

# An autoethnography of a Pakeha teacher's experience in a predominantly Maori school.

EDEM 698

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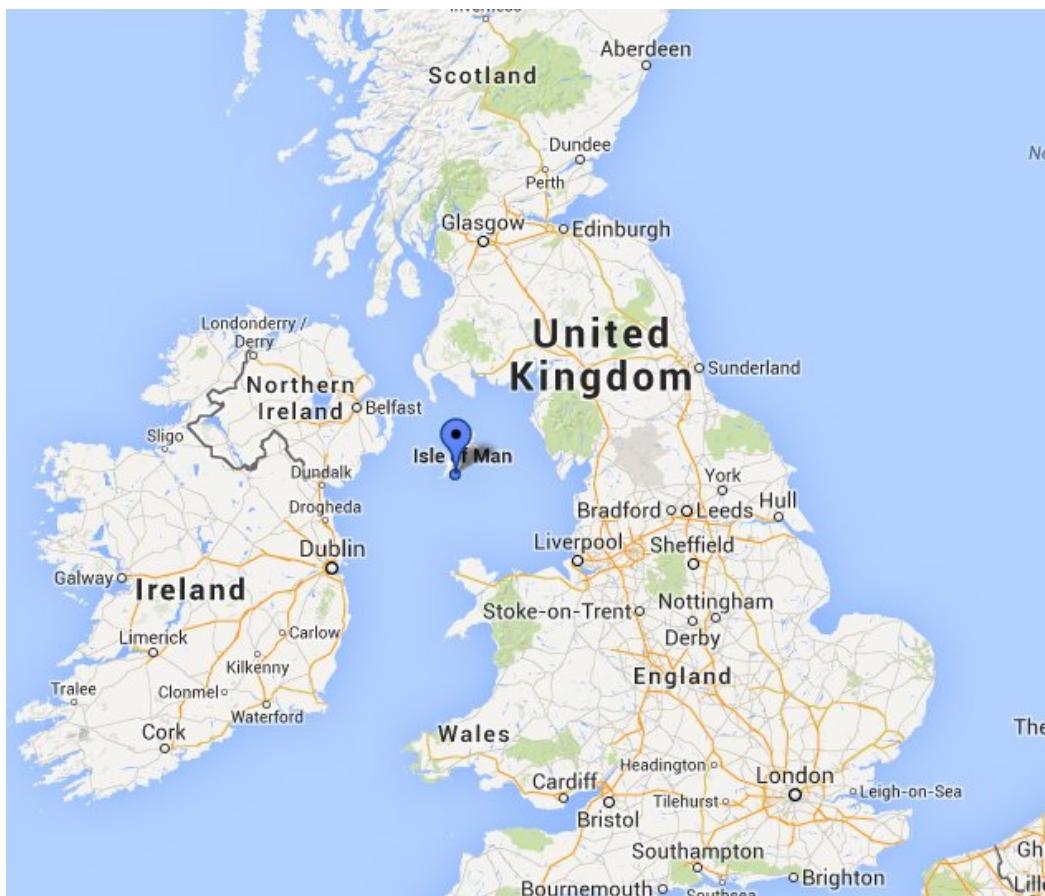
Introduction:

In this self-reflexive essay I hope to expose any racial bias either socially or politically I have towards brown students by critically questioning my reactions to experiences at my current secondary school which is predominantly Maori. I want to know if I unconsciously subscribe to the white oppression which Wetherell, M. & Potter, J. (1992) Wise, T. and Paperson, L. (2011) refer to and the 'white privilege' as described by McIntosh P., (1989) as a result of my upbringing.

To place the discussion in context I begin with my story, my ancestral trail and a reflection of my upbringing. I then explore my role as a new teacher and my place as a Pakeha teacher in a Maori school.

*Despite unquestionably good intentions on the part of most people who call themselves intercultural educators, most intercultural education practice supports, rather than challenges, dominant hegemony, prevailing social hierarchies, and inequitable distributions of power and privilege.*

Gorski, P. (2008, pg.1)



My parents and ancestors hail from the Isle of Man, a tiny island in the centre of the Irish Sea, home to the oldest government in the world. The indigenous people are known as Manx and are of Celtic and Viking descent and traditionally the spoken tongue was *Manx Gaelic*.

My parents were by no means fluent speakers but they did use the correct pronunciations for place names and held in pride their flags motto '*Quocunque Jesseris Stabit*' which according to the Manx National Heritage site translates to 'which ever-way I am thrown I will stand'. However, I prefer my parent's adaption of the term, '*no matter which way you throw me I will always remain standing*', it reminds me of the 'Bridson spirit' my maternal grandmother would often speak of whenever I needed to stick up for myself. The flag's motto is represented as the Three Legs of Man, a symbol that can be traced back to 1300 A.D.



