

# Moving Out of the Realm of Myth

## GOVERNMENT CHILD WELFARE SERVICES TO MAORI, 1925–1972

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IN JUNE 1986, the Ministerial Advisory Committee on a Maori Perspective for the Department of Social Welfare released its report, *Puao-te-Ata-Tu*. This followed closely on the heels of a series of inquiries and reports justifiably critical of government welfare policy towards Maori. Social welfare institutions for children and young people had come under the spotlight from the late 1970s, and were found wanting; internal reports outlined shortcomings in responses to Maori clients and detailed the institutional racism within the Department of Social Welfare.<sup>1</sup> Based on extensive consultation with Maori communities, *Puao-te-Ata-Tu* was also an indictment of the philosophy underpinning contemporary and historical welfare policy and the delivery of welfare services to Maori — and of the society in which Maori were the predominant clientele of social welfare institutions and courts. The report concluded that the situation was one of ‘crisis proportions’. Maori families, dependent on the state, had been torn apart through interventionist and racist policies, whanau and iwi had been ignored in welfare service provision, and, as a whole, Maori society had been excluded from the ‘key decisions’ relating to welfare, justice and education. The report called for immediate and sweeping change in all aspects of social welfare: the incorporation of Maori values, culture and beliefs in all future policies, legislation and strategies, the allocation of an equitable share of resources, and a shared authority over the use of resources.<sup>2</sup>

*Puao-te-Ata-Tu* was notable for its direct consultation with Maori communities,

1 See, for example, ‘Social Welfare Children’s Homes: Report on an Inquiry held on June 11 1978’, Auckland Committee on Racism and Discrimination, Department of Social Welfare Library, Wellington, 1978; ‘Report of the Human Rights Commission on Representations by the Auckland Committee on Racism and Discrimination: Children and Young Persons Home Administered by the Department of Social Welfare’, Human Rights Commission, Department of Social Welfare Library, Wellington, 1982; ‘Report of Committee to Report to the Minister of Social Welfare on the Current Practices and Procedures followed in Institutions of the Department of Social Welfare in Auckland’, Department of Social Welfare Library, Wellington, 1982.

2 *Puao-te-Ata-Tu*, Report of the Ministerial Advisory Committee on a Maori Perspective for the Department of Social Welfare, Wellington, June 1986, pp.7–9, 18, 21.

its articulation of Maori voices, and its agenda for change. Several of the report's recommendations were implemented over the next few years, and much of its call for culturally-appropriate welfare services was incorporated into the Children, Young Persons and Their Families Act 1989, legislation which many have considered a watershed in New Zealand's welfare provision for children and young people.<sup>3</sup> Notwithstanding the powerful and evocative nature of *Puao-te-Ata-Tu*, its findings should not necessarily be read back into the entire spectrum of welfare policy towards Maori throughout the twentieth century. As David Thomson has argued, current welfare policy is often viewed in the context of events of the previous two decades, and anything beyond that is of 'background interest' or belongs to the 'realm of myth'.<sup>4</sup> Government welfare policy towards Maori in particular, as *Puao-te-Ata-Tu* and the Children, Young Persons and Their Families Act illustrate, has been read primarily with the recent past in mind. A longer-term view of one aspect of government welfare — the provision of child welfare services from the 1920s to the early 1970s — indicates that some government agencies displayed a flexible approach in working with Maori families. Rather than the wholesale removal of Maori children to state institutions or to Pakeha foster families, official policy was to keep Maori children with their whanau, in their own tribal areas, or with Maori families.

This article, drawn from a larger study of government child welfare services, examines the operation of policy towards Maori children and young people between 1925 and 1972.<sup>5</sup> It focuses on child welfare services in the community, rather than residential institutions for children and young people, and touches on the relationship between government and other welfare providers. The article is based on government sources and is told from the perspective of policy-makers and child welfare officers, most of whom were Pakeha. Such sources and perspectives, Judith Binney reminds us, are just one way of telling the past; Maori sources and Maori perspectives would reveal other perceptions of child welfare policy and practice.<sup>6</sup> The policy of maintaining Maori children in their

3 The Department of Social Welfare has worked with a varied commitment to putting in place the report's recommendations. See John Bradley, 'The Resolve to Devolve: Maori and Social Services', *Social Work Now: The Practice Journal of the New Zealand Children and Young Persons Service*, 1, 1995, pp.29–35; Danny Keenan, 'Puao-te-Ata-Tu: A Brief History and Reflection', *Social Work Review*, 7, 1 (1995), pp.11, 29. For discussions of some of the advantages and disadvantages of the Children, Young Persons and Their Families Act 1989, see 'Review of the Children, Young Persons and Their Families Act 1989', Report of the Ministerial Review Team to the Minister of Social Welfare, Hon. Jenny Shipley, February 1992.

4 David Thomson, 'Welfare and the Historians', in Lloyd Bonfield, Richard Smith and Keith Wrightson, eds, *The World We Have Gained*, Oxford, 1986, p.357.

5 Bronwyn Dalley, *Family Matters: Child Welfare in Twentieth-century New Zealand*, Auckland, 1998.

6 Judith Binney, 'Maori Oral Narratives, Pakeha Written Texts: Two Forms of Telling History', *New Zealand Journal of History*, 21, 1 (1987), pp.16–28.

community did not always flow into practice, and some policies, however well-intentioned, caused considerable harm to their recipients — as the examples in *Puao-te-Ata-Tu* attest. While neither minimizing that damage, nor ignoring the intellectual and cultural precepts on which child welfare policy was based, it is evident that before the 1980s' reassessment of social welfare services and the widespread enunciation of culturally-appropriate, family-centred policies, child welfare agencies endeavoured to work with and within Maori communities to safeguard child and family welfare. Examining those endeavours — moving them out of the 'realm of myth' — enables us to provide a fuller context for current welfare practices.

Prior to the establishment of the Department of Social Welfare in 1972, state responsibility for child welfare services rested with the Child Welfare Branch of the Department of Education. From 1926, child welfare officers within the Branch (renamed the Child Welfare Division in 1948) oversaw all aspects of the welfare of children and young people up to the age of 21. This included work with young offenders in residential institutions or under supervision in their own homes, the welfare of infants born out of wedlock, children who had been abused or neglected, or those living away from their birth families in foster care. Unpaid, honorary child welfare officers, sometimes drawn from religious or voluntary welfare groups, investigated cases or supervised children and families in rural and isolated areas.

