H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Wally Penetito. *What's Māori about Māori Education? The Struggle for a Meaningful Context.* Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2010. 320 pp. $30.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-86473-614-7.

Reviewed by Christopher J. Frey (Bowling Green State University)
Published on H-Education (December, 2011)
Commissioned by Jonathan Anuik

Wally Penetito's *What's Māori about Māori Education?* is a compelling, dense study of the recent history of schooling and education policy for and by the Indigenous Māori in Aotearoa/New Zealand. The book's central aim is to illuminate how the state has been able to constitute Māori subjects within the confines of an education system designed for New Zealanders of European descent, or Pākehā. To do this, he analyzes four "mediating structures": education reports, formal consultations, traditional meeting houses on university campuses (*marae*), and community-based schooling (*kaupapa* Māori) that have structured Māori schooling over the past five decades (p. 15). Penetito is less interested in the content of these structures, given that they tend to focus either on diagnosing the reasons why Māori have not found success in the Pākehā system or the culturally relevant curriculum that many Māori advocate. Instead he argues that these mediating structures establish limits on the degree of structural change that the Pākehā allow. Personal anecdotes from his educational experiences and his extensive professional career add nuance and detail to the analysis.

One central theme throughout the book is the development of self-determination in Māori schooling, from individual, political, and cultural perspectives. Penetito, a professor of Māori education at Victoria University, who identifies as Māori, goes back to his own first days in school, describing them as "remote, detached, separate from reality and institutionalised." For Penetito, school "seemed to be about a distant promise that Pākehā kids did not have difficulty perceiving and Māori kids always did" (p. 29). Throughout the book, he juxtaposes the many compromises that Māori have been expected and habituated to make within the Pākehā education system, in contrast to the limited accommodations to the Māori made by the mainstream education system. These accommodations have led to the creation of a "Māori education" that is an "ideological construct in which the vested interests of the dominant Pākehā society, represented in a variety of critical mediating structures, virtually ensure that Māori education will operate in a deficit, marginalised and failure mode" (p. 52).

Penetito spends the rest of the book addressing how these mediating structures perpetuate this system and how some Māori are beginning to work outside the Pākehā-dominated "Māori education system." Not unlike assimilative forms of "Indian education" in the United States, which have almost nothing to do with being Indigenous, "Māori education" is better understood as a form of socialization, where a "dominant society that holds the institutional and philosophical power" controls the form and function of society and reproduces itself "almost incidentally, by replacing difference" (pp. 87, 90). The analysis is detailed and could be written about any colonial/Indigenous relationship in education. However, the analysis mostly avoids the classroom and institutional practices that are often the focus of research on Indigenous schooling.

Penetito prefaces his investigation of the mediating structures with a discussion of Māori epistemology. His explanation is grounded in Emile Durkheim's studies of school as an "intermediate between the family and state," and Penetito, quoting Anthony Giddens's work on Emile Durkheim, understands this "intermediate" as part of a larger process of "'the dissolving "traditional" society and the emergent "modern" type"' (pp. 106-107).[1] This kind of analysis speaks to both Māori and Pākehā readers, illuminating how the long transformation of Māori culture through European colonization is not necessarily unique to New Zealand, reminding this reader of the fundamental compromises that schools have forced on Indigenous peoples in the last two centuries. Penetito is also critical of the Māori focus on cultural relevance, not because it is unimportant but because "by focusing on the familiar elements of culture … almost everything becomes potentially achievable, except that power relations remain unchanged" (p. 173). Without ownership and leadership

of the education of their Māori children, 85 percent of whom study in Pākehā-centered public schools, culturally relevant education is likely to inevitably remain sidelined within the dominant Pākehā system.

