, obviously the school, residence and associated out buildings. All other signs of habitation were the infrequent, unpainted, small house and milking shed merging with the surrounding bush and tea tree.

These immediate impressions were a far cry from the idyllic picture Marks had built up when after studying a map of the North Island, he had made an application for Kohunui. However, despite the eerie silence of the nights, the twice weekly rural mail delivery, the urgent need to learn how to milk a house cow, the twenty mile distance from a store, doctor and other elements of civilisation, the raw, city bred boy had settled in well.

The children of the school numbered over thirty. They ranged in age from five to fifteen, there being four secondary school pupils who worked from correspondence school sets at the school rather than at home where conditions were not favourable to study. With the exception of four children from two families they were all local Maoris, representing the twelve families of the small inter-related community.

Theirs was a largely subsistence economy, based on some dairying, fishing in the nearby harbour, hunting pigs and goats in the extensive bush and scrub land and cultivating large gardens in the spring to autumn seasons.

The Donovans readily became accustomed to the need to provide more than just the formal educational requirements for the group of shy, reticent, yet willing children to whom English was a second language and one little used out of the school grounds. The school also provided often needed medical and hygenic facilities and Marks and his wife accepted their wider role of teacher, nurse and community standard keeper with enthusiasm and some sense of missionary purpose.

Marks was determined to assimilate as much as he could of Maoritanga. He began to learn Maori through the Correspondence School but was disappointed when his attempts to use some of his new knowledge were somewhat lukewarmly received. A certain coolness towards outsiders was apparent and even the few Pakeha farmers were slow to offer friendship. Much no doubt could be explained in terms that the school was in the heart of the King Movement country and the people were the inheritors of the troubles and resentments of the previous century.

Even the school children could be moody and wary and this often coincided with local events, the prolonged absence of parents in the nearby town, the planting and harvesting periods and when they were more than usually tied to the twice daily routine of milking cows.

The older pupils were the chief cowhands of the district. Their attention and deligence at school were closely correlated to the long hours they spent in the milking shed. This was particularly marked when comparisons were made with classroom achievements of the four Pakeha children who came from the only two large sheep farms in the area. Although racial harmony was outwardly cordial, the Pakeha children who were free from the enormous chores most of their Maori peers carried, and living in a language environment in which they were at ease, were invariably to the fore scholastically. Marks found situations arising which took some skill, commonsense and tact to defuse, and so preserve an atmosphere of unity and goodwill.

Another feature which was disturbing was the incidence of petty theft. Donovans' educational and personal philosophy incorporated trust and openness but these aspects had not been reciprocated in full. Various items had disappeared from the school's storeroom and both Marks and his wife were aware of their predecessors experience when many of their household possessions were stolen during a holiday absence.

Nevertheless it was the frequency of absences of many of the children - absences which were clearly known and connived at by the parents - which caused the greatest concern. This he expressed to the School Committee whose meetings were always an exhausting exercise, business being conducted in Maori followed by translation by Robert Rahere, the chairman, into and from English for Donovans' benefit. They, he felt, did not share his concern. It had always been customary for children to actively assist in planting, harvesting and other communal and family activities and this young teacher's enthusiasm, somewhat naive and brash attitude was not entirely appreciated. They promised however to discuss the teacher's concern when they all next met at the Marae.

Marks' zeal though, when a little later the annual potato and kumera planting absences occurred, in sending out official absence notices, did not improve the already smouldering atmosphere related to this issue.

Matters became really complicated when Joe Tinira, the grand patriarch of the district and one related, if by Pakeha concepts rather distantly, to every Maori of the area died after a short illness. The tangi, which promised to be large, long and very important was arranged for the local Marae, a short distance from the school.

At the time of a previous tangi, on the death of a city relative buried in the local cemetry, several children were absent for upwards of a week, returning to school reluctant and moody. On that occasion Marks had paid a visit to the home of the chairman of the School Committee. His request that the chairman intervene and effect the children's return to school had not been as successful as Marks had hoped. For this large tangi Marks wondered what the outcome would be. He was not long in finding out. Joe Tinira died on Sunday morning and for the remainder of the day cars, trucks and buses brimming with people kept arriving at the Marae.

Monday morning when school opened four children arrived - all the Pakeha pupils.

At the Marae and the nearby river within full view of the school, children were walking, playing and generally amusing themselves. To Donovan this was an intolerable situation and his zealous, eager, well intentioned mind filled with different courses of action which he felt he could take.

Discussion

Which course of action should Donovan follow?

2. IDEALS AND ISLANDERS

Mr Kingi sat at his desk trying valiantly to write notes for the statement he must make at tonight's Board Meeting.

He glanced again at the chairman's letter informing him of the meeting, and re-read the section he had underlined. "There has been growing concern in some quarters", it said, "over the effect on our school of the growing number of island pupils. Both parents and teachers have expressed to me their fears that standards of schoolwork and of behaviour are suffering. Could you please be prepared to give a statement at tonight's meeting concerning the current situation, and any steps you advocate for the future."

Somehow his thoughts wouldn't clarify; or could it be that his feelings kept intruding? Perhaps, he thought, his own Maori background made him over-sympathetic toward these modern Polynesian migrants now travelling the route taken by his ancestors so long ago. Yet he could see that there were real problems in his school, and he wanted desperately to find a solution to them.

Five years ago, when John had first been appointed as headmaster of Christian Primary School, the problem had not existed. Yet the potential was there. The Church, the denomination that owned and operated the primary school (and a number of others like it in other centres), had an active mission programme in the Cook Islands, and a number of the Church's adherents were coming to New Zealand for periods of work. The New Zealand church members welcomed their island brethren into church fellowship, and when the first families came to settle permanently, arranged for their children to attend the church school. John remembered how the first family had been unable to pay the fees in advance, as the school policy clearly required, but how several of the church members offered to stand as guarantors. He remembered, too, how proud the father had been as he paid the debt in full a month or so after starting work, and how he had insisted that John accept £5 extra, as a gift to the school's sport fund.

