

CHAPTER SIX

PARENTS AS FIRST TEACHERS:THE POLICY

INTRODUCTION

In the mid 1980s Television New Zealand broadcast a series of documentaries titled 'The Hothouse People'. One particular programme of that series outlined a parent intervention programme based in America, The Missouri Project. The segment concerning the Missouri project aroused interest of Dr Lockwood Smith, National MP for Kaipara (Personal Communication, 1992). During his time as Opposition spokesperson on Education, Dr Smith became increasingly aware of the levels of achievement and underachievement within the education system.

In considering education policy Dr Smith decided to look further at the programme from Missouri and arranged for the Parliamentary Library to place a trace on the T.V.N.Z. programme and material relating to the Missouri project. His growing interest in the programmes and in particular the ways in which childrens "educational development in their school years had been profoundly affected...by what happened in the early years of life" prompted a visit by Dr Smith to Missouri and further

investigation into the work of Burton White and the Harvard Preschool project (Smith 1992). In doing so Dr Smith became more and more interested in three key areas of development within the programmes: Language development, Motor coordination and Health.

Convinced of the soundness of the research bases of the programme and that they were not solely peculiar to America, i.e. they could be imported here, these coupled with his belief that early childhood education in Aotearoa did not focus, on the whole, from birth to three years, Dr Smith began a process of developing 'Parents as First Teachers' (PAFT) as part of National party election policy. PAFT became one of the key planks in National party education policies and upon election in 1990, and Dr Smiths assuming of the education portfolio, he started immediately on implementation of the pilot programmes.

What is particularly interesting in the development of the PAFT programme is the adhoc manner in which it was initially conceived. One questions whether such a programme would have ever been considered by the Minister of Education had he not "happened to be watching television one night". The development of PAFT did not derive from a request from any particular section of the community nor did it derive from any form of focused research in this area within Aotearoa, rather it derived in a clearly by-chance manner, unplanned and developed in a unilateral manner without consultation with those involved in early childhood education or parent support programmes (Farquhar 1990).

A further concern in the early investigation into the programme is Dr Smith's belief in the "soundness" of the research upon which PAFT is based. Although he appears to have some understanding of Head Start, there is no indication within his speeches or papers that he has an awareness of the critical analyses undertaken of compensatory education. As previously stated the theoretical underpinnings of both Head Start and the Missouri project are highly questionable and are located in a deficit paradigm that is far from sound as espoused by Dr Smith.

The aim of this chapter is to analyse critically three key elements of the PAFT programme; Family background, Home visits and Language development and the relationship of these aspects of the programme to the Maori community.

KEY OBJECTIVES OF PARENTS AS FIRST TEACHERS

Based on the Missouri project Parents as First Teachers aims to curb what Lockwood Smith identifies as an increasing trend of illiteracy and low levels of educational achievement by some sections of the community, which stemmed in part from a high occurrence of 'Bilateral otitis Media with Effusion', more commonly known as 'Glue Ear'. The main objectives of the programme as expressed by Lockwood Smith being

"identifying and remedying sensory defects such as Otitis Media with Effusion, and also addressing the family background...we must change an entire family system so that it is a better background for the development of the child."

(Smith, Lockwood., 1990:8)

The key aims of the PAFT programme, according to the Plunket Society, are to provide support and guidance for first time parents, based fundamentally on the frameworks developed within the Missouri project. Furthermore, the programme as outlined by the Northern Evaluation Unit (1992), provides a recognition that parents as the "most important teachers in the early years of their child's life". The goals of the programme identified in material, distributed by the Plunket Society, promoting parental involvement in PAFT are stated as being

"For you [parent] to have:

- * Knowledge of how your child grows and develops.
- * Knowledge of how to encourage the growth and development of your child.
- * More confidence in your own parenting skills.
- * Support and professional assistance with your child's health and developmental needs.

Your child to have:

- * Well developed language skills
- * An increased ability to solve problems.
- * Well developed social skills.
- * Any health problems detected."

