

Including Māori language and knowledge in every New Zealand classroom

Nesta Devine, Georgina Tuari Stewart, and Daniel Couch

Recent changes to professional standards make it mandatory for every classroom teacher to be assessed on their use and development of te reo Māori. The next iteration of national school curriculum policy seems likely to include much more Māori content than the current version. Teachers are no longer being encouraged by state education policy to include Māori content; they are now being forced to do so, and perhaps rightly so: otherwise how could the Government's 'audacious goals' (Te Puni Kōkiri, 2021) for having at least one million speakers of te reo by 2040 possibly succeed? The national policy for Māori language in education *Tau Mau Te Reo* (Ministry of Education, 2021) has been refreshed and aligned with other major work programmes across national agencies. These incumbent changes in expectations are currently placing enormous pressure on providers of initial teacher education (ITE) to more adequately prepare future classroom teachers.

The national teacher workforce, however, is predominantly White and seriously lacking in competence and confidence to include Māori language and knowledge in their classroom programme. There is a generational issue tied up here, since older people generally have more outdated attitudes and more difficulty making changes and learning a new language. There is also a cultural issue because a disproportionately high percent of teachers in our classrooms did not grow up in Aotearoa New Zealand. The detailed demographics of the teacher workforce raise issues both positive and negative for the prospects of including Māori language and knowledge in every classroom. On one hand, teachers who did not grow up in New Zealand may not see past the hype about our 'race relations' being the best in the world (Human Rights Commission, 2017). On the other hand, non-White immigrant teachers are more likely to see and understand the racism faced by Māori in their communities, and even White immigrant teachers may be usefully free of typical Pākehā ideologies (Stewart, 2020).

The mandated insistence on the use of te reo Māori in classrooms clearly has multiple and intersecting purposes. To start with, it is a move towards honouring Te Tiriti o Waitangi, which

includes recognising te reo as one of the taonga guaranteed to the Māori people within the treaty. Second, it is to give some substance to the notion that te reo Māori is an official language of Aotearoa New Zealand (although that argument is complicated by the fact that no one yet has suggested that all teachers use Sign Language). Thirdly, despite the efforts put into building Māori education, it is clear that for many years to come, Māori children will mostly be taught in ‘mainstream’ or English-medium classrooms, and there is a moral imperative both to make those classrooms more inviting, hospitable and useful to Māori children, and to go some way to ensuring that the language of their ancestors is honoured.

Notice that we do not advance here any argument that the ability (and practice) of the teacher will necessarily fix the ‘long brown tail problem’ (Stewart, 2014). That has complex reasons, many of them social and economic and are unlikely to be addressed by a change in language, *if that is all it is*. To adequately include Māori language and knowledge it is necessary to allow for cultural difference, which challenges universal humanism and notions of ‘fairness’ and democracy. Fairness is often interpreted by classroom teachers into their practice as ‘treating everyone the same’ but this response can fail by being superficial or uncritical, for a number of reasons, including failing to disrupt existing unfair power relationships in society. To include Māori language and knowledge in the classroom programme can and should raise philosophical and ethical questions, which can greatly enrich the traditional curriculum for all students.

Language is more than a collection of words: as Vygotsky understood, it is the vehicle by which the culture is transmitted (Vygotsky, 1987). We cannot just substitute Māori words for English ones, or indeed English words for Māori ones. Every word in every language comes freighted with its own history; with allusions, subtleties, boundaries to meaning, which are characteristic and different from one language to the next. Arguably, if teachers can ‘use’ Māori words correctly, then they would already be experts in the Māori language, and this is unlikely to be the case.

On the other hand, New Zealanders already use Māori words for which there is no English equivalent, often without even being conscious of it: haka, mana, and pōwhiri are common examples. But too often Pākehā, including teachers, assimilate Māori words to concepts with which they are familiar, and in so doing distort them. At the same time it is entirely possible for teachers to respect Māori and show values which are consonant with Māori values—manaakitanga, aroha—without the use of any Māori words.

aroaha—without expressing those values in Māori words.

Ideas of this sort are often discussed in terms of not separating te reo from tikanga, but perhaps even that is not sufficient. If neither te reo nor tikanga come with a deep respect for difference, for the right of Māori to be Māori in their own country, and not to have to assimilate to all the superstructures settlers have built, then the effort can only be superficial. If we were to rethink the nature of schools, the curriculum, assessment programmes, the law, the economy—then we would be starting to create manaakitanga for our tamariki. And let us not forget, these are *all* our tamariki—demographics suggest that will be the case, in the not too far distant future. So we are all involved in this mahi in this country.

We have shown through the pandemic several things which are apposite: first that we can take our own road, second that we have a greater sense of the wider community as community than many other countries, third that we are prepared to make sacrifices for the greater good. These are not attributes to be sneezed at. If part of nation-building in this nation is to develop a real respect for the other—and without necessarily ‘understanding’ which can be a step towards denying difference—and if the use of the language of the other is a necessary or even just useful step on this road, then the huge effort required of teachers and teacher educators will be worthwhile. But if the use of te reo becomes a tick-box exercise, then it probably won’t be.

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