SYMBOLIC POLICY AND THE EDUCATIONAL MYTH OF BICULTURALISM

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ABSTRACT. Using the concept of symbolic policy and drawing from an anthro-pology of policy approach, this paper explores the ways that bicultural education policy creates and sustains a myth of partnership between Māori and Pākehā/European settler-descendants. Drawing from doctoral research undertaken in mainstream Auckland secondary schools, the paper illustrates the ways that the educational myth of biculturalism is sustained through auditing systems and institutional practices, and discusses one particular effect of this process. For the research participants in the study (a group of non-Māori students learning Māori language), bicultural policy, as it tends to be enacted in schools, appears to contribute to an idealized conception of Māori people. In this idealized conception, Māori people are believed to be speakers of the Māori language and consequently the Māori language is perceived to be healthy and thriving. Whether this perception is widely held is unknown, but it has the potential to impact negatively on future Māori language revitalization efforts.

Keywords: biculturalism; symbolic policy; Māori language education

1. Introduction

This paper explores a way of understanding how policy works, and in doing so, presents the argument that bicultural education policy creates and sustains a myth of partnership between Māori and Pākehā/European settler-descendants. I employ Clarence Beeby's (1986) notion of an educational myth as a form of communication which gives a sense of direction rather than absolute goals. This idea will be developed alongside another set of ideas which come from an anthropological approach to policy. In this approach, policies are seen to contain myth messages about how we ought to behave. These messages can be sustained and strengthened by auditing systems and institutional practices which materialize an educational myth. In the case of bicultural education policy, this process may have an unforeseen consequence. Findings from

doctoral research undertaken in mainstream Auckland secondary schools suggest that schools' attempts to enact a commitment to biculturalism appears to simultaneously strengthen and sustain a "partnership between two peoples" narrative and weaken the engagement of non-Māori learners of Māori language with issues of Māori language use and long-term survival. For the group of learners in the study, the "two peoples" narrative, which underpins the notion of bicultural partnership, contributes to an idealized conception of Māori people. In this idealized conception, Māori people are believed to be speakers of the Māori language and consequently the Māori language is perceived to be healthy and thriving.

2. The Educational Myth of Biculturalism

Biculturalism is a highly contested term (see for example, Maaka & Fleras, 2005; O'Sullivan, 2007; Vasil, 1988; Walker, 1986; 2004), but broadly speaking, in New Zealand, it is understood as referring to a partnership relationship between Māori and the Crown that was established by the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi in 1840. In education, the commitment to this relationship is frequently stated, including within the New Zealand Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007) which "acknowledges the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi and the bicultural foundations of Aotearoa New Zealand" (p. 9).

Two central concerns appear in the literature when considering the concept of biculturalism. One of those concerns relates to the difficulty in identifying and/or naming who the partners are in the relationship. One of the partners is usually referred to by the generic term "Māori" which is both an ethnic and a cultural label (Royal, 2012). This label implies a homogeneity that does not exist in reality because of differences between different iwi (tribal groups) and because of the mixed ethnicity of many New Zealanders including Māori (Callister, 2003; Chapple, 2000). All Māori have European or other ancestry and around half the Māori population identifies as both Māori and European (Chapple, 2000). The other group in the partnership is variously referred to as "the Crown," "pākehā," "European settler descendants" or in some contexts can, in essence, mean the New Zealand government. Commentators argue that the assumption of the existence of two peoples and two cultures greatly oversimplifies the reality of New Zealand society (Mulgan, 1989) and ignores the entangled history of Māori and pākehā (McCarthy, 2011). Despite these complexities, education policy statements convey a "two peoples" myth message, that is, the narrative of two culturally and ethnically distinct groups in New Zealand.

The other concern that appears in the literature relates to the notion of "partnership." Aside from the difficulties relating to who constitutes the partners, and therefore who represents each group, there is also little consensus

about what partnership might mean in practice (Fleras & Spoonley, 1999; McRoberts, 2001; O'Sullivan, 2007). Some writers reject the notion of biculturalism altogether, arguing that it locks Māori into an unsatisfactory power relationship where they are positioned as the junior partner (O'Sullivan, 2007), and propose entirely different power structures. An indigeneity approach for example, envisages a new constitutional arrangement that involves a partnership of self-determining peoples within a multi- (or bi-) national framework (Fleras, 1998; McRoberts, 2001).

