



# Including Māori Language and Knowledge in Every New Zealand Classroom

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In 2017, the Education Council (since renamed the Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand) released *Our Code, Our Standards/Ngā Tikanga Matatika, Ngā Paerewa*, an updated framework under which teacher registrations are granted and renewed. These included a new requirement of teachers seeking registration: an assurance, endorsed by their professional leader, that they “have continued to develop and practice te reo me ngā tikanga Māori”. While a requirement since mid-2017, in early 2021 Teaching Council chief executive Hoskin told Radio New Zealand that this year the council has made it an explicit part of recertification (Gerrison, 2021). Such changes to professional standards in effect 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 Mai Te Reo* (Ministry of Education, 2021a) 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), and of in-service teacher professional development, to more adequately prepare current and future classroom teachers. Recent demographics illustrate the audaciousness of the goal. According to the 2013 census, just 3% of the population indicated that they spoke te reo Māori. In addition, the national teaching workforce is predominantly White. Last year 73% of teachers identified as “European/Pākehā”—the Ministry of Education’s apparent catch-all category for New Zealand Europeans, Pākehā, and other White populations (Ministry of Education, 2021b). The detailed demographics of the teacher workforce raise issues both positive and negative for the prospects of including Māori language

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and knowledge in every classroom. On one hand, some teachers 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 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 development and use of *te reo me ngā tikanga Māori* by teachers 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 and young people will mostly be taught in ‘mainstream’ or English-medium classrooms, and there is a moral imperative to make those classrooms more inviting, hospitable, and useful to Māori children and young people, and to go some way to ensuring that the language of their ancestors is honoured.

There are promising indications that the teaching workforce is ready to engage with this audacious goal seriously. Of the nearly 30,000 teacher registration applications under the updated professional standards, only 300 have indicated that the applicant has not continued to develop and practise *te reo me ngā tikanga Māori* (Gerritson, 2021). Elsewhere, in a bid to increase the number of *te reo Māori* speakers in schools by 40,000 teachers and support staff, the Ministry of Education has directed \$108 million into expanding *Te Ahu o Te Reo Māori* nationally after a successful pilot in 2020 (Maxwell, 2020). An evaluation of that pilot indicated that teachers had engaged enthusiastically across multiple demographics including age, ethnicity, and years of teaching experience (Smith et al, 2020). There is, however, much work ahead for all sectors of education.

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—perhaps the impetus for the Teaching Council’s *Unteach Racism* initiative, fronted by the mesmerising star power of Taika Waititi, who reflects on the disruptive power of his own *unteachers*. To include Māori language and knowledge in the classroom programme can and should raise philosophical and ethical questions, which can greatly enrich the current 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.

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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