By the 1920s, family-based, community work was the mainstay of child welfare services. The growing emphasis placed on the social value of child life in Western nations, especially after the First World War, turned the tide against the confinement of children in industrial schools and reformatories for lengthy periods.<sup>7</sup> Boarding children with foster parents for payment, supervising delinquent or neglected children in their own homes in the community, and developing community-based preventive schemes were all regarded as superior to any form of institutional treatment which separated a child from her or his family. The Education Department had promoted the benefits of boarding children in the community since the 1880s, for it was through living with a foster family that children could 'acquire habits of self-reliance that cannot be formed in the seclusion of an institution which is a kind of prison. They come to look upon their foster-parents as their natural guardians, protectors, and counsellors, and the

7 For a good study of changing attitudes towards children in New Zealand, see Dugald McDonald, 'Children and Young Persons in New Zealand Society', in Peggy Koopman-Boyden, ed., *Families in New Zealand Society*, Wellington, 1978, pp.44–56; for Britain, see Harry Hendrick, 'Constructions and Reconstructions of British Childhood: An Interpretive Survey, 1800 to the Present', in Alison James and Alan Prout, eds, *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood: Contemporary Issues in the Sociological Study of Childhood*, London, 1990, pp.35–59; for the United States, see Viviana Zelizer, *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children*, New York, 1985.

home becomes a starting point and a rallying point for them as they enter naturally into the ordinary relations of common every-day life.’<sup>8</sup> The Child Welfare Branch continued and expanded this emphasis, and argued that family care was the ideal situation for ensuring children’s welfare. ‘It is considered that home life is the most precious heritage of every child, and no effort should be spared to keep the home together’, stated John Beck, the first Superintendent of Child Welfare, in 1927.<sup>9</sup>

The philosophy of community-based care was largely reflected in the practice of both the Child Welfare Branch and Division. The major forms of child welfare services — foster care, court-ordered supervision of children by child welfare officers, and the supervision of children and families for preventive purposes — all took place within the community and some form of family structure, including birth families and non-related families. Only a minority of children and young people whose conduct or home circumstances the children’s court considered to be particularly poor were removed from a family situation and housed in residential institutions; both the Branch and the Division endeavoured to foster these children, or place them in employment, as quickly as possible. Between 1925 and the 1970s, institutions accommodated less than 10% of children committed to care, and most young people remained in residence for less than two years. Numerically, as well as philosophically, family- and community-based care dominated New Zealand’s child welfare system from the 1920s.

Family-based care had many advantages for child welfare agencies, not the least of which was financial; foster care and supervision in the community were far cheaper options than keeping children in institutions. Most importantly, family-based care carried the possibility of altering or supporting families. By the 1910s, poor parenting and lack of control in family life had largely replaced the effects of heredity and ‘bad breeding’ as diagnoses of child delinquency and other welfare problems.<sup>10</sup> Tending to children’s welfare within the family allowed for the adjustment of those very conditions which led to a child coming to official attention, and which institutional treatment, with its severance from domestic life, denied. Regular visits to children in their own homes enabled child welfare officers to oversee parental conduct, offer advice on child-rearing, and seek to change ‘maladjusted’ family circumstances. In this respect, child welfare services followed wider policies aimed at bolstering family life which dominated New Zealand’s health and welfare services from the second quarter of the twentieth century.

The emphasis that both the Child Welfare Branch and Division placed on the centrality of a family life for children allowed them to display a flexible attitude

8 *Appendices to the Journals of the House of Representatives* (AJHR), 1881, E-6, p.1.

9 AJHR, 1927, E-4, p.8.

10 For an example of the emphasis on poor home conditions, see AJHR, 1917, E-1A, pp.1, 3.

towards family forms. Some historians have argued that New Zealand's welfare state was intent on upholding and supporting the nuclear, Pakeha family, but the child welfare policies of that welfare state were never so straightforward.<sup>11</sup> In the case of Maori children, 'extended' families and family groups were among the options considered as child welfare officers endeavoured to resolve Maori child welfare issues within Maori families.

Neither the Child Welfare Branch nor the Division compiled separate statistics for Maori and Pakeha children, but reports from child welfare officers indicated that Maori constituted an increasingly disproportionate section of those coming to notice over the twentieth century. Comparatively few Maori appeared in children's courts during the 1920s and 1930s; few others were on child welfare officers' books as cases for preventive supervision, an informal system of oversight which bypassed court appearances. Those Maori children and young people coming into contact with the Child Welfare Branch were primarily from rural areas into which the network of child welfare officers had recently expanded. The districts of Northland, the East Coast and the central North Island, for example, were regions in which child welfare work was a new feature of government policy, and where delinquency and welfare issues were 'discovered' as Maori health and housing became subject to closer inspection and disapproval. Napier's child welfare officer, who visited settlements around Taupo in 1940, found 'deplorable' conditions and Maori living in housing he considered to be unsuitable and unhygienic. Shortly after the location of a child welfare officer on the East Coast in the early 1930s, Pakeha settlers called for action in halting the 'bands of hooligans' from Maori communities. 'As one man remarked', noted John Beck who visited the district to inspect the situation, 'when the time had arrived that no pakeha settler could with safety leave his home unoccupied even for a few hours and his womenfolk were not safe from molestation even in a motor car after dark had fallen, it was time the Government took the matter in hand'.<sup>12</sup> A subsequent visit from Jim McClune, Beck's successor, provided a more nuanced reading of the causes of any Maori welfare problems: low wages, a dearth of employment opportunities for young people, inadequate housing, and the ill-effects of alcohol use.<sup>13</sup>

By the early 1940s, however, child welfare officers commented on the growing number of young Maori appearing before the children's courts for delinquent conduct and offences. The annual reports of the Child Welfare

11 See, for example, Linda Bryder, "'A Social Laboratory': New Zealand and Social Welfare, 1840–1990", *British Review of New Zealand Studies*, 3 (1991), p.37.