Both of the concerns identified are complex, and this is why referring to biculturalism in education as an example of a Beebyan myth is particularly useful. The function of an educational myth according to Clarence Beeby (1986) is that it gives purpose and direction to the educational endeavor. In his words, an educational myth is:

> ... a form of communication, spoken or assumed, between contemporaries or between generations. It's a communication that can't be taken quite literally. It gets public credence and support from its capacity to express, in relatively simple terms, relations between ideas and events that aren't completely understood and whose outcomes can't be fully foreseen. Within limits, it can be interpreted in different ways by different people; it leaves some place for the element of the irrational that underlies most human activities, and it gives a sense of direction rather than absolute goals (Beeby, 1986, pp. 53–54).

An educational myth is, by its very nature, loosely defined, vaguely expressed and not fully attainable. Part of its effectiveness is that it allows space for different interpretations, while at the same time suggesting a broad unity of purpose or direction. In this sense biculturalism, or the narrative of a partnership between two peoples, can be regarded as an educational myth. It enables the aspirational elements of biculturalism to set some broad parameters providing a general sense of direction in education while avoiding the difficulties associated with achieving consensus about what biculturalism might mean in everyday educational practices.

3. Educational Myth and Symbolic Policy

The educational myth of biculturalism is created and sustained by bicultural education policy. The relationship between myth and policy can be theorized by employing ideas from policy anthropology. In policy anthropology, policy is regarded as a fundamental organizing principle of society and according to Cris Shore and Susan Wright (2011), "provides a way of conceptualising and symbolising social relations" (p. 2). From this perspective it can be argued that policies often occupy the same role as myth in traditional societies,

providing guides to behavior and containing implicit messages about how individuals should relate to society and each other (Shore, 2012). In very simple terms, bicultural education policy conceptualizes and symbolizes a relationship of partnership between Māori and Pākehā/European settler-descendants, which was established in 1840 when the Treaty of Waitangi was signed. But what makes this myth message effective?

For some time I was particularly vexed by this question because of the abstract nature of bicultural statements in policy documents. These types of statements tend to be in the form of "acknowledgements," for example, the New Zealand Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007) acknowledges the "principles of the Treaty of Waitangi and the bicultural foundations of Aotearoa New Zealand" (p. 9). These kind of policy statements are characteristic of what Fazal Rizvi and Bob Lingard (2010) describe as symbolic policy. Unlike material policy, symbolic policies typically carry little to no commitment to implementation and usually do not have any substantial funding attached to them. In addition they "tend to have vague, ambiguous and abstract goal statements" (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010, p. 9). Importantly however, the effects of symbolic policy may be significant because they can have a strategic function, legitimating a particular political view (Rein, 1983). Describing bicultural education policy as symbolic helps explain the way they function and their potential effects.

Bicultural policy statements legitimate, by their very existence, a narrative of two ethnically and culturally distinct peoples who are in a partnership relationship with one another. This is the educational myth of biculturalism. The social function of myth is to bind groups together thereby enabling social consensus. One reason that the educational myth of biculturalism may be so compelling is that, in the words of Eric Kolig (2004), its narrative conveys to New Zealanders "the promise of a better nation: a nation not only free of guilt, but harmonious, a happy society without the scourge of racial tension" (pp. 97–98). For reasons that have little to do with tangible implementation symbolic policies can be powerful in the messages they convey despite having vague or abstract goal statements.

The power of symbolic policy is enhanced when accompanied by auditing systems which have the potential to shape institutional practices. Susan Wright (1998) argues that once a particular world view is institutionalized through policy, it is able to work through non-agentive power as institutional practices instead are able to shape perceptions, values and behavior. The following section of the paper discusses some examples of how the auditing systems that accompany bicultural educational policy can influence institutional practices in schools, and in so doing contribute to the "partnership between two peoples" myth narrative.

4. Symbolic Bicultural Education Policy and Auditing Systems

The popular understanding of biculturalism as a relationship of partnership established by the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi, has been naturalized in education policy since the late 1980s and can be found in a number of policy statements. For the purposes of this paper I am going to use the New Zealand Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007) and Section 61.3 of the Education Act 1989 as examples of bicultural education policy. Both of these policy statements are symbolic, that is they are vague and abstract without a clear goal statement, and as such they are challenging to interpret as a set of practices.

