

Equity, te reo, and doing the right thing

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In her follow-up blog to [Raising the equity flag – why I’m passionate about fighting inequity in Aotearoa](#), Dr Hana O’Regan writes about the historical marginalisation of te reo Maori, and the importance of picking your equity battles.

When I was in the 6th Form – the equivalent of Year 12 now – I remember having a debate (actually an argument!) with some of my teachers around the way that marks were allocated to schools for Sixth Form Certificate.

The number of points a school received was based on the School Certificate marks received from the year before, across all subjects. These points were then allocated to different subjects based on a curriculum hierarchy. I learnt that any points received because of the high marks in School Certificate Māori, may be allocated to the ‘academic subjects’, which didn’t include te reo.

Te reo Māori was the only language on the New Zealand curriculum not considered an academic subject. It was aligned with home economics, and woodwork.

I challenged my teachers – how could one language be separated out from all the others? I was told that it was because Māori didn’t have a literary heritage – the “standard” for a language to be considered academic.

I was angry!

This felt unjust and unfair, but I didn’t have a good counter-argument other than saying it was a stupid rule. When I was 16 I didn’t know the history around the treatment of Māori as a language, or the way that it had been deliberately marginalised. I didn’t know about the laws and policies that were imposed to silence it and those who spoke it. All I knew was that it seemed unfair, and unjust.

That frustration increased when I was 20 years old and working in the Alexander Turnbull Library in Wellington. I started going through Māori language newspapers written in the 1800s and early 1900s... I saw thousands upon thousands of examples of a literary heritage, and I was blown away with the depth and breadth of what I found. Māori were active seekers of knowledge. Newspaper stories with current affairs of the time – international, national and local – history, politics, poems, editorials all in te reo Māori! In fact, I now know that people were more likely to be literate at the turn of the last century if they were Māori, than if they were non-Māori.

I was angry that my 16-year-old self hadn’t known this to help me argue the case for te reo with my teachers.

While I now had more information to argue my case for the equitable treatment of my language, I was yet to properly understand the legacy of the fight for language revitalisation in New Zealand. I didn't have an understanding of the breadth of policies and actions that had led to the decline of the language in Māori communities. That learning would develop over the following years. With each new piece of information, a part of the puzzle was solved, and my confidence and ability to articulate and advocate for the language grew.

I LEARNED TO PICK MY FIGHTS

But even having that knowledge and preparing the rebuttals was not always enough. I learnt to pick my fights, and decide when I would argue for the correct pronunciation of my name, someone else's name, a place name and so on. I made decisions around which parts of the equity landscape for te reo I wished to address. I learnt early on that it could be tiring, exhausting, and emotionally draining to feel that you always had to be on the defensive; ready at the drop of a hat to invest your time and energy into helping someone else increase their knowledge and awareness. Calling someone out for their statements, stereotypes or put-downs, certainly has the ability to create an air of tension, even when done with empathy and patience. I also had to be prepared to fail in my goal and understand that I wasn't always going to achieve a shift in people's thinking or behaviour.

Some of the barriers, the blocks, and the failure to successfully raise the equity flag for the treatment of te reo and Māori culture and identity have been harder to swallow than others. The hardest for me have been when I haven't been able to shield my own children from the negative stereotypes and treatment.

Before my children were born in 2003 and 2004, I had done my homework, prepared all the responses I thought I would need, and knew how to help people say their names correctly. I had absolutely committed to doing whatever it took, even if it meant giving personal pronunciation lessons. But I hadn't counted on the fact that some people would not be prepared to even make the effort, and would go so far as to insist that they mispronounce my children's names, or that I give them an English option. I wasn't prepared to respond with one-liner rebuttals when my three-year-old son was verbally abused for speaking Māori to me in the supermarket. I wasn't prepared for the fact that the abuser thought she had the right to swear at my three-year-old child who was simply speaking to his mother.

I was lost for words.

I also wasn't prepared, while sitting in a doctor's surgery, to have another person verbally attack my child at the age of six, when he was again having a personal conversation with me in his native language. I was taken aback by her viciousness, the swear words she used and the fact that she thought it was remotely okay to curse angrily at a young boy in a public space for talking to his mother.

None of the educational training and knowledge I had acquired at that point prepared me for that moment. Again, I was lost for words.

SHIFTING THE EQUITY DIAL

When I was 21 I was infuriated by the racial and targeted attacks on my father, and our wider Ngāi Tahu tribe, by a group who were protesting that Ngāi Tahu had asked the Crown to buy a number foreign-owned High Country farms that were up for sale. We were asking whether they could be used as part of a Ngāi Tahu Settlement. Ngāi Tahu had declared we would not be seeking any privately owned land as part of that process. This was met with bumper stickers, fliers and rallies saying (Ngāi Tahu) Hands off the Greenstone Valley.

I wanted my father to join with me in my outrage, to stand strong, and to call them out. But he responded calmly and in a matter-of-fact way; “If you only knew what they only know you probably would think the same”. Of course that infuriated me even more because what he said made perfect sense! But it didn’t help me to deal with the level of frustration and anger I felt at the overt racial slurs thrown our way over this issue. What his words did do, however, was to give me a blueprint for resolution, and an idea of where to focus my energies and attention. I needed to do what I could to help others see what I saw, to learn some of what I knew, in the hope that it might help them see a different picture.



Lifting the veil of ignorance on inequity is the first step. Being able to understand, and know, where inequities exist is a fundamental prerequisite to doing something about them. Using an equity lens to assess situations, policies, practices and behaviours, allows us to see the fuller picture – to deeply understand what the challenges are that we’re dealing with.

But it’s not good enough to know and see inequity. Once we are aware of its presence, we need strategies that help us respond to them – to shift the equity dial. This is often where things become unstuck, as the challenges can become almost overwhelming and seem too hard to change. We then run the risk of becoming apathetic, or suffering inertia, which gives them airspace and the room to persist and exist.

So what do we need to do?

We have to dig deep and find the strength to move into the uncomfortable spaces, even when we feel tired and, sometimes, overwhelmed. At those times we need to commit to the change because it is the right thing, and the just thing, to do.

I will finish this blog by using a quote from one of our tīpuna from Moeraki, Matiaha Tiramōrehu, who petitioned The Queen on the 22 October 1849, which was the first formal statement of Ngāi Tahu grievances against the Crown regarding the South Island land purchases. Matiaha asked:

“That the law be made one, that the commandments be made one, that the nation be made one, that the white skin be made just as equal with the dark skin...”.

Now I know that the issue of equity goes well beyond skin colour, ethnicity and race, but the foundational sentiment and intent is an enduring one that lasts through the generations. We still have a way to go – but how exciting it is to be journeying together!



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