12 G. Young, Child Welfare Officer, Napier, to Jim McClune, Superintendent of Child Welfare, 26 September 1940, John Beck, Superintendent of Child Welfare, to Director of Education, 23 September 1936, Child Welfare (CW) 1, 40/25/26, National Archives (NA), Wellington.

13 McClune, notes on a visit to Napier, Gisborne and East Coast, March 1940, CW 1, 19/52, NA, Wellington.

Branch referred to a steady rise in Maori 'juvenile delinquency', as measured in appearances before the children's courts. Although the rise was halted temporarily in the later 1940s — as indeed it was for all appearances before the children's courts — the general trend was of an increasing over-representation of Maori youth in child welfare cases. From the 1940s to the early 1970s, Maori were about three times as likely as Pakeha to appear before children's courts for offences or breaches of the Child Welfare Act 1925, such as being neglected, indigent, or not under proper control.<sup>14</sup>

Maori were also over-represented in the population of residential institutions for children and young people. During the 1920s and 1930s, the Child Welfare Branch was loathe to have Maori children in its institutions and tried as quickly as possible to return to their community those whom the children's court had committed to an institution. 'Experience' had shown, one child welfare officer stated, that the 'Maori girl does not take kindly to Institutional life, as they are home sick and crave to be with their own people'.<sup>15</sup> Less salutary motives also lay behind the policy of trying to keep Maori out of institutions, prompted by the alleged 'trouble' they caused there, or when they returned to their own communities. Maori girls would sometimes 'segregate' themselves and 'gang up against Pakeha' at the main institution for girls, staff claimed, while according to John Beck, '[Maori] are exemplary in conduct while in residence, are generally the favourites of the institution, return to their homes as heroes, boasting of what good times they have had and immediately resume their former lawless habits'.<sup>16</sup> Any qualms about the negative effects on Maori of confinement in institutions far from their communities were outweighed by public and official concern over the rising level of Maori offending and 'delinquency' from the 1940s. In 1944, the Branch opened a small residential institution specifically for Maori girls in Featherston; by the 1960s, Maori formed a rapidly increasing proportion of all residential institutions.

Anxiety over Maori child welfare issues grew out of a broader interest during the 1940s with 'juvenile delinquency' — a vague and ill-defined term which encompassed youthful behaviours and lifestyles ranging from criminal conduct to 'misbehaviour' and being 'uncontrollable'. It also reflected the particular mid-century focus on Maori welfare which continued through the 1960s and was illustrated in a series of reports on Maori education, social and economic conditions. Child welfare officers and other commentators, including groups

14 See, for example, Joint Committee on Young Offenders, 'Recent Research into Crime amongst Maoris', December 1962, Social Security (SS) 8/10/9, part 5, NA, Wellington; Joint Committee on Young Offenders, 'A Limited Study Comparing Maoris and Non-Maoris Appearing in the Children's Court in 1960', June 1963, Justice Department (J) 1, 21/2/46, part 2, NA, Wellington.

15 M. Hamilton, Inspector of Child Welfare, to McClune, 30 June 1939, CW 1, 40/25/26.

16 S. Slater, Research Unit, to J. Ferguson, 18 April 1962, CW 1, 4/15, part 1; Beck to Director of Education, 23 September 1936, CW 1, 40/25/26.

such as the Maori Women's Welfare League, ascribed poor employment opportunities, and inadequate housing and living conditions as primary causes of Maori youth delinquency and child welfare problems.<sup>17</sup> A four-year survey of the Gisborne and East Coast regions in the early 1940s led local child welfare officers to conclude that lack of employment in reasonable conditions contributed to Maori delinquency; the first task of the child welfare officer was to find a suitable situation for young Maori.<sup>18</sup> Meetings of Maori groups and child welfare officers in the central North Island in the later 1950s discussed the effects for Maori of poverty and poor accommodation in the area, where housing was often substandard and parents tried to raise their families in poor conditions and with dismal prospects of employment locally.<sup>19</sup> The accelerated pace of Maori migration to urban areas in the 1960s accentuated housing and employment problems, and made many Pakeha aware of the country's social, economic and racial inequalities. As one child welfare officer commented in 1967, Pakeha were having to live with 'uncomfortable consciences' in being brought face to face with Maori welfare and health conditions 'which demand the exercise of their supposed racial tolerance'; Pakeha 'theoretical openmindedness' was 'rapidly crumbling' she asserted.<sup>20</sup>

Racial intolerance and ignorance of Maori custom also lay behind Pakeha explanations for Maori welfare problems. Drunkenness, laziness, and especially the 'misuse' of Social Security benefits were some of the most common explanations. An honorary child welfare officer in Shannon noted the poor living conditions of Maori at nearby Opiki where the families earned 'enormous' wages but spent it all on gambling and drinking; a Pukekohe officer claimed that Maori children lived in the 'filthiest of shacks', and that 'the only diversion is taxis, fish and chips and the cinema'.<sup>21</sup> Whanau relationships and child-rearing methods were sometimes taken for a lack of parental 'control' or neglect. One Auckland child welfare officer found it difficult to tell if a Maori child were 'unwanted' or not, as he found parental attitudes 'somewhat deceptive': 'it would appear from observation that the parents exist to supply meals to the children, and after a certain fashion clothe them, but the cultural and hygienic

17 AJHR, 1945, E-4, p.4. The Maori Women's Welfare League was particularly interested in housing conditions during the 1950s and 1960s. For a discussion of this see Barbara Brookes, 'Nostalgia for "Innocent Homely Pleasures": The 1964 New Zealand Controversy over *Washday at the Pa*', *Gender and History*, 9, 2 (1997), pp.244ff.

18 'Delinquent Maori Youth and Employment', 31 July 1941, CW 1, 40/25/26.

19 F. Hallett, District Child Welfare Officer, Taumarunui, to Charlie Peek, Superintendent of Child Welfare, 20 October 1957, CW 1, 4/7/5.

