

## CHAPTER NINE

### *Postscript*

In the first few days of January 2006 it was obvious to both of us that there was something wrong with the fix proposed by this book. The experience was frustrating. The manuscript was due at the publisher's by the end of the month, and for a few, very important days, important because like schooling once they were over they were gone forever and could not be used again, nothing got done. We didn't read each other's draft, and we didn't write.

During this period Jim Bell, a wonderful man and father died unexpectedly. On the way back to Coromandel from Jim's funeral in Auckland one of us stopped to pick up a hitchhiker. It was dark, 9.30 p.m. and wet, and driving up to Waikawau Bridge a thumb was caught in the car's headlights. Crossing the one-way bridge, turning around, going back, and turning round again was almost too much trouble.

The young man making his way from Thames to Coromandel was Michael, a seventeen-year-old Maori who had left Thames at 10 a.m. to hitch the fifty kilometres to Coromandel. He had got one ride, the twenty kilometres to Tapu (which he pronounced tap-oo), and was still twenty kilometres from Coromandel. Michael was hitching because the shocks on his Honda Civic were shot and the car wouldn't always turn.

Michael would turn eighteen in February, and was looking forward to being old enough to 'D1'. Whatever that was it involved drifting in a Holden Calais up Whangapoua hill. Michael's mum had recently moved from Coromandel to Thames. When he was younger his parents had

drunk a lot, fought a lot, and his dad had hit a lot. A neighbour had called Child, Youth and Family who took the kids away. Mum left dad. Dad hanged himself, and Michael developed an 'anger problem' which resulted in four charges of aggravated assault and one charge of grand theft auto. Michael spent three years in the Grey Lynn secure residential facility.

He can neither read nor write. His verbal skills are impressive, but from what he says it appears he can't decode words and cannot spell. He recognised that his plan to write a sign saying 'I won't kill you' in a bid to encourage drivers to pick him up had several flaws – it was dark so nobody would have been able to read the sign, he didn't have any cardboard, he didn't have a pen, and he could spell only two of the four words – 'I' and 'U'. Despite this Michael has his restricted licence. He took his brother into the written test with him and explained to the people there that he could neither read nor write but his brother could.

Michael also has a job as an apprentice car mechanic. The first place he went into and asked about being an apprentice told him he needed unit standards in maths and literacy. He reckons his maths is pretty good – when he was at school he had a reader-writer (teacher-aide) in maths who would read the questions to him and write his answers down. The second place he went into took him on as an apprentice despite his illiteracy.

When we reached the flats just past Te Kouma Rd, Michael told how one of his mates had drowned there a few months ago. After drinking till closing in the Star and Garter his mate had approached the corner too fast, his car had locked up and rolled, and he had been thrown unconscious and face down into a few inches of water.

There are lots of younger versions of Michael in New Zealand schools. Bigger, violent boys with learning difficulties. But not bad boys. Alcohol and violence at home, and perhaps an element of foetal alcohol syndrome. Michael is the human face of two key questions. The first is, who should have taught Michael to read and write? Not who could have, but who *should* have? Who is paid to do so? Who claims to have the skills and qualifications to do so, and who further claims that unqualified people cannot do so? In our view the answer is: Michael's teachers.

The second question is, who should have made school safe for Michael's fellow students? In our view the answer is: the principal.

Michael and the many Maori boys like him are the reason why we believe Redhill School, despite its excellent ERO reports, has real failings. Schools like Redhill do not accept responsibility for either learning or behaviour. They believe that violence and bullying are police problems. They believe that referring boys like Michael for specialist assessment and input discharges their responsibilities.

We believe that many schools would answer the first question by saying that the responsibility for Michael's learning is shared between Michael, his family and the school. This is a cop-out.

Finally, Michael illustrates two key problems with this book. The first is that we have not acknowledged the resilience and strength of individual Maori. One of the reasons that the 60 per cent failure rate in NCEA Level One of Year 11 Maori is not perceived as an urgent problem by either Maori or the wider political system is that many Maori, like Michael, find a way around this failure. They set and achieve life goals that are not dependent on success in the Pakeha system. At the same time, a Maori like Michael would very much prefer to be able to read and write. Then he could take his girlfriend to a restaurant.

The second problem is that in proposing a solution, particularly in the preceding chapter, we have chosen a reductionist approach, and have talked about teachers, principals, boards and schools as separate things because in the system they are. However, boys like Michael require a holistic approach. That is not to say that they require lots of different people, each stirring the pot. They require one person, a mentor, someone they want to please, who can identify the child's needs and who can meet these in a supportive ako context. As we have said before, that person is unlikely to be a registered teacher. Much more important than the qualification is the mana and rangatiratanga, neither of which can be awarded by the Teachers' Council.