

MINORITIES

Making the library multicultural

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This is the first of a series of articles on library service to minority groups. In each case the paper will be written by a member of the minority group discussed or by a non-librarian closely involved. This paper concerns itself with library service to Polynesians, and is based on a talk given at a seminar on "Breaking the Reading Barrier" during the NZLA Conference in Auckland, February 1975.

I welcome you to the capital of Polynesia, the largest Polynesian city in the world. I start off reminding you of this, since it is the Polynesians who provide most of the cultural diversity in New Zealand: over one-third of a million of them. They are a growing population; and if there are no Polynesians in your local community at the moment, I think you can be assured that in the fairly near future there are likely to be some. Though I want to limit what I say today to those New Zealanders who share in a Polynesian culture, I am sure the general principles are applicable even where other cultural minorities may be more numerous at the present.

Characteristics of Polynesian cultures

The first thing to realise is that in New Zealand Polynesian cultures—Maori, Cook Island, Samoan, Niuean, Tongan especially—are alive, are vigorous, are adapting healthily to the changes of the modern world, and are active in influencing the minds and the behaviour of those who share in them—even though all Polynesians, like the rest of us, share also in the dominant European way of life. Fundamentally, they are oral cultures even today. People strongly influenced by a Polynesian culture tend to trust the person-to-person spoken word, rather than the printed word, in their daily lives. Even so literate a person as the author Albert Wendt ascribes the foundation of his success as a writer to the daily story-telling sessions as he massaged his grandmother's legs. It is the living, spoken, personal word which is valued by the Polynesian. The implication for librarians is clear; if

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you conceive of yourself solely as purveyors of dead language, of print only, you cut yourself off from serving effectively many culturally Polynesian people.

Libraries need to offer the living word as well as print: through television, radio, cassette tapes, records. And they need also to offer the other media of communication which can speak so easily to all people: films, film strips, slides, charts, posters, maps, video-tape. Demonstrations, drama, lectures—none of these, either, are outside the scope of the librarian whose job it is to make available to everyone the ideas and the artistry communicated through the various forms of language.

Polynesian cultures are very strongly people-oriented. Polynesians are people-oriented in the sense of liking to be together; but also in the sense that they expect you to offer yourself as a person, to be ready to talk with them, to get to know them. They may wish to use the library as a sort of social centre, a place where people can meet, can share in some activity—even if it is only selecting books. And the tiny tots can be left playing with toys while the parents are occupied.

The kin group is tremendously important—indeed it is basic—in Polynesian cultures. There are two important implications here for librarians. The first is that librarians should allow for family membership, rather than insisting that each individual be enrolled and treated as a distinct entity unconnected with anyone else. To do something as simple as this is immediately to indicate one's goodwill and willingness to accommodate the values of Polynesian cultures. The other implication is specific to Maori culture. Each local area is associated with some families, some hapu (sub-tribe), some tribal group. Each area has some historical associations. The land on which your library stands is dear to the hearts of some group of Maoris. A crucial way of demonstrating your determination to cater for all peoples will be to lay in a good stock of materials of all kinds relevant to the history of the area and to the Maori peoples in whose ancestral home your area is. I feel that a Maori should, on entering your library, be able to see something that straight away identifies him with the library, the library with his people: a display of books, a photograph of a well known person or place or event in history, a taiaha, some kuias demonstrating weaving: your imagination and good local advice can provide the right touch.

Polynesian cultures foster some characteristic habits of mind and behaviour which may differ from those fostered by book-oriented Pakeha culture. For instance, thinking, feeling, and sensory activity tend to go together, as in a discotheque where sound, movement, physical closeness, lighting, even odour are integrated as parts of a single experience of dancing. This is one reason why there should be plenty of paperbacks, there should be objects related to books on display that can be handled and talked about: there should be pictorial materials available; then real or depicted things and the printed materials may be inter-related, may illuminate each other.

Polynesian habits of relating things, of classifying, of associating may not always be the same as those of the academic-minded Pakeha. Bliss, Dewey and other classification systems may not be adequate in a multi-cultural library. Books of the same topic will have to be placed together—even the fiction—so as to make for easy locating. And indeed some libraries already do this, using clear signs to assist people to find the topics.

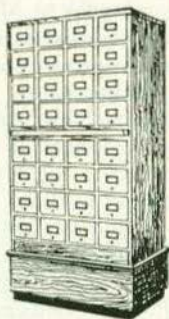
Cultural identity is important to any group, particularly when they are a minority group. Therefore Polynesians appreciate anything that indicates that Polynesians and their cultures are welcomed: decor, objects on display, books, and periodicals; and best of all, if you know and greet them by their names.