20 Miss Weir, in Minutes of Augmented Head Office Staff Meeting, 7 February 1967, CW 1, 4/15, part 2.

21 D. Campbell, Honorary Child Welfare Officer, Shannon, to Child Welfare Officer, Palmerston North, 20 December 1944, CW 1, 4/16/3, part 1; H. Giles, Child Welfare Officer, Auckland, to District Child Welfare Officer, Auckland, 20 October 1943, CW 1, 4/15/5.

education and the general control of the children are mostly neglected'.<sup>22</sup> Lewis Anderson, later to become Superintendent of Child Welfare, noted a 'great deal' of racial prejudice in Northland where a colour bar operated against Maori in areas where Pakeha were a minority. He affirmed that those who proclaimed the prevalence of Maori 'laziness' were often the quickest to refuse jobs to Maori youth seeking work. He could find few examples of heavy drinking among Maori, but noted that if he gave evidence to that effect before the 1945 Liquor Licensing Commission 'I can imagine the great numbers of irate pakeha Northlanders wrathfully proclaiming that the Child Welfare Officer did not know what he was talking about, that he did not look around, and that he was encouraging the Maoris in their lazy and drunken habits'.<sup>23</sup>

Many child welfare officers also recognized that an adaptation to European cultural norms contributed to Maori social dislocation and burgeoning welfare problems. Reflecting on his work in the Whangarei district for 1951, the District Child Welfare Officer attributed many of the 'evils' facing Maori to European influence and 'faulty legislation': 'the Maori today is caught between two influences — those which are fundamentally a part of his very fabric and those which are a part of modern civilisation'.<sup>24</sup> Other officers noted with concern what they believed to be the breakdown of traditional Maori structures. According to some, a disappearing 'community spirit' and a dwindling respect for elders were detrimentally affecting Maori culture; others alleged a lack of leadership in some communities, where tribal committees established under the Maori Social and Economic Advancement Act 1945 were rendered powerless.<sup>25</sup> As Barbara Brookes has shown, however, some mid-century Pakeha created nostalgic views of the 'simplicity' of Maori rural life that could be at odds with Maori aspirations;<sup>26</sup> for Pakeha, 'traditional' solutions to welfare problems, like calls for the rapid assimilation of Maori into Pakeha society, could leave little room for dealing with the realities of the situations confronting Maori.

Maori offending and over-representation in children's courts also became of major concern in Maori communities from the 1940s. A number of Maori groups, including the Maori Women's Welfare League, argued that Maori themselves were best suited to solving their own problems. New Plymouth's Te Kotahitanga Tautaru group informed the Division in 1948 that its officers could not control delinquency among Maori girls, especially those who boarded ships

22 John Cupit, District Child Welfare Officer, Auckland, to Peek, 9 May 1951, CW 1, 4/15, part 1.

23 Lewis Anderson, District Child Welfare Officer, Whangarei, to McClune, 2 April 1945, CW 1, 40/2/124.

24 A. Rounthwaite, District Child Welfare Officer, Whangarei, annual report on child welfare work, 1 April 1952, CW 1, 4/12/3, part 2.

25 J. Lucas, District Child Welfare Officer, Gisborne, annual report on children's court, 3 May 1956, CW 1, 4/12/3, part 3; Rounthwaite, 'Ministerial Enquiry: Drinking at Pupuke', 5 November 1952, CW 1, 4/15, part 1.

26 Brookes, pp.242–61.

in the local port at night when child welfare officers were off duty; it suggested that its own members supervise young Maori women.<sup>27</sup> These calls echoed those raised by Maori groups shortly after the passage of the Child Welfare Act 1925. Te Akarana Association was a forceful critic in the early 1930s of the application of the Act to Maori children, and recommended that jurisdiction for child welfare be passed to the Native Land Court. It condemned the practice of boarding Maori children with Pakeha foster parents and the social dislocation attendant on that. Maori children became 'social misfits', its President argued, and were strangers to their own people and language: 'You may leave a native child among his own folk and he is likely to grow up a good Maori, but you cannot make a good Pakeha out of him', he warned.<sup>28</sup>

Whatever the reasons given for Maori child welfare difficulties, both the Child Welfare Branch and Division were clear that the policy towards Maori children and young people was to solve problems within Maori communities and maintain children within a Maori family group. Children removed from their immediate birth families were to be boarded with Maori families wherever possible, and young people found employment ideally would be placed with Maori employers. Only as a last resort would Maori children be sent to residential institutions.<sup>29</sup> The policy of trying to keep Maori children in Maori communities fitted the broader enunciation of a family-based care for all children, but it also reflected a reluctance to have Maori welfare issues 'intrude' on Pakeha society. Resolving Maori welfare problems in Maori communities may have been presented as being in the interests of Maori, but it also served the interests of a Pakeha society and state chary of engaging thoroughly with Maori social and economic conditions.

Nevertheless, child welfare officers recognized, even if they may not have understood, the particular importance for Maori of kinship ties and of drawing on community resources in sharing responsibility for the well-being of young people. Child welfare officers could be aware of the hurt and despair created when courts ordered Maori children to residential institutions, usually far away from their families. Problems young Maori had in adjusting to institutional life

27 A. Witten-Hannah, Honorary Child Welfare Officer and President, Te Kotahitanga Tautaru, to Peek, 9 March 1958, CW 1, 4/12/10; Minister of Education to Ralph Love, Secretary, Maori Women's Welfare League, 15 July 1952, CW 1, 4/12/6.

28 *Sun*, 16 July 1930, George Graham, Te Akarana Association, to Minister of Education, 1 November and 11 December 1930, Minister of Education to Graham, 13 February 1931, CW 1, 40/25/26.

