

Mere Skerrett 7 October 2021

Māori English Bilingualism and Kōhanga Reo

Introduction

Te Hau kāinga – e koutou, ngā mana, e ngā reo, e ngā kārangaranga maha – nei
ra te mihi kau ki a koutou katoa

Indeed it is an honour to be invited to speak to you today on the poignant and ,
MORE RECENTLY, hot-potato political issue of Māori language revitalisation in
the wake of Mahuru Māori and Māori language week. It touches on the lives of
all of us living in Aotearoa.

But this is very much a political/personal journey into Kōhanga Reo – because,
as has been suggested by many postcolonial theorists – adopting an activist
position seeking social and linguistic transformation is crucial in the work of
Kōhanga Reo. I am a descendant of Pōtatau Te Wherowhero, Maniapoto, and
Pikiao – the kingites – and married into Ngāti Toa, Ngāti Tama, Te Ati Awa, Ngāti
Koata – all activists from way back – and together we had five children – all of
whom have been born into the Kōhanga Reo Movement – and who remain
politically active in the space of Māori language revitalisation.

Colonialism/Undrip/National instruments

Aotearoa/New Zealand is a colony - colonized by the British. Its education institutions are British colonial imports. Suffice to say, Kōhanga Reo is a space of resistance to the onslaught of colonialism and utilises the need to draw on international instruments like the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and various other national instruments that assist -- for example Te Tiriti o Waitangi - Waitangi Tribunal findings which challenge ideas of Māori ceding sovereignty, unequal power sharing, the need for equal governance in different roles and creating Māori spheres of influence – and there are instruments which uphold the rule of law - like the Māori Language Acts, 1987 and 2016 which support and promote Māori language revitalisation efforts, **for all NZers**. And I want to emphasise for “all” as I work through four key ideas;

1. The determinations of the Māori Language Act 2016,
2. Kōhanga Reo activism,
3. resistance to mainstream monolingualising and
4. Māori English debates.

The Māori Language Act 2016

The Maori language Act - Its stated purpose is;

(a) to affirm the status of the Māori language as—

- i. the Indigenous language of New Zealand; and
- ii. a taonga of iwi and Māori; and
- iii. a language valued by the nation; and**
- iv. an official language of New Zealand; and

(b) to provide means to support and revitalise the Māori language. (p. 29).

Te Reo for All

All the speeches made in Parliament on the 14th of April 2016 when the Bill was passed into law referred to the notion that te reo Māori was for all New Zealanders. But there are still questions to be grappled with.

- A language for all New Zealanders – what does that really mean?
- What does it mean for the nation to ‘value’ a language?
- Does it have to be spoken to be valued?
- Can one **value** a language when it is not spoken?
- It can easily be said ‘I value Latin’ but is that enough to bring a dead language back to life?
- If it is a national language, an official language, valued by all, and for all New Zealanders, does that mean all New Zealanders should have access to it to enable them to speak it?
- So what does that mean in education?
- The clause that govts have “to provide means to support and revitalise the Māori language” – what does that mean for Kōhanga Reo – where there are staff working for ‘aroha’ or not even earning a minimum wage

– while in Kindergarten teachers are on the payroll with the goal of being paid between \$51,358 to \$90,000 this year.

Even our very own Ministry of Education is conflicted on all this, evident in the early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki, 2017* and the curriculum in schools. It is probably enough to say that there are many inconsistencies

Kōhanga Reo – a personal journey

My journey into Kōhanga Reo –is a personal journey into activism

Kōhanga Reo are biculturally diverse spaces, through immersion in te reo Māori. Māori **immersion** programmes aim to produce **bilingual** speakers, carefully introducing English into the curriculum at the optimum time – and that depends on the years of being immersed in te reo. That concept is little understood. To state a different way, it is TKR and KKM (the Māori immersion strand) that is producing the great bilingual speakers in this country right now – why? Because they are the experts in second language acquisition theory and practice. Instead, what we commonly have is an English medium system still focussed on displacing te reo Māori, daily. It is still a little bit too assimilatory. And I realised that in the 80s when I started my family.

Kōhanga Reo Activism

So, it was to Kōhanga Reo and its Māori language primary schooling extension, Kura Kaupapa Māori, that I turned my sights for all five of my tamariki.

At the time I was having my children in the 80s and 90s, there were no TKR or KKM – we had to step outside the system. To do that meant operating in the side stream with no funding, next to no resources, few spaces (apart from garages) – no nothing – just a will to power things a little differently- a lot differently actually.

Apart from the first decade of exponential growth, the movement went into decline largely due to ‘glacial’ and ‘leaden-footed’ policy responses to Māori language regeneration.

For example subsidy cuts¹ in 1994, made it difficult for parents to remain involved in TKR. The subsidy cuts were seen by government as a way of maximising workforce potential through upskilling parents into training for the market place and deliberately choking the kaupapa of Kōhanga Reo which was about the intergenerational transmission of language. Many parents were forced out of the Kōhanga. We practitioners in TKR knew the impact that would have.

¹ Parents had to be in either full time work, or training, to access a subsidy for their child to attend Te Kōhanga Reo.

To try and actively signal our concerns, we organised a march down the main street of Hamilton. This Photograph 1 (below) was taken at the time, showing a banner made in our TKR, Here it is 😊



Photograph 1: 1994 hikoi (march) against marketization reforms

Mainstreaming is monolingualising

Still, as the mother of five children, all of whom can speak te reo Māori, all of whom speak English and are Māori English bilinguals – and ***a couple*** of whom speak three languages, all of whom have higher education degrees, two at post graduate level – all of whom have been involved in Kohanga Reo and Kaupapa Māori education – it is disheartening to know that 97% of Māori children are still

being schooled in English-medium colonially inherited education schools and systems.

However, it was very heartening to read recently, on the that the Human Rights Commission is going to stop hearing individual complaints over the use of te reo Māori or the term Pākehā, and nor will the Broadcasting Standards Authority (BSA)— so gone is the idea that te reo Māori is some sort of ‘breach of a standard’. That’s a good move for the media.

Maori English bilingualism debates

Lorde

- But I want to take a moment to talk to the recent debates over the last month – that I referred to earlier AND After the backlash of Lorde’s ‘Te Ao Marama’ EP and the waiata anthems

Hana Mere-Raiha had this to say

Tape

- Various commentators had lots to say – SUFFICE to say, it beggars belief.

Final comments

As Hana argued in a different way, and as I have argued in other forums-- what is good for Māori is good for the Nation, not any other way around – the essentialising, universalising notion of one nation, one language BELONGS to a bygone era.