My parent's immigrated to New Zealand in the early 1960's. It was my mother who came here first with my brother and sister on board the 'Canberra', a six week journey. She was excited at the prospect of having a better life, a more temperate climate and more jobs. She worked three jobs to save the fare for herself and my two siblings to leave their ancestral home. My reluctant father followed a year later and a year after that I was born.



We settled in the beautiful seaside village of St. Heliers and I attended Churchill Park Primary School with 100 other white faces. My first introduction to Maori culture was learning to play Raukau, visiting the Maori village at the Auckland Museum, playing with poi and laughing at Billy T. My mother had a love for Maori songs and Maori designs and she incorporated their designs into her knitting.

My Grandmother and Aunty lived in the heart of Otara, Auckland. We often visited them in Mum's Singer Vogue and although they were surrounded by Maori family I don't recall ever getting to know any of the families. I do remember the padlock on my Gran's letterbox though, to put a stop to the 'coconuts' stealing her mail.

An online NZ Herald article I came across by Misa, T. 2010 reflects on the community climate of Otara in the 1970's;

*It warned that the continued flight of Pakeha families from Otara "could develop into a form of apartheid by natural selection", and argued that "polarisation of a whole community within this most populated region of New Zealand is not in the national interest". Tapu Misa*

My Gran was there until she became too unwell to care for herself but she was never really a part of the community more like a buffeted island in an ocean of cultural-chaos.

My second memory of reference to Maori as the 'other' would have been when I was about 12. Another family I was staying with commented on all the 'bloody Maori's' down at the river. I remember wondering what was wrong with the Maori's being at the river.

I must have adopted that term 'the bloody Maori's' because I remember saying it to my new boyfriend in my early twenties. Unbeknown to me at that time he had Maori ancestry, the look on his face told it all and I realised the pain of my words. From that point on I decided to never use a derogatory manner towards people of another race.

Until this point I was completely oblivious to the fact that I might be growing up in what Wetherell, M., & Potter, J., (1992, pg.24) term, a 'classic liberal humanist ideology'. A society that masks exploitation of another race through seemingly good deeds in order to obtain and maintain political and societal domination.

I have a mix of good and bad references to Maori, most of which I didn't understand like the protests at Bastion Point in the 1970's, Herbs, the many trips visiting my Gran in Otara and my Mum saying why do they have so many cars on their lawn? Why can't they keep their homes tidy? A stabbing; - bet it was a bloody Maori...

It would be fair to say I was ignorant to any notion that I might be growing up to be an 'oppressor'? The kind that McIntosh, P. (1998, pg.1.) describes as the white privileged, the morally average ideal of a society one that encourages 'them' (or in this case Maori) to be more like 'us'?

For many years my affiliations with Maori, were largely one of mystery, intrigue and indifference. I was proud of the haka at rugby games and intimidated by facial moko's but living in the eastern suburbs of Auckland I seldom crossed the paths of our indigenous race. Travelling overseas I began to develop an appreciation for our culture and recognise its immense value, but it was not until I returned to further my education in my late thirties that I would fully understand the significance of our past.

Through teacher training I was introduced to a very different Maori culture than what I had grown up with. I was now immersed in a politically correct dialogue, one that I had to feel comfortable enough with to integrate it into my teaching practice. I discovered how to write and say my own pepeha. I had two versions but mostly used my New Zealand version for I assumed not many people would know much about the Isle of Man and besides New Zealand is where I really call home.

*Ko Rangitoto toku maunga*

*Ko Hauraki toku moana*

*Ko Manx toku iwi*

*Ko Boyde toku hapu*

*Ko Snaefell toku maunga*

*Ko Irish toku moana*

*Ko Manx toku iwi*

*Ko Boyde toku hapu*

Fresh from teachers training college I was ready to fully embrace Maori culture in education. I was well aware of my ignorance and naivety for Te Reo but decided I'd fair quite well if I drew on that good old kiwi attitude 'she'll be right'. Hey, I could even fit in a night class to learn Te Reo. I was looking forward to being a part of a bi-cultural profession.

Fast track my idealism to the reality of being in charge of 27, Year 10 students who were not only full of energy and teenage rebellion but who were also well bonded with one another. Only two students were Pakeha, the rest were Maori.

It was the reality of being at the coal face that hit me hard at first. I could not understand the aggressive opposition some students expressed towards me and as I struggled with my nerves while trying to take some control I would raise my voice and threaten the consequences if we did not have some sense of what I termed 'order'. These tactics often proved disastrous, it became more of a game for the students as they banded together to erode my self-esteem.

Maori students would critique me whenever I didn't pronounce their name correctly with disparaging comments which would only serve to discourage me from trying and yet very few knew me only as Miss. My rosy idealism to use Te Reo in my classes was becoming less frequent. I started to see the students as a group rather than individuals. Was I falling into the trap of social identity as described by Wetherell & Potter (1992, pg.45) to help me establish my own sense of self?