(PAFT Pamphlet, Plunket, 1992)

The Royal New Zealand Plunket society have been contracted by the Minister of Education to implement the programme within Aotearoa and have sought recruitment of families for participation in PAFT on a voluntary basis. The programme is promoted as a non-targeted project which will be delivered to families with children from birth to three years, as a pilot programme in four geographical areas. The four pilot areas have been selected: Whangarei, South Auckland, Gisborne and Dunedin. Within each pilot area 250 families will be involved, 125 in the PAFT group and the remaining 125 in a comparison group. The comparison group will not receive the PAFT programme (Plunket 1992, Silva

1992). It is also noted by Lockwood Smith (personal communication:1992) that PAFT is not intended to replace existing early childhood services and therefore those families involved in the pilot programmes may continue to use those services.

Eight Parent Educators have been employed by the Plunket society, all of whom are Pakeha women and either past or present Plunket nurses. In areas of high Maori or Pacific Island population cultural facilitators have been employed to work alongside the Parent Educators to ensure smooth implementation of the programmes (Smith, Lockwood 1992).

An essential ingredient of the pilot programmes is regular home visits by Parent Educators, the intentions of which are to (i) share information and provide practical ideas and guidance in relation to child growth and development, (ii) provide regular monitoring of child development, growth and health and (iii) to provide group meetings as a forum through which to "share experiences and concerns with other parents" (ibid).

ANALYSIS OF KEY OBJECTIVES

According to John Codd (1988) policy documents have inscribed within them multiple intentions. A process of deconstruction is necessary to highlight both multiple intent and multiple readings that may be taken from such texts. Deconstruction, a key strategy utilised by Codd is that which reveals the contradictions that exist within policy discourses.

Deconstruction, Patti Lather (1991) contends, identifies the binaries and oppositions that are inscribed within texts. The identification of binary oppositions provides insights into the ways in which texts are constituted and reveal the underlying assumptions which structure and maintain unequal power relations. The exposing of contradictory, and at times contesting, discourses within a text operates to reveal its "lack of innocence" (ibid:13).

The "lack of innocence" of texts, in this case policy documents, may be seen in the inability of educational decision-makers to develop policies which address the disproportionate number of Maori children underachieving within the education system. Educational policy documents in Aotearoa have been constructed within dominant Pakeha paradigms and have on the whole contributed to an ongoing agenda of the assimilation of Maori people into the dominant culture.

A fundamental contradiction exists within the PAFT programme. The programme is promoted in Plunket literature as a "non-targeted project", such a statement stands in contradiction to the visual presentation of the programme within which the ethnicity of the 'family' is identifiably polynesian. Furthermore, in the interview undertaken with Lockwood Smith (1992) he noted,

"...my real objective is to try and help those families [underachievers] break out of that cycle of underachievement, cycle of failure. Some would say, therefore, why don't you target the programme at those families. The problem with that is, that I don't want families to feel when they're approached to join

the PAFT programme to feel, do you think we're poor families, do you think we're going to be bad parents, is that why you want us on this programme. I think we've got to make it a general programme so that there's no feeling that, no feeling of inferiority or anything." (Smith, Lockwood, Personal communication, 1992)

Within this statement Smith maintains a need for both the targeting of the programme to those families which he discerns as 'underachievers', however in order to achieve the involvement of those families the programme must be promoted in a way that is perceived as 'comfortable'. Furthermore, the targeting of the programme is inherent within the selection of of the pilot areas. Again this is described by Lockwood Smith (ibid.),

"I chose the pilot areas quite carefully too, you'll note the pilot areas are not New Zealand's wealthiest areas. They have a strong, most of the pilot areas have a higher proportion of Maori and Pacific Island, in one case, population. The pilot areas being Whangarei, with obviously a high proportion of Maori population, Taitokerau. East Coast, Gisborne, the one being based in Gisborne, there again quite a high Maori proportion of the population and South Auckland, there again a high Pacific Island and again quite a high Maori population." (ibid.)