The New Zealand Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007) explicitly articulates the partnership myth narrative. The principles of the Treaty of Waitangi and the bicultural foundations of Aotearoa New Zealand are acknowledged in the *Principles* section, and a strong statement of support for the notion of partnership is evident in the *Vision* section. This section of the New Zealand Curriculum describes "what we want for our young people" (p. 8), and reads, "[o]ur vision is for young people .... Who will work to create an Aotearoa New Zealand in which Māori and Pākehā recognise each other as full Treaty partners" (p. 8). Returning to the anthropological idea that policy influences social relations by providing messages about how people ought to relate to one another, The New Zealand Curriculum as policy clearly supports a view of Māori and Pākehā as two distinct ethnic groups who ought to relate to one another as partners.

Section 61.3 of the Education Act 1989 states that school charters need to include; "the aim of developing, for the school, policies and practices that reflect New Zealand's cultural diversity and the unique position of the Māori culture." Writing school-based policies that "reflect the unique position of the Māori culture" is a considerable challenge because it is difficult to ascertain what that statement means. Consequently, in my professional experience as a secondary school teacher of Māori language, there is a tendency for schools to create policy statements which mirror statements made in the New Zealand curriculum which, for example, "acknowledge the bicultural foundations of Aotearoa/New Zealand" or, "acknowledge the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi."

What gives these examples of symbolic policy their "teeth" is not the policy statements themselves, but the auditing systems that accompany them. These auditing systems ask schools to provide evidence of bicultural practices, and make suggestions of what that evidence might look like, despite the difficulties associated with meaning and interpretation that were discussed in the early part of this article. The auditing systems that accompany bicultural education policy can influence the practices and perceptions of people en-

gaging with the policy narratives. Examples of these auditing systems include teacher registration and attestation, performance management systems, and external reviews conducted by the Education Review Office (ERO).

It is mandatory for practicing teachers in New Zealand to be registered. *The Registered Teacher Criteria* (New Zealand Teachers Council, 2014) are designed to represent the essential knowledge and capabilities for quality teaching in Aotearoa New Zealand, be both aspirational and achievable for teachers, and apply to all teachers seeking to gain full registration and to renew practicing certificates (p. 1). Two criteria in particular refer to the bicultural nature of education in New Zealand. Criterion 3 requires teachers to "demonstrate commitment to bicultural partnership in Aotearoa New Zealand" (p. 11) and the key indicator for this is that a teacher can "demonstrate respect for the heritages, languages and cultures of both partners to the Treaty of Waitangi" (p. 11). Criterion 10 requires teachers to demonstrate that they "work effectively within the bicultural context of Aotearoa New Zealand" (p. 14). The indicators for this criterion are narrow, one related to the use of Māori language, "practise and develop the relevant use of te reo [language] Māori me ngā tikanga-a-iwi in context," and the other is difficult to enact in a measureable way. This indicator asks that teachers "specifically and effectively address the educational aspirations of ākonga [students] Māori, displaying high expectations for their learning" (p. 14).

The appraisal process which is mandated by the Ministry of Education, but managed within schools, requires teachers to demonstrate on an annual basis that they are meeting *The Registered Teacher Criteria (RTC)*. In order to progress up the pay scale teachers must provide satisfactory evidence that they are meeting the criteria in order for the attestation document to be signed off by the school. If this document is not signed off, teachers are unable to move up a level in the pay scale. Biculturalism is thus established as the accepted ideological basis for teaching practice in schools, and some evidence of teachers' commitment to bicultural partnership is required.

The Education Review Office (ERO) is a New Zealand government department which, in its own words, "independently evaluates the quality of education in schools and early childhood services and reports on these publicly with the aim of improving the achievement of all students" (Education Review Office, 2011, p. 1). Schools and early childhood services are reviewed on average once every three years, more frequently if a school or centre is underperforming. The reports produced by ERO are posted on the ERO website and as such, are freely accessible to the public.

The handbook entitled *Evaluation Indicators for School Reviews* (Education Review Office, 2011) begins with a clear statement about biculturalism: "ERO has a commitment to honouring Te Tiriti o Waitangi as the founding document of Aotearoa New Zealand that underpins relationships between

Māori and the Crown" (p. 4). The handbook identifies six dimensions of good practice then presents in table form, suggestions for evaluative prompts, indicators and evidence of good practice. One of the dimensions of effective teaching is "[t]eaching to promote te reo and bicultural awareness" (p. 25).

ERO indicators for "[i]ncluding Māori students and whānau [family]" (which is related to the Treaty principle of participation) include "bi-cultural values are fostered" and "[s]tudents have opportunities to engage in cultural activities such as kapahaka [performing arts] [and] Ngā Manu Kōrero [national speech competition]". Possible sources of evidence of these indicators include "[g]roup discussions, assemblies…pōwhiri [welcome ceremony] [and] whānau feedback" (p. 44).

