

Bilingual High School — Growing at grassroots pace

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“Cast your eye around the room and almost everything you see — tripod, bunsen burner — has no Maori word to describe it,” says Gerry McMahon.

A good enough reason, one would think, for not attempting what he is now.

Why then would a non-Maori speaker try to teach a subject like science, with its own specialist language, to pupils when the pupils themselves do not speak Maori?

“I elected to,” is his answer. Gerry, along with a handful of other enthusiasts who are tackling similar transition problems to a lesser degree, believes in Wellington High School’s bid to arm its pupils with an extra skill — in his case, bilingualism.

Minor handicap

The absence of an English/Maori dictionary of words encountered in the secondary school junior science syllabus is viewed only as a minor handicap.

Worse perhaps are the interpretation horrors associated with the new maths terminology.

A year’s careful planning has gone into the programme, the first of its type in a New Zealand secondary school.

Mixed ability

It caters for one mixed-ability third form class of 29 pupils, who take all core subjects apart from English (mathematics, science, social studies and physical education) in both English and Maori.

Three pupils from the Hutt Valley, Porirua and Titahi Bay bypassed their local schools specifically to enrol in the bilingual class.

“3DT” is a multi-cultural mixture, comprising four “full pakehas,” 19 Maori, and children with Samoan, Pitcairn Island and Czechoslovakian backgrounds.

They are there because they want to be and with their parents’ consent. The requirement to take the Maori language option to reinforce their classroom Maori is the only other condition of their enrolment.

The principal, Mr Turoa Royal, an outspoken critic of the “mono-cultural bias” in state education, says the experiment has no grand design. Neither are there set academic targets to meet,



(From Left) Helena Winiata, Linda Henare, Del T Kiri and Raewyn Bush, with principal Turoa Royal.

apart from ensuring that the class keeps pace with the third form curriculum.

Based on the premise that the Maori language is viable for today’s pupils growing up in New Zealand, Mr Royal — bilingual himself — says the programme is intended to increase the social and cultural awareness of children to our multicultural society.

He views it as a confidence-booster for pupils as well as being an extra skill, opening up new job opportunities at a time when some employers, such as the Broadcasting Corporation of New Zealand, are seeking bicultural people.

Our heritage

High’s effort is to recognise the importance of the Maori language and its contribution to our national heritage.

The only other New Zealand secondary school attempting bilingual education is Trident High School, the difference is that 3DT pupils are beginners, whereas at Trident they are already bilingual, coming from the bilingual Ruatoki primary school.

Wellington High is starting from scratch with the programme which, according to Mr Royal, allows a certain flexibility — the chance to “grow at our own pace in a grassroots way.”

Besides, he says that it is not necessary to be bilingual to take a bilingual class.

It is more a matter of “where there’s a will ...” — a belief best borne out by the intention of the music teacher, Miss Sally Earle, to enrol in a night school Maori language class.

There are several teachers on the staff who took Maori at university and are keen to put their qualifications to use. It is thought they will be needed next year when 3DT moves up a rung and the bilingual programme receives a new third form intake.

Mr Royal refers to research undertaken in Wales which identified two key areas for bilingual education: “classroom management language” and “subject content”.

For starters, 3DT is progressing with classroom conversation, with the more daunting subject content introduced where translations and teachers’ ability permit. A recent example was a study of Maori food sources — in both languages — in science.