In chapter 5, Penetito reviews ten official reports on Māori education, published between 1960 and 2000. These reports are framed within a Māori perspective as reflecting two approaches to state policy for Māori education. The first group of five reports, published between 1960 and 1977, reflect the Māori aphorism, "*Ka awhi noa i waho, kare i uru ki roto*" or "we are outwardly embraced but never get inside." By this, Penetito argues that the reports facilitate "Māori education remaining a peripheral activity in education" rather than "penetrating the dominant system in some fashion" (p. 138). The second group of reports, published between 1978 and 2000, reflect "a major surge forward in promoting and revitalizing the essence of what it means to be Māori," reflected in the adage, "*Ma Te Kanohi Miromiro*" or "looking for missing objects" (p. 158). In contrast to the first era, Māori were able to exact some compromises after 1978 by leveraging their limited political power at the national level and by initiating new educational institutions at the local and tribal levels outside the Pākehā system. Despite those limited gains, Penetito's analysis of the reports suggests that the predetermined goals, selection of committee members, and the very questions the committees are tasked with answering are more telling than any findings or results of the studies, because these structural characteristics determine the limits of inquiry and possible solutions that might result from the state's research.

Chapter 6 has a brief look at the evolution of the process of "consultation" between the state and Māori communities. To Penetito, the process represents "hegemony of consent" where negotiation and compromise are permitted "when evidence has shown areas of weakness where improvements can be introduced that do not disturb the overall balance of the system" (p. 178). In sum, like most colonial settings, consultation and state reports are a kind of manipulated consensus where the Māori are problematized, and the Pākehā and their structures of schooling are absolved of any responsibility to change.

Penetito then turns his attention to Māori initiatives to institutionalize culturally based educational sites both inside and outside the Pākehā system. In chapter 7, he surveys how traditional, kin-based social ties, with their ritual sites and cosmologies, or *marae*, are recreated in the form of traditional meetinghouses on the grounds of universities. These "institutional *marae*" are also seen as a mediating structure between the traditional Māori and modern Western forms of social organization (p. 208). Here, too, Penetito argues that the traditional meanings, forms, and practices of Māori culture cannot help but be transformed by their environment. As one example, he cites a debate in the 1980s at his own university between the Māori Studies and Women's Studies departments about the limits on "formal speech-making" by women on many traditional *marae* (p. 217). The de-territorialized and nontraditional nature of the institutional *marae*-where kin and place-based relationships cannot be sustained–results in "expressions of culture becoming surface manifestations that are not supported by the deep structure of coherent traditional and spiritually grounded life" (p. 217). As a result, Penetito argues, the institutional *marae* becomes merely a "show home … existing artificially without its cultural meanings" (p. 220).

Penetito is most hopeful about the development of *kaupapa* Māori, or community-based schooling, which has so far tread the fine line between institutionalizing itself and becoming part of the Pākehā system. It has done so by maintaining its community roots while codifying some protections under national legislation, defining clearly these schools as institutions based on Māori philosophy. This protection, argues Penetito, has precluded Pākehā schools with significant Maori enrollments from simply re-designating themselves as *kaupapa* Māori with no significant structural, curricular, or epistemological changes. Ironically, neoliberal reforms in the 1980s that attacked the *kaupapa* movement as separatist compelled it "to come out of the closet and assert itself" (p. 230). Similarly, the Right's market reforms opened new avenues for choice and autonomy. While only 15 percent of Māori students currently study at *kaupapa* Māori schools, Penetito argues that professionalization and increased state funding are necessary for their survival, though he offers few ideas about how they can withstand the increasing state accountability that would surely follow.

Penetito offers a unique and persuasive model for studying Indigenous education policy, one that could be useful in graduate courses on sociology of education, Indigenous/multicultural education, comparative education, and history of education. Those interested in the social and political foundations of education are likely to find many parallels between Penetito's analysis of Māori schooling and minority groups. Historians of education are likely to be disappointed at the lack of a historical narrative, but this was not the aim of the work. Rather, this book may be useful for historians for its methodological insights on process, intercultural dialogue, state power,

and sources to illuminate the "why" and "how" behind the limits and possibilities in contemporary education for and by Indigenous peoples.

Note

[1]. Anthony Giddens, ed., *Emile Durkheim: Selected Writings*, trans. A. Giddens (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 41.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Christopher J. Frey. Review of Penetito, Wally, *What's Māori about Māori Education? The Struggle for a Meaningful Context.* H-Education, H-Net Reviews. December, 2011.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=31754

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.