But the movement of island families to this big city and to the surrounding area had continued apace, to the extent that there were almost as many island pupils at the school now as there were Europeans - and the attitude of the original group seemed gradually to have changed. Already several of the long established European families of the area had moved away, perhaps because so many of their neighbours were islanders, and their children had left the school. It seemed likely that this trend would continue.

John recalled with concern the cold way in which Jim Steward, long a personal friend, and father of three pupils, had told him a few days before "John, I have nothing against the island folks as individuals. Some of them are as nice as you could hope to meet. But my children's education is important to me, and I tell you clearly, if there comes a time when more than half the pupils in my kid's classes are islanders, my three will leave the school. And I know a lot of other parents feeling the same way about it. You'd understand how it is, John, because you're a real New Zealander." John sensed some embarrassment in his friend's tone as he ended his statement, and wondered if it was possible that some

parents would be reticent to tell him how they felt, because of his colour. The possibility was rather disquieting as he had always considered he kept in close contact with the parents of his pupils.

The last staff meeting had been rather difficult too. He had hoped to introduce the use of Gloria Tate's oral English series, and therefore suggested their use in special classes for the island children to help them improve their spoken English, but the whole idea had received a rather mixed reception. Miss Corban, the infant mistress, seemed delighted with the Tate series, and asked questions about time-tabling and materials which indicated she was eager to try out the new work in her classes. Three of the other teachers (all, he had noticed, teachers of the lower classes) had also shown some interest in the new approach and the special classes.

But Mr Fowler, the first assistant, and several others had given fairly blunt refusals when he asked if they would like to try the new ideas. They said they were already battling to try and keep their classes up to the expected standard, and felt that if any extra help was to be given it should go to the European children whose progress was being adversely affected by the large number of island pupils. In fact the first assistant had suggested that the time had come for the forming of separate classes. It was obvious, he said, that there was a tendency for the European children to copy the stilted English of the island children, and he found that both oral and written expression were suffering in his Form 2 class. There had been an audible murmur of agreement.

Then the discussion in the meeting had taken a sudden turn. John had been surprised to hear the thought expressed that behaviour in the school had declined badly since the island children came. "Nothing is safe anymore," one of the teachers said. "If you leave anything on your table and go out of the room it will quite likely be gone when you come back." It was true that there had been several cases of stealing lately, John had thought, but two cases had involved European children, and two had involved island pupils. Yet when he had pointed out the racial distribution of the offences, he had been told that the European children had been badly influenced by the islanders. There did not seem to be any point in reminding the teachers that there had been problems involving loss of property before any island children at all had come to the school.

"But that's not all," a Form 1 teacher, recently out of Training College, had added. "Some of the senior Island girls in Form 1 and 2 are quite old - why, Mary must be nearly 15 - and physically advanced for their ages by our standards. And they seem to be very fond of attracting attention from the young men at the factory down the street. You ought to hear the whistles when our girls go by. You mark my word. There'll be trouble, and our school will have a bad name as a result. Those girls should not be in a Primary school at all." John had wondered momentarily if any of the factory boys would have whistled at the speaker herself, and what her reaction would have been if they had. One of the other lady teachers had pointed out that the girls in question had been unable to attend school before coming to New Zealand, and would not be able to cope with high school work. Perhaps, she had suggested, what was needed was a series of special classes in cooking and homemaking, the kind of thing that some of the women from the community could come in and help with. Such classes would give the girls something worthwhile and useful, and at the same time occupy some of their leisure time.

But again the staff had been divided, some suggesting that the older island girls would get into trouble whatever was done for them, and any extra help should be given to those who would better be able to benefit, in other words to the European girls. The staff meeting had ended without any united action of any kind being decided on.

John's thoughts of the past were interrupted by the sounds of a truckload of laughing and singing men coming down the school drive. One saw John, and waved. "Come and play on the tennis court," he called. There was a gale of laughter, as the men went on down to where they were pouring concrete for a new tennis court. There was one thing certain, John thought. The island folk certainly gave excellent help if there was work to be done - or money to be raised. The school had in no way suffered financially because of the islanders' coming. He put down his pen (all he had written so far was a list of figures concerning enrolment) and leaned back to try and think things through.

The figures he would give the Board tonight would show that there were already two classes where there were more island pupils than Europeans. It would only require a few more families (large families they usually were) to come, and the island pupils would represent more than 50% of the enrolment. There was no doubt that the school could continue even if most of the European children left. But the assistance that children with a New Zealand background could give in helping newcomers to adjust to the new way of life was very important. And although the European children did copy some of the quaint sayings of the island children, the general level of English in the school was still fairly high. Some of the island children who had come some years back were now quite fluent in English, and were helping new arrivals to adjust. In fact the standard of work in the school was fairly good, John thought. A series of objective tests in all basic subjects that he had recently run in all the upper classes had shown that the average results for the school were above the national norms.

Discussion

There must be some way to help all the groups work together. The children themselves soon seem to get along happily together, John thought, but how could he help staff, parents and Board members to see things the same way? Christian Primary School was a private school, and as such could make its own policies regarding acceptances, age limits, etc, and provided certain basic requirements of the Education Department were met, could organize its own programmes of studies too. Should the school be declared full as far as island students were concerned? Should separate classes be tried? Perhaps one more staff member would allow for a series of special oral English classes for island children. What about the possibility of after school classes for the older island girls? How can one show people that standards have not slumped? How can one compare behaviour in two different periods of time? John picked up his pen again and looked at his notes.