29 See, for example, H. Lacey, Child Welfare Officer, Hawera, to Beck, 16 July 1930, Beck to Annie Tocker, Child Welfare Officer, Hawera, 20 October 1937, CW 1, 40/25/26; Beck to C. Gilmour, Child Welfare Officer, Gisborne, 28 March 1935, CW 1, 4/13; T. Macarthy, Child Welfare Officer, Hamilton, to District Child Welfare Officer, Hamilton, 20 March 1947, CW 1, 4/15/2; L. Uttley, District Child Welfare Officer, Whangarei, to Lewis Anderson, Superintendent of Child Welfare, 13 August 1964, Minutes of Augmented Head Office Staff Meeting, 7 February 1967, CW 1, 4/15, part 2.

were often attributed to their separation from home. Arthur Eru's admission to a residential institution in the late 1950s was a traumatic experience for the young boy, and child welfare officers predicted that his 'adjustment' would not be maintained unless 'serious consideration' were given to his return to his family.<sup>30</sup> Danny Ropata, admitted to an institution after a period of supervision in his own home, cut his arms with razors; a psychological examination remarked on the 'racial characteristic' of his attachment to his home, and concluded that his 'unsatisfactory behaviour' was a 'blind, almost animal rebellion' against any controls placed on him. Anguished families were not always treated with respect or understanding when sons or daughters were removed. Walter Matene's mother wrote frequent letters to her local child welfare officer when Walter was admitted to an institution in 1951. The officer believed that she was 'worrying quite unnecessarily' when she inquired about Walter's welfare, and expressed her concern: 'I still can't forget my boy in mind or in my heart which worries me day and night or where ever I may be you may think I imagine things but never the less I love my children'. The officer informed her crisply that her son 'is in the best place at the present where he is being trained in good habits . . . . Of course you will miss him very much in your family circle . . . but at the same time it was quite impossible for him to continue living as he was, and his removal was in the boy's own interest. I think you must comfort yourself with that thought, and if you do, I don't doubt that you will accustom yourself to losing him and accept it in the right way.'

Many child welfare officers worked closely, and over long periods, with Maori families in trying to resolve child welfare difficulties within the community. In 1951, for example, Girlie Burrows and three of her eight siblings were committed to care for living in an environment detrimental to their physical well-being. For four years, child welfare officers had visited Girlie's family, which was living in straitened circumstances that declined even further following Mr Burrows' death in 1950. The eldest daughter looked after all the children, and it was only once she could no longer do so, and Mrs Burrows' behaviour had become 'erratic', that the children were taken into care and sent to live with an aunt and uncle.

When Maori children were removed from their parents, child welfare officers often sought out other family with whom they could live, and asked Maori families to recommend suitable relatives. Pei Mutu's family moved from Dannevirke to Wellington in the 1940s in search of employment, and found it difficult to adjust to life in the city. Following his apprehension for stealing mail, Pei's father and the local child welfare officer arranged for him to live with an aunt in Dannevirke until his term of supervision ceased, after which he returned

30 I have used pseudonyms for all cases. Unless otherwise indicated, this and subsequent cases are drawn from ABNT W4295, Department of Social Welfare files, Child Welfare Division, NA, Wellington.

to his home. Pita Wiki lived with his family in a Maori community in Northland in the late 1950s when the court placed him under the supervision of a child welfare officer for two years for car conversion. Family relationships were good, his child welfare officer noted, but Pita was not under any type of 'restraint', and he became a 'considerable source of trouble' at his school. Pita was sent to live with his brother, and even though he appeared in court again on three counts of breaking and entering, theft and car conversion (for which his brother administered his own discipline), Pita remained with his brother until he slipped into his 'old habits', was convicted of theft and committed to a residential institution.

Keeping Maori children with their whanau or in the community was not always a popular decision with Pakeha or critics of child welfare policy. Child welfare officers frequently reacted to charges that they 'did nothing' with Maori families, as keeping children in their family group was sometimes interpreted. An Otorohanga teacher who disagreed with the Division's methods and suggested that Maori boys be sent to institutions for several years received a straightforward response from the Superintendent of Child Welfare, Charlie Peek: 'I would not encourage [my officers] to adopt the cut-and-dried but quite erroneous belief that the dumping of under-privileged Maori children into hostels, however well-managed, is . . . the only solution'.<sup>31</sup> In Whangarei and Northland especially, where child welfare officers' actions had long been criticized by Pakeha, complaints were rife in the 1960s. 'The old cries of "put him away" and "what is Child Welfare doing?" are being heard here with renewed insistence and volume', the District Child Welfare Officer wrote in 1964. He continued: 'Usually of course the action expected of us is the wholesale removal of families which have between 8 and 12 children . . . I don't doubt that many of the children concerned will survive their backgrounds and become reasonable citizens if left alone, [but] it is worse than useless trying to explain this to an eager beaver social worker, an irate headmaster or a policeman who wants peace at any price in his area. Our policy of leaving children in their homes . . . is regarded as laziness and weakness.'<sup>32</sup>

In the case of children completely removed from their family and sent to board with non-related families or to an institution, contact with their own family was usually facilitated. Fourteen-year-old Jessie Makatea was living with her mother in the Waitotara Valley, near Wanganui, when she called on child welfare officers and asked to be taken away from her home. With her brother, she was sent to board with a Maori family in Raetihi, but was removed after she was found to be having a sexual relationship with a Wanganui seaman who provided her with 'pills' in case of pregnancy. 'In the emergency' of their discovery of this relationship, child welfare officers sent her to an institution in Palmerston North,

31 Peek to C. Hotson, District High School, Otorohanga, 10 June 1949, CW 1, 4/15/2.

32 Uttley to Anderson, 13 August 1964, CW 1, 4/15, part 2.

and then to school in Rotorua in the belief that Jessie could 'improve' only if removed from all her 'old associations'. Her contact with her father was maintained, however, even though child welfare officers disapproved of his mode of living; he drank 'to excess', his home was 'totally unsuitable' for any child or young person, but 'in spite of all this', one child welfare officer noted, 'the man *is* [her] father and she cannot be indefinitely denied the right to see him'. Officers arranged for her to board near him in Wanganui so that she could visit regularly.

By 1958, when Arthur Eru was placed under preventive supervision in his own home, child welfare officers had already been visiting his family for a year because of 'domestic and matrimonial problems'. Mr Eru was unemployed, 'anti-Pakeha', apparently drank heavily, and according to the officers, gave his ill wife no help in tending to their ten children. Even though three of the children, including Arthur, were regarded as 'out of control', the officers saw that the children were happy, and that the best way of assisting Arthur and his siblings was to support the family unit. Mrs Eru herself finally suggested that her son would have a 'better chance in life' if he lived away from home. The child welfare officers regarded his removal as a temporary measure; in and out of foster homes and then institutions, Arthur regularly returned to his family for 'trial' placements or on a semi-permanent basis, even though the Division believed it to be a 'risky' venture and could 'almost guarantee' that he would soon be 'in trouble' there.

