

A stranger in a strange land?

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I recently read a [blog post by Wharehoka Wano](#) and watched [Alex Hotere-Barnes on EDtalks](#). Both of these discussions centred on Māori/Pākehā dynamics within education settings. Reading Wharehoka's blog and listening to Alex got me thinking about an experience I had a few weeks ago when I was in Whakatāne as part of the [LEARNZ Waka Voyaging virtual field trip](#).



End of the pōhiri on Moutohorā

AN HONEST APPRAISAL

I don't mind admitting that throughout the course of my life to date I have internalised some of those 'white privilege' examples that Wharehoka refers to in his blog. A lack of empathy and misunderstanding about Māori culture and its place in our society has surely led to a fair amount of 'Pākehā paralysis' on my part throughout my involvement in education.

On the other hand, I did go to a primary school that had a lot of Māori culture within its curriculum. We learned many waiata along with their actions, how to pronounce words properly, some vocabulary and phrases, different games, as well as incorporating Māori culture and history into artwork and so on. Although this was now many years ago, I can certainly credit those formal experiences with grounding me enough to at least reflect on and question my own beliefs and assumptions around issues of 'privilege'.

What a pity this great start in Māori education didn't extend beyond primary school!

I have also been lucky to experience Māori language and culture first hand through many of the virtual field trips I have been involved in over the last eight years. Field trips such as

[Northern Wetlands](#), [He Hokinga Whakaaro](#), [Waka Voyaging](#) (to name a few) have incorporated many Māori cultural, historical and also Māori/Pākehā bicultural themes.

These more recent work experiences have enabled me to increase my te reo vocabulary and to practise certain tikanga. As a result, I have developed more confidence to engage with Māori in culturally respectful ways. Yet I still get the feeling that I could do more. Like Alex talking about Pākehā paralysis, I do push through my own feelings of discomfort if they arise during such experiences. But there are still occasions where I feel that I would like to be involved on a deeper level.

A STRANGER IN A STRANGE LAND?

During the Waka Voyaging field trip, I was lucky enough to go to Moutohorā (also known as Whale Island). This particular activity was part of a local kura's excursion to learn about some of the island's past, its present, and to be encouraged as future kaitiaki.

Te Kura Kaupapa Māori o Te Orini ki Ngati Awa is a full immersion kura, so naturally the students were all speaking te reo Māori. The pōhiri on the island was also in Māori. As I mentioned, I feel lucky to have experienced similar occasions (more frequently I would hazard to guess than your average Pākehā), so I was not completely out of my comfort zone. But for some reason or other, this particular event sparked a thought which has been nagging me on and off since that day.

I started to think that if a tourist had have been part of this experience and hearing only Māori being spoken, he/she would have probably thought little of it. A stranger in a strange land will naturally hear languages being spoken that they do not, or only partially, understand. But I am not a stranger in a strange land. Yet here I sat, unable to understand what the very people who have inhabited this country for many hundreds of years (and that I am a citizen of) were even saying. Not only that, they seemed to be having a right old laugh so I actually wouldn't have minded joining in the kōrero!

A CALL FOR ACTION

So, it suddenly dawned upon me that, quite simply, I could never truly be part of such an experience if I do not understand what is being said. It became clear that this lack of te reo ability was a key part of that underlying feeling mentioned earlier; that I could do more. Yes, learning te reo would unlock that potential to 'be involved on a deeper level'.

Like Alex says, we are all at different stages on the journey when it comes to addressing Pākehā paralysis, whatever shape or form that takes. And I might add, sadly for some, their journeys appear to have only just begun, especially if you take into consideration recent debate over Māori seats at local body level in New Plymouth — referred to in Wharehoka's blog.

I believe we need to be committed to making genuine improvements in this area. I don't believe we can create much change at all in our understanding of Māori culture if we mostly only passively receive knowledge and experience via certain Māori cultural events over time. I feel it is important not to get complacent about where we think we sit on this particular learning continuum. For me, this involves honestly addressing where in fact I do sit on the continuum, and actively seeking to move myself along it. For someone who doesn't typically

practise tīkanga or te reo in my life outside work, this is even more important. And even at work some of those opportunities to learn or participate may not be immediately obvious.

BENEFITS TO LEARNING TE REO MĀORI

You don't have to look too far to find out what benefits there are of learning another language. One key idea that pops up time and time again is understanding and appreciating the culture and heritage of the people whose language it is. Historically in New Zealand, "Most Pākehā did not understand that the Māori language was an essential expression and envelope of Māori culture, important for Māori in maintaining their pride and identity as a people" (NZHistory.Net: [History of the Māori Language](#)). And I would contend that not a lot has changed over time, for how can one understand the connection Māori have with their language, and therefore their identity, if one does not understand the language itself?

Learning the Māori language (and let's not forget that it is an official language in Aotearoa) will go a long way towards ensuring we are able to encompass this area of priority in our practice with or within schools. But it is the active learning of Māori language which I believe is the key to breaking through Pākehā paralysis to a point where Pākehā educators have an experiential understanding of Māori language and culture, not just an intellectual understanding, to make the teaching and learning environment a properly inclusive one.

So what does this mean for my own te reo Māori journey? I'll let you know how things are progressing in my next blog!

LINKS

- TKI: [The benefits of learning te reo Māori](#)
- Blog post by Rochelle Savage: [The year was 1987](#)
- Blog post by Wharehoka Waro: [Is Māori representation Māori privilege?](#)
- EDtalks: [Addressing Pākehā paralysis with non-stupid optimism](#)

CORE Education runs workshops for learning te reo.

The next workshop is due to begin in August:

[Te Reo Puāwai Māori](#)



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