*Intergroup comparisons between Pakeha and Maori, rather than comparisons with other individuals, become the arena in which Pakeha New Zealanders define their own self-worth. Since, self-esteem is a desirable commodity, group members will be motivated to maximise the differences*

I noticed the students never spoke in that manner to Maori teachers. During a restorative justice meeting I was told I was being racist when I said to a student, "I'm sure you wouldn't speak to Matua...or Whae ....that way. My colleague asked the student to leave the room whilst I was questioned as to whether my question was racially prejudiced.

Verbal abuse from students became the norm and is still far too prevalent. Some were dealt with well, others were poorly handled, forgotten or a token apology offered. To say I felt like I didn't belong was an understatement and I began to question what had possessed me to go into the teaching profession in the first place.

In one conversation I was told my supervisor would be taking pastoral care of a particular student because her father didn't want a 'white person' looking after her.

Another colleague apologised to me and expressed her embarrassment at the racial discrimination towards me from some students, she had not recognised it before and was shocked that a student

could feel so justified in their actions. "Unfortunately, I have to say, it is because you are white" she added "you have to remember the inherited knowledge of the injustice done to Maori by the Pakeha".

I reluctantly admitted to my colleague I didn't know if I belonged here at this school, or for that matter in New Zealand. How might I ever be accepted at a predominately Maori school when the colour of my skin is a constant reminder of the desecration committed on Maori? If I don't belong here, where do I belong? My ancestral links to the Isle of Man have diluted since the death of my parents and unlike many Pakeha families who comprise of large extended families I have just one sibling.

At assemblies that feeling of not belonging became even more prevalent to me. I did not know the songs in Te Reo Maori but when I looked around neither did two thirds of the school. The emergence of the Reo Rua unit, magnificent and rich in culture had, perhaps inadvertently procured an elite group of students like a school within a school.

After a time the tide began to turn, I started to harden to the personal attacks, became indifferent to their outbursts and started to dream of a school full of fresh faced students keen with enthusiasm to participate in a shared educational journey. Why could I not have that here? Was it my lack of skills? The colour of my skin? Perhaps a combination of the two.

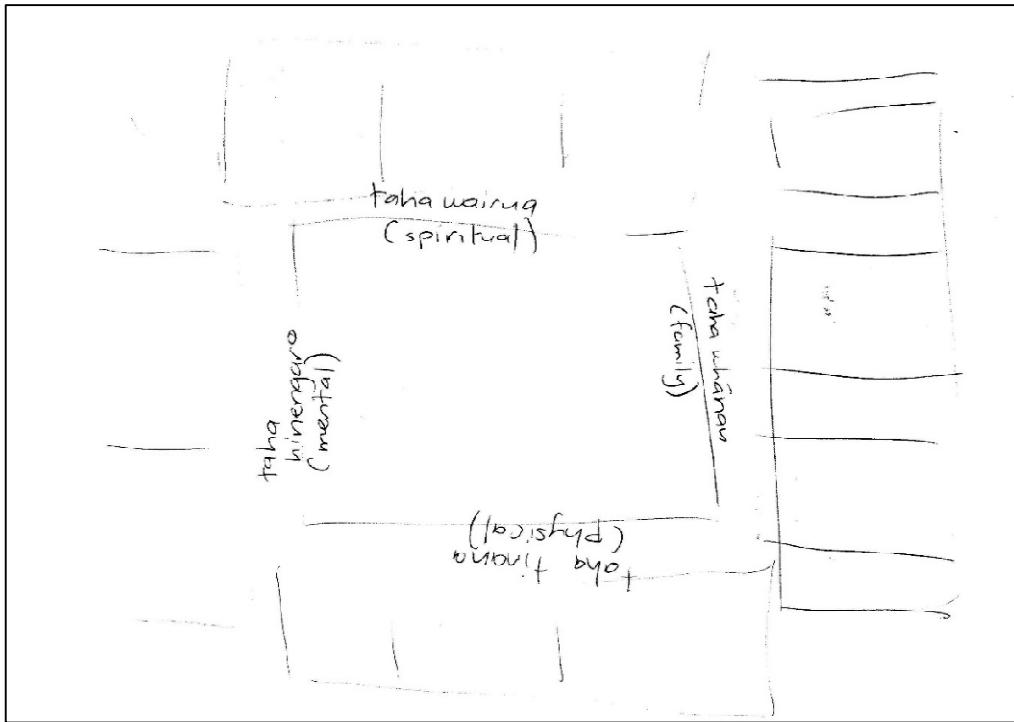
Paperson, L. (2011) makes me question myself further, am I truly emanating a hidden white privilege? Is this what is at the basis of disparaging remarks from students? As I try to delve deeper into the source of my confusion and reflect on my perspective of *my* anomic environment I find myself with no answers, no language even to articulate what I am experiencing.

From my point of view I wasn't acting in a racist manner and yet I felt racism all around me.