In any multi-cultural society many kinds of English will be spoken; and linguists will tell you that all of them are valid, each of them connects the speaker with some group which is important to him. Maori English, for instance, even has a literature in its own right in stories by Roderick Finlayson, Witi Ihimaera, and some of the stories in my own anthologies, and elsewhere. Does your book-buying reflect this linguistic diversity? Do you aim, at the very least, to buy heavily of books that are readable to all, whatever the kind of English they speak and whatever their degree of competence with English of any sort?

Finally, Polynesian immigrants want to know about New Zealand

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culture, the New Zealand way of life; and Maoris from isolated rural areas are interested to learn about life in the city. Librarians have an obligation, then, to ensure continual displays of readable, well illustrated, interesting material which will help these people find their feet in our complex society.

Slamming the library door

I will conclude by mentioning some of the things I have noted over the last few weeks in public libraries, things which are serving to slam the door in the faces of Polynesians, things which are maintaining too many of our libraries as the preserves of the middle-class Pakeha.

Little attempt is being made in most of our libraries to provide any other media but print, yet other media are often just as cheap. It does not cost all that much for a sturdy, simple cassette tape recorder; records cost much the same as hard-back books. Radio and television, perhaps with headphones, can be placed in a small room or in a corner. Where librarians do offer records, too often a silly snobbishness seems to guide the selection: in some libraries there is nothing in-between Beethoven and the well-worn community sing-song Max Bygraves sort of stuff and certainly nothing of Polynesian music.

Some libraries make it plain that they do not value people. The notices on the walls tell you this: SILENCE, KEEP OUT, NO THOROUGHFARE, LIBRARIANS ONLY—and my favourite DO NOT REMOVE FROM THE SHELVES. Too often the libraries are impersonal places with assistants pre-occupied with library housework. I sometimes feel that our libraries can become mere supermarkets for hardback books.

Families are at a discount. Not only is individualistic membership emphasised, but there is a clear-cut division between what children may borrow and what adults may borrow, a division based entirely on the senior librarian's notions, without any reference to what her clients' interests and reading abilities really are.

The library reflects a middle-class Pakeha conception of things both in the classification system adopted and the impersonal manner in which business is conducted. There is little multi-cultural decor; there are few fluid lines inter-connecting areas and topics; and where large areas of space are available they are usually for the use of a tiny minority—students who want to use the rare books or those wanting to borrow art prints. Catalogue systems go unexplained; classification systems in vogue are sometimes so complicated as to defy all but the most persistent efforts to locate books on particular topics or by particular authors. Too many libraries are prison-like with banks of books in straight lines, dim lighting, nowhere to relax, and a deep religious hush.

The libraries too often reflect the tastes only of the social group to which the librarians belong. In too many of our libraries you have to pay for simple, ordinary, unexceptional and unexceptionable stuff like Crump, Innes, Science fiction, while getting balderdash such as Bridget Brophy and Commander Cathie free. And there is too seldom

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a good selection of printed fiction or non-fiction material that reflects accurately the worlds of Polynesia. A list for teachers in *English in New Zealand* offers some guidance to librarians. (1) So often the books on Polynesia available in the local library are either rubbishy books designed to grace the coffee table or else are scholarly tomes aimed at the academic.

The library and the schools generally have too little to do with each other. At the worst, one finds the school library replicating the public one, instead of each complimenting the other. It ought to be possible for teachers and librarians to meet once in a while to discuss how together they can better serve the whole community.

And finally, libraries ought to be more involved with the life of the community. As a first step, some libraries take their books out into the community in vans. But the Hawaiian public library service sets us an example of what can be achieved. Among the services they offer are:

- showing of family films
- talks on books
- paperback swaps
- art shows
- dance and music programmes
- special materials for the handicapped
- multi-media facilities
- meeting rooms
- printed, free materials on Hawaii and its history
- cassette tapes
- mounted pictures, periodicals, copies of historical documents, photo collections and so on.

Some of our libraries are doing a splendid job; for instance, the Leys Institute offers plenty of easy-to-read materials, games, television, and much personal help. And my own school's local library, the Otara Public Library, is a first port of call in the pursuit of wagging children who relish its friendly atmosphere and sensible selection of books. And I know well that many of you are determined to make your libraries places where everyone is welcome.

Do not, however, offer lack of money as an excuse for failure to make your library a multi-cultural centre for all members of your local community. If money is short, this means that you have failed to persuade your local councillors that your work is important, and to remind them that Polynesians are citizens and rate-payers, too. To make our social institutions—including both school and library—reflect the multi-cultural reality of our society is one of the major tasks facing New Zealanders now.

Reference

- 1 Maori and Polynesian; some resources. *English in New Zealand*, July 1974:26-28.