Dunedin, the fourth pilot area was selected by Lockwood Smith as "a more general area" (ibid.) and to link into the longitudinal study being conducted by Dr. Phil Silva at Otago University. Areas of high Maori and Pacific Island populations are categorised as being something 'other' than a "general area" and are targeted in relation to their constructed 'otherness'.

Carmen Dalli (1992) questioning the "real agenda" behind the rationale of the PAFT programme raises four concerns. These concerns centre upon a number of the key objectives outlined for the programme and are summarised as follows:

(1) A concern with Lockwood Smith's (1990) statement that "Early

childhood systems are not preventing reading problems at school". Smith's analysis (of Glynn et.al. (1988) research of 6 year olds in Reading Recovery) is, Dalli contends, not a "correct interpretation" of the research. Furthermore she notes Smith has failed to recognise the "multi-faceted process" that is undertaken in learning to read and therefore incorrectly apportion blame with the Early childhood sector.

(2) The implication that PAFT will be the 'remedy' for educational problems and where unsuccessful the parents are to blame. PAFT is therefore constructed as an intervention programme to 'solve' the deficiencies of the parents.

Moreover, Dalli notes, the intervention of 'experts' has the potential to undermine parents confidence through the construction of a belief that they are lacking appropriate expertise. Therefore, she notes,

"the idea that there is a unidirectional causal relationship between parent teaching and child development is overly simplistic and inadequate as a full explanation of how the child develops."
(ibid.:61)

(3) A concern related to the National Party policy statement (1990) which noted PAFT is a

"bold new concept, the most significant innovation in New Zealand child development since Truby King founded the Plunket Society"
(National Party Policy, 1990:1)

According to Dalli, Truby King emphasised a "cult of domesticity" and "racial fitness" as means through which to halt societies degeneration. Dalli asserts King was instrumental in developing a 'recipe' for the training of women in motherhood and domestic

life. If anything went wrong it was construed that the mother was to blame. Updating the work of his father, M.Truby King (1934) states a 'true' Truby King baby was one "whose mother brings it up strictly according to the Truby King system" (King,M.T.,1934:4).

Dalli (ibid.) contends parallels can be drawn between the philosophy of Truby King and the rationale of PAFT.

"It is not difficult to see where the parallels between Truby King's philosophy and the proposed PAFT programme are, i.e. in

(i) the focus on the parents "natural role" as first teachers of their children. For 'parents' read 'mothers' since it is mostly women who stay at home to look after children and PAFT is a programme for parents who stay at home

(ii) the focus on the home as the place where parents carry out their "natural role"; by implication, parents whose 0 - 3 year olds are not at home are not carrying out their natural role

(iii) the focus on trained parent educators to visit homes and give advice as "experts". "

(ibid.:62)

(4) A concern surrounding the emphasis of PAFT on 'correcting' the family background as a "cure for all our social ills". Within her discussion of this Dalli refers extensively to literature related to Head Start and The Missouri Project and levels her criticism at the deficit mode of PAFT.

Dalli's analysis identifies that PAFT, like its Headstart and Missouri Project counterparts, may be located within an environmental model that emphasises deficiencies and deprivation in the area of parenting and the family.

In locating PAFT within a 'compensatory' model, it may be

considered a policy which advances incremental change.
Incrementalism is, according to Dale and Ozga (1991)

"developed through the pursuit of (those) bandwagons
rather than as a result of any coherent overall plan
(or plans) of what the education system should be
attempting"
(Dale, R., & Ozga, J., 1991:27)

The development of PAFT in such a way ignores the moves taken by
Maori people in the establishment of Te Kohanga Reo and Kura
Kaupapa Maori, moves which espouse a shift from compensatory,
assimilationist models to non-incremental, structural change.
Maori people are clearly targeted as potential recipients of the
PAFT programme, however they remain in a marginalised position.