Another indicator worthy of mention comes under the dimension *Leading and Managing the School*. It refers to the performance appraisal system and states "the performance appraisal system is effectively used to identify and address on-going improvement of the quality of teaching" (p. 31). The performance appraisal system appraises teacher performance against *The Registered Teacher Criteria*. This system itself is in turn audited by the ERO. The point I want to make here, is not whether biculturalism is an appropriate ideological underpinning for the New Zealand education system, but rather, that to contest the idea is almost impossible. An individual is immediately positioned as an ineffective and hence underperforming teacher, while a school or school leadership team is positioned as not fulfilling its professional responsibilities. While ERO does not publicly report on the performance of individual teachers, it does report on the overall performance of schools, making ERO reviews a powerful example of an auditing system.

My purpose here is to show the considerable pressure placed on schools to provide evidence of a commitment to biculturalism. While the policy statements themselves relating to biculturalism are symbolic in that they acknowledge a relationship but do not have clear goal statements, the auditing systems require schools to materialize the policy by finding ways they can provide evidence of practices. This is made more difficult by a lack of shared understanding about what these practices might be, especially because there is not a shared understanding of the meaning of biculturalism. Consequently schools put into practice what they can. Examples of this might include the creation of a designated school marae [ceremonial meeting house or hall], the provision and support of Māori language classes, the increased inclusion of pōwhiri as part of school events, the celebration of Māori language week, and the deployment of Māori achievement strategies. All of these practices contribute to the sustenance and strengthening of a "partnership between two peoples" narrative.

5. The Research Findings

Up until this point the article has illustrated the ways that the educational myth of biculturalism is sustained by policy and by auditing systems which can influence perceptions and practices in schools. The focus of the paper now turns to a discussion of one of the effects of this process on a group of non-Māori learners of the Māori language. As part of my doctoral research I interviewed 20 non-Māori learners of Māori language who were learning in mainstream secondary school settings or who had left school, but learnt the language for the duration of their secondary education (Lourie, 2013). Drawing on a theme explored in the study, I am going to argue that one of the effects of bicultural policy, as it tends to be enacted in schools, is that it appears to contribute to an essentialized and perhaps idealized Māori identity. For some of the young people in my research study, this appeared to have two effects. Firstly, they perceived Māori people to be culturally and ethnically distinct, and one of the markers of this distinctiveness was that they were competent Māori language users. The other effect, which seems a fairly logical extension of the first point, is that the Māori language is healthy and thriving.

Significantly, the research participants also expressed a sense of distance between themselves and Māori language speakers, that is to say, for them, Māori language speakers exist elsewhere, in another place beyond the physical orbit of their everyday lives. This contributes to an essentialized or idealized sense of Māori identity. The unquestioned belief of some of the research participants that Māori people were likely to be users of the Māori language was not a belief that came from lived experience. The research study was small, involving only 20 participants all living in Auckland so I am not claiming generalizability, however the findings do offer insights into the perceptions of an under-researched group (non-Māori learners of Māori language). Moreover, the implications of the research findings raise concerns in relation to Māori language revitalization and survival.

6. An Idealized Māori Identity

Among the younger research participants there was a perception that Māori people were users of the Māori language. Alice (year 9) for example, made this statement, "I always thought that people that were of the Māori culture were taught [Māori language] from when they were younger." A similar idea was echoed by Amber (year 9) who told me confidently: "For Māori families they would speak it [Māori language] in their home." This struck me as odd because these students were learning Māori at secondary school and there were Māori students in their classes who they were learning Māori with. Yet,

when they thought of "Māori," they did not appear to think of the people they knew, that is, their classmates, but rather an idealized, or essentialized Māori identity. Through her step-father Leah had some experience with relatives who were users of the Māori language. When talking about "Māori" Leah did not take into account her step-father who didn't know any Māori language despite being Māori when she described the following:

> I know that most families would use it around the house if they're Māori most of the time. Then, also if they go to like birthdays and stuff they usually say most things in Māori if they're Māori. Then, also when they go to maraes there's all the stuff that's in Māori.

The perceptions of these three participants exemplify an idealized notion of what it means to be Māori, and I argue this is contributed to by a narrative of two ethnically and culturally distinct peoples that they experience at school.