If, for whatever reason, child welfare officers considered that a child should be removed from her or his family, or the family requested removal, attempts were made to board the child with a Maori family if kin placements were not available or were not regarded as appropriate. Walter Matene was removed from his home in 1951 after having been missing for four weeks. For the next four years, he lived with a succession of Maori foster families, returning home periodically, until he again went missing. Child welfare officers eventually found him living in Wellington; he had obtained a job at the freezing works at Petone and boarded with a Maori family. Some officers also removed Maori children from Pakeha households to place them with Maori families. Child Welfare Inspector Lorna Hodder, for example, found a Maori child from Ohakune boarding with a Pakeha family at Shannon; she arranged for his removal to a Maori home near Ohakune so that he could visit his family as a prelude to returning to them.<sup>33</sup>

In their dealings with government child welfare agencies, families and children were very often at a disadvantage. As a number of historians have argued, relationships between welfare providers and clients were complex, and both parties had a part in negotiating the boundaries of assistance; welfare

33 Lorna Hodder, visit to Palmerston North, April 1957, CW 1, 2/6/27, part 3.

recipients sometimes sought assistance themselves, demanded that agencies take action to resolve their problems, or refused to co-operate with officials.<sup>34</sup> With statute law — and the authority that entailed — on their side, however, child welfare officers were in a powerful position. For Maori clients, the social and economic inequalities which derived from racial difference in mid-twentieth-century New Zealand complicated further their relationship with government agencies. As one Maori group wondered, ‘what chance of making any satisfactory pleas had a frightened Maori woman when confronted by a magistrate, lawyer, Child Welfare Officer, police and social workers?’<sup>35</sup> Definitions of ‘suitable’ homes, ‘adequate’ parenting, social ‘improvement’ and ‘delinquent’ conduct all rested with child welfare agencies or the children’s court. The greater likelihood of Maori children appearing in court or on the books of child welfare officers as ‘cases’ suggests that these definitions were applied more stringently to Maori families.

Maori foster families in particular could come under careful observation during the visits of child welfare officers. Officers who were doubtful about the standard of care in some Maori homes visited more regularly, or sometimes made difficult demands on the foster mothers. Kathleen Stewart, for example, an Inspector of Child Welfare who monitored the work of child welfare officers, visited Mrs Cobham’s house at Waitotemarama in 1950 as part of her inspection tour. The house was a two-roomed ‘shack’ in which Mrs Cobham, her two foster children, and eight other people lived. It was clean inside, with rows of bottled jam and fruit on display. Stewart described the Cobhams as a ‘respected Maori family’, but suggested, somewhat impossibly given the family’s circumstances, that the foster children should have their own room.<sup>36</sup> Placing Maori children in Maori families was also a cheaper option financially until the 1970s. As a general rule, neither the Child Welfare Branch nor the Division paid Maori employers or foster families taking Maori children at the same rate as Pakeha families caring for Maori children; payment to Maori was to be commensurate with the circumstances in which they lived — a condition which invariably involved a judgement on Maori housing and living standards.<sup>37</sup>

Some child welfare officers attempted to be flexible in their dealings with Maori families, not only including extended family in their definitions of family, but also adopting a pragmatic approach to Maori lifestyles. So long as children were happy, healthy and stable, child welfare officers could overlook what they

34 For more on the negotiations between welfare providers and clients, see Linda Gordon, *Heroes of Their Own Lives: The Politics and History of Family Violence*, London, 1989; for New Zealand, see Margaret Tennant, *Paupers and Providers: Charitable Aid in New Zealand*, Wellington, 1989, especially chapter 6.

35 Graham to Minister of Education, 1 November 1930, *Sun*, 16 July 1930, CW 1, 40/25/26.

36 Kathleen Stewart, visit to Whangarei, 14 March 1950, CW 1, 2/6/27, part 1.

37 Beck to M. Hamilton, Child Welfare Officer, Gisborne, 22 May 1930, CW 1, 40/25/26.

could have regarded as 'questionable' living arrangements. At 14 years of age, for example, Nellie Mahoney was orphaned, looking after two young children, and assisting a Maori shearing gang around Ohakune when a child welfare officer visited in 1942. Although the young children were removed — one to return to her father — the child welfare officer agreed to Nellie's request to remain in the gang. Taking her away, the officer noted, would seriously handicap the gang's employability, and the members had promised to look after Nellie. This case file continued for Valerie, the girl whose father had collected her; after a series of Maori foster mothers and short terms in residential institutions, Valerie also worked in a shearing gang around Ohakune and Raetihi, with child welfare approval.

Other officers focused on the emotional, as well as physical, welfare of children, and recognized that what appeared to them as 'rough' surroundings could still provide suitably for children. Child welfare officers described one foster home in which Walter Matene lived as 'rough and ready and has few material comforts', but Mr Te Kahu, the foster father, was 'easy-going' and a 'good foster parent'. In particularly impoverished communities, child welfare officers would keep Maori families together while seeking out better accommodation. Officers in Taumarunui visited the Te Tau family fortnightly for a year in the later 1950s. Mrs Te Tau and her seven children lived in an 'unbelievably dilapidated' house near Turangi, and officers recommended that she be given immediate assistance in obtaining a housing loan through the Department of Maori Affairs. Only one of her three rooms was habitable; one had collapsed and the roof in the other leaked so badly that the rain streamed down the wall. Mrs Te Tau carried water to the house from a stream, and did all her cooking over an open fire. Frequently ill, Mrs Te Tau tried 'very hard' according to the child welfare officers, and was worth 'all the assistance' that could be given her.<sup>38</sup>

The success of resolving Maori child welfare issues within Maori families and communities rested often on the ability of individual child welfare officers to establish good relations with local Maori organizations, kaumatua, or iwi groups. Many child welfare officers tried to play a supportive role in communities, and depended on local organizations and individuals to keep them informed of any problems; in other areas, the tactlessness of child welfare officers or Maori distrust of the 'Pakeha Welfare' hampered relations between officers and the community.<sup>39</sup> Some officers did not always communicate their policies clearly — if at all — to Maori families, and reacted angrily at what they saw as Maori abrogating their family responsibility. One Hastings child welfare officer complained of Maori parents 'weakly saying' that their daughters should be 'put away', rather than left under supervision in the community, after they had been

38 Notes on Maori families, October 1957, CW 1, 4/7/5.

39 Merv Hancock, interviewed by Margaret Tennant, 10 September 1997, Tape 1. I am grateful to both Margaret Tennant and Merv Hancock for allowing me access to this interview.

involved in 'sexual misbehaviour' in the barracks of the Whakatu Freezing Works in the late 1960s.<sup>40</sup>

In the 1920s and 1930s, kaumatua and Maori honorary welfare officers were important links for child welfare officers. On the East Coast and in Northland especially, child welfare officers sought the advice of kaumatua — or Maori whom they described as 'locals' — in overcoming child welfare issues in their area; on an extended visit to the East Coast in 1940, the Superintendent of Child Welfare met with 'locals' in Ruatoria to discuss Maori co-operation with the Branch in child welfare.<sup>41</sup>

Maori honorary child welfare officers were particularly significant in areas without a resident child welfare officer. Such honorary officers were selected by the Child Welfare Branch or Division, often after nomination by local Maori or Maori Members of Parliament. In common with other honorary child welfare officers, who numbered around two hundred between the 1920s and 1970s, Maori honorary officers recommended foster homes and service positions, supervised and visited young people, and acted as a liaison between the local community and the salaried staff. Sometimes, child welfare officers utilized the community standing and mana of honorary officers to bring together tribal elders to discuss local problems. In Pukekohe during the 1940s, for instance, Reverend Tuhimata, the Maori honorary child welfare officer for Tuakau, convened a meeting of elders to consider solutions for the area's welfare and educational difficulties; in New Plymouth, the honorary officer advised child welfare officers on the intricacies of the local tribal executive committee. In some areas, such as Gisborne and the East Coast, child welfare officers relied extensively on the assistance of Maori honorary officers. Mr Te Kani Teua, an honorary child welfare officer living in Waiomatatihu, supervised young people stationed on Maori farms in isolated areas, and was particularly active in passing on to Gisborne staff the names of Maori farmers wishing to employ state wards.<sup>42</sup>

The development of tribal committees in the 1940s gave child welfare officers what they considered to be more formal and organized structures to approach. Despite the shortcomings of the committees established under the Maori Social and Economic Advancement Act 1945 — they were predominantly male in membership, focused on community rather than family matters, and have been considered as undercutting other forms of Maori authority — contemporary

40 K. Page, Senior Child Welfare Officer, Hastings, to District Child Welfare Officer, Hastings, 16 May 1967, CW 1, 4/15/3.

41 McClune, notes on visit, 19 March 1940, CW 1, 19/52.

42 H. Giles, Child Welfare Officer, Auckland, to J. Cupit, District Child Welfare Officer, Auckland, 20 October 1943, CW 1, 4/15/5; A. Witten-Hannah, Honorary Child Welfare Officer, New Plymouth, to Peek, 9 March 1948, CW 1, 4/12/10; M. Hamilton, Child Welfare Officer, Gisborne, to Beck, 27 September 1929, Mr Te Kani Teua to Hamilton, 7 May 1930, CW 1, 40/25/26.

child welfare officers often sought their aid and authority.<sup>43</sup> Officers unfamiliar with Maori tribal structures or the correct way to proceed no doubt regarded the government-sanctioned tribal committees as the easiest and most appropriate way of working with Maori communities. Despite the rapid growth of the Maori Women's Welfare League from its inception in 1951, for example, child welfare officers were relatively slow to seek the assistance of League members in welfare matters.

In many areas, child welfare officers attempted to co-operate with Maori to discuss child welfare issues and devise solutions, or locate foster homes. 'Co-operation' between Maori groups or iwi structures could be very much on the terms of the Pakeha child welfare officers who simply arranged meetings and sought 'approval' for decisions they had already made. In 1953, for example, one child welfare officer responded to a complaint that Maori children were stealing lunches from their school-mates. 'Thinking that this was a Maori problem, and should be handled by the Maoris themselves', he reported that he had persuaded the 'sub-chief' to call a tribal meeting. At that meeting, the officer informed Maori parents of local problems, and told them that they were 'lacking in responsibilities' in not having a representative on the school committee. He believed that his efforts were successful: the stealing of lunches ceased, a Maori was elected to the school committee, and parents began to provide play-lunch for their children. 'In all it might be said that this Division has started something of a benefit in this area', he concluded.<sup>44</sup>

Some officers relied heavily on tribal committees or Maori organizations for assistance in suggesting, organizing, and supervising the placement of Maori children in foster homes. In Taranaki, Te Kotahitanga Tautaru placed and supervised Maori children, and an Auckland-based member of one tribal committee in the mid-1940s was active in encouraging young Maori women to return to their tribal area, as well as arranging foster care with Maori families.<sup>45</sup> By the later 1950s, tribal committees in a number of areas approved placements, and supervised foster care in Maori communities; child welfare officers maintained contact with such families through the committees.<sup>46</sup>

43 For comments on the work of the committees, see *Puao-te-Ata-Tu*, pp.15–18; Tania Rei, Geraldine McDonald and Ngahuia Te Awekotuku, 'Nga Ropu Wahine Maori/Maori Women's Organisations', in Anne Else, ed., *Women Together: A History of Women's Organisations in New Zealand/Nga Ropu Wahine o te Motu*, Wellington, 1993, pp.8–10; Mira Szaszyn in *Te Timitanga Tatau Tatau: Early Stories from Founding Members of the Maori Women's Welfare League*, Wellington, 1993, p.228.

44 H. Hunt, District Child Welfare Officer, Palmerston North, to Peek, 29 April 1953, CW 1, 4/15, part 1.

45 *Taranaki Herald*, 6 April 1948, CW 1, 4/12/10; K. Stewart to J. Cupit, District Child Welfare Officer, Auckland, 13 February 1945, CW 1, 4/15/2.