The participants often referred to two fairly common school experiences as they were talking. One was the various "marae" trips they had been on, and the other was the pōwhiri. Pōwhiri have become increasingly common in schools and are often performed to welcome new staff and students to the school, and to welcome important visitors. When I asked Mele (year 9) where she thought Māori language was being used frequently, the first place she thought of was school, "usually at school, because that's where people usually speak in Māori." Like other participants Mele believed that Māori language would also definitely be heard in places that she associated with Māori culture, "definitely at pōwhiris and funerals." She was less sure about other places, saying hesitantly, "I guess they'd use it at the parliament."

School seemed therefore to be a place where students could hear Māori being spoken during the pōwhiri by a group of people who they perceived to be authentically Māori because of their ability to use the Māori language. Their confidence in the existence of a group of distinctively different Māori people who are fluent Māori speakers was further strengthened by their lack of direct experience with these people. For several of the participants there was the belief in groups of Māori language speakers "elsewhere," beyond the lived experience of the participants. Helen (year 12) described the Māori language as still being fairly widely used, "I think that they mostly speak it in areas where Māoris live." Natalie (year 13), held a similar view: "I think that in more the rural areas that Māori is used widely – I think it's still quite common in the secluded Māori communities." Neither of these participants had direct experience of these groups they were describing, but articulated their thoughts with confidence.

Adult participant Jordan, who had learnt Māori throughout secondary school, was really surprised by what she experienced when she was working on her Master's thesis and was doing research with iwi groups.

> One thing I was surprised about with both iwi was their lack of Māori. Very few of them spoke [Māori] at all. And when they got up in the marae they spoke in English because they had no reo. Yeah, that really surprised me... I would have associated people living within their tribal areas to be more in tune with their reo I guess.

In another part of the interview Jordan (adult) described some experiences that she had while she was at university which confronted and interrupted her assumptions and perceptions about Māori identity. She recognized that the notions that she held, which were developed while she was at school, were naive describing herself as having been wearing "rose coloured glasses" until she got to university. "I had just been in this dreamland until that point I guess."

The concern raised by this idealized version of Māori identity in which Māori people are all users of Māori language is that its logical corollary is that the Māori language is alive and thriving. Alice (year 9) was shocked when I described Māori language revitalization efforts and the ongoing concern that some people had about possibility of the Māori language dying out, saying "I thought it has always just been there." Likewise Paul (year 9) was very confident about the well-being of the language, "there's definitely a lot of it [Māori language] everywhere."

Evidence suggests that there is cause for ongoing concern about the survival of the Māori language. While there has been a tendency to report good news stories in relation to language revitalization (Waitangi Tribunal, 2011), Winifred Bauer (2008), suggests that New Zealand census data and data from other national surveys "show few positive signs that knowledge of te reo [the Māori language] is strengthening rather than declining" (p. 33). This same concern is echoed by the authors of the recent Wai 262 Waitangi Tribunal report (Waitangi Tribunal, 2011). If young learners of Māori language, who in the research study were not Māori themselves, do not know of concerns about the future survival of the language, they may not view themselves as having anything significant to contribute to the health and well-being of the language. They may approach language learning as an academic exercise undertaken out of curiosity or a vague sense of good-will, but this, I would argue, is a weak form of engagement with Māori language.

7. Concluding Comments

Theorizing bicultural education policy as symbolic policy, which works to legitimate and sustain Beeby's notion of biculturalism as an educational myth, that is, a loosely defined, aspirational concept that provides a sense of direction, goes some way to explaining a "dreamland" that students may experience

in school. There are ethnically and culturally distinct characters who inhabit this dreamland, but the creation of these characters can lead to cultural essentialism or an idealized notion of Māori identity. While there are benefits associated with the prevalence of a strong myth narrative of two distinct peoples, in that it supports recognition of difference and the inclusion of different cultural practices, the challenges associated with interpreting symbolic policy are many.

The lack of agreement about what biculturalism looks like in practice, and a number of strong auditing systems mean that schools must often enact what might be described as fairly tokenistic practices. Students are influenced by the policy narratives they experience in schools as they observe how different groups appear to relate to one another, and the perceptions those groups appear to hold about one another. The lack of nuance, discussion or critique associated with bicultural education policy as it is enacted in schools can thus contribute to the development of an idealized notion of Māori identity.

The perception that Māori language is alive and thriving and being used with frequency by "Māori people" held by some of the young non-Māori language learners in the research study, coupled with their lack of knowledge about Māori language survival issues is a troubling finding. If the Māori language is to continue to survive, all New Zealanders need to have a realistic view of the current state of the language. The findings of this small study suggest a need for further research, and that we need to pay close attention to all the effects, intended and unintended, of bicultural education policies.

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