46 Secretary of Justice to Under-Secretary, Department of Maori Affairs, 30 April 1957, J 1, 18/20/9.

A few officers stepped back from an organizing role so that Maori could reach their own solutions for local problems. Whangarei officers worked in the background in the 1950s while local tribal committees took an active role in resolving their child welfare issues. The Ngararatunua tribal committee, for example, heard informal charges and complaints against young offenders in their area. In 1955 they fined one 15-year-old youth for throwing stones, and ordered him to leave the district for a period. Other committees performed 'useful work' in taking responsibility for the welfare of young women who were 'sexually troubled'. The Superintendent reprimanded the District Child Welfare Officer, however, when he argued that the tribal executive or committee should handle the case of a 9-year-old boy who had been admitted to hospital after drinking alcohol. In the Superintendent's view, the officer was 'off the beam' and needed to look at the case from a Divisional, rather than a tribal, point of view.<sup>47</sup>

In marked contrast with recent policy under the Children, Young Persons and Their Families Act 1989, financial or other resources were not passed to Maori to enable them to implement their own solutions to welfare problems. The Division considered that there were clear limits to the extent to which Maori should take responsibility for child welfare. A suggestion from the Maori Women's Welfare League that their branches should deal first with cases of Maori offending was declined on the grounds that it would necessitate a 'drastic change' in administration; a similar 'privilege' would have to be accorded a non-Maori group as well, the Minister of Education informed the League's secretary.<sup>48</sup>

Maori welfare officers were another important community link for child welfare officers after 1945. Maori welfare officers were not able independently to take responsibility for cases where there was statutory obligation on the Child Welfare Branch or Division, but it was considered desirable that they work closely with and advise child welfare officers on issues concerning Maori child welfare.<sup>49</sup> Child welfare officers looked to Maori welfare officers for advice and assistance on a range of issues, most notably in finding Maori families willing to foster children. Obtaining 'suitable' foster families generally was a constant problem, but was especially difficult in the case of Maori families, for whom a system of non-kin-based foster care had no traditional base.<sup>50</sup> A closer scrutiny

47 Rounthwaite, note for file, 29 March 1955, Anderson, note for file, 18 April 1955, CW 1, 4/15/3; Rounthwaite, annual report to Children's Court Magistrate, 2 April 1951, CW 1, 4/12/3, part 1; Rounthwaite to Peek, 20 October 1952, Anderson, note for file, 23 October 1952, CW 1, 4/15, part 1.

48 Minister of Education to R. Love, Secretary, Maori Women's Welfare League, 15 July 1952, CW 1, 4/12/6; Love to Minister of Education, 10 September 1952, CW 1, 4/15/3.

49 C. Bennett, Department of Maori Affairs, to Peek, 29 January 1964, CW 1, 4/15, part 2. Responsibility for Maori legal adoptions rested with Maori Welfare Officers after 1955.

50 Joan Metge, *New Growth from Old: The Whanau in the Modern World*, Wellington, 1995, p.212.

of Maori homes, and the lower rate of board payments paid if Maori fostered Maori children, no doubt also contributed to a paucity of willing Maori foster families. From 1950, the Division and the Department of Maori Affairs agreed that Maori welfare officers would notify the Division of suitable homes; aware that Maori children could face committal to an institution if such homes were not available, the Department of Maori Affairs provided assistance.<sup>51</sup>

Despite the understanding between the two agencies, child welfare officers did not always look to Maori welfare officers for advice either on Maori issues or on obtaining Maori foster families. In 1957, Child Welfare Inspector Lorna Hodder reported that child welfare officers in Taranaki had lost patience with Maori welfare officers who were not seen to be doing anything in the community. She blamed Child Welfare staff; it was their responsibility, she argued, to inform Maori welfare officers of all relevant cases and invite their suggestions on ways to proceed, as was becoming 'normal practice' in other districts.<sup>52</sup> For their part, Maori welfare officers sometimes chafed at Child Welfare reluctance to involve them. According to one Maori welfare officer based at Kaitaia, there was no co-operation between himself and the local child welfare officers who, unlike other government agents, neither sought his advice nor welcomed his assistance.<sup>53</sup>

As I have suggested in this article, child welfare officers tried to implement a community- and family-based approach to Maori children in many instances. Attempts to keep Maori children with their families or family groups, and to work within Maori communities should not detract from those aspects of the child welfare system which worked against Maori communities. If the Child Welfare Branch and Division displayed a flexible attitude towards family forms and community-based care, then they also had a flexible approach towards the 'last resort' policy of institutional use, as is suggested by the establishment in 1944 of a special residence for Maori girls and the growing number of young Maori admitted to institutions through the 1960s. Maori groups and committees may have been relied on for advice in dealing with local families, but they were rarely involved in the development of policy. The practice of policy seldom incorporated the transfer of resources to the community to enable Maori groups to implement the ideal of family-based care, and Maori families could be seriously disadvantaged or hurt in their relationships with child welfare agencies. The entire basis of the child welfare system, in which the state acted in *loco parentis* and took over the guardianship of children and young people, took scant account of Maori beliefs and practices.

51 Anderson to Mr Ropiha, Under-Secretary of Maori Affairs, 14 June 1950, Maori Affairs (MA) 36/11, part 1, NA, Wellington.

52 Hodder, visit to New Plymouth, August 1957, CW 1, 2/6/27, part 3.

53 Report from Maori Welfare Officer, Kaitaia, June 1952, MA 36/11, part 2.

Since the mid-1980s, New Zealand's welfare system has undergone considerable re-assessment in the wake of political agendas emphasizing devolution, community responsibility, and family empowerment. In child welfare services, the last two have been particularly stressed, along with the necessity of establishing culturally-appropriate solutions to welfare problems; as with the policies of the 1920s or the 1950s, those of the 1980s and 1990s have not always been put into practice. The formal adoption of culturally-appropriate, and community- and family-based measures into welfare legislation such as the Children, Young Persons and Their Families Act has been novel, but the roots of this approach to children's welfare stretched back to the 1920s, and were evident in welfare policy in the subsequent decades. Viewing welfare services through a lens which goes beyond recent events complicates and challenges both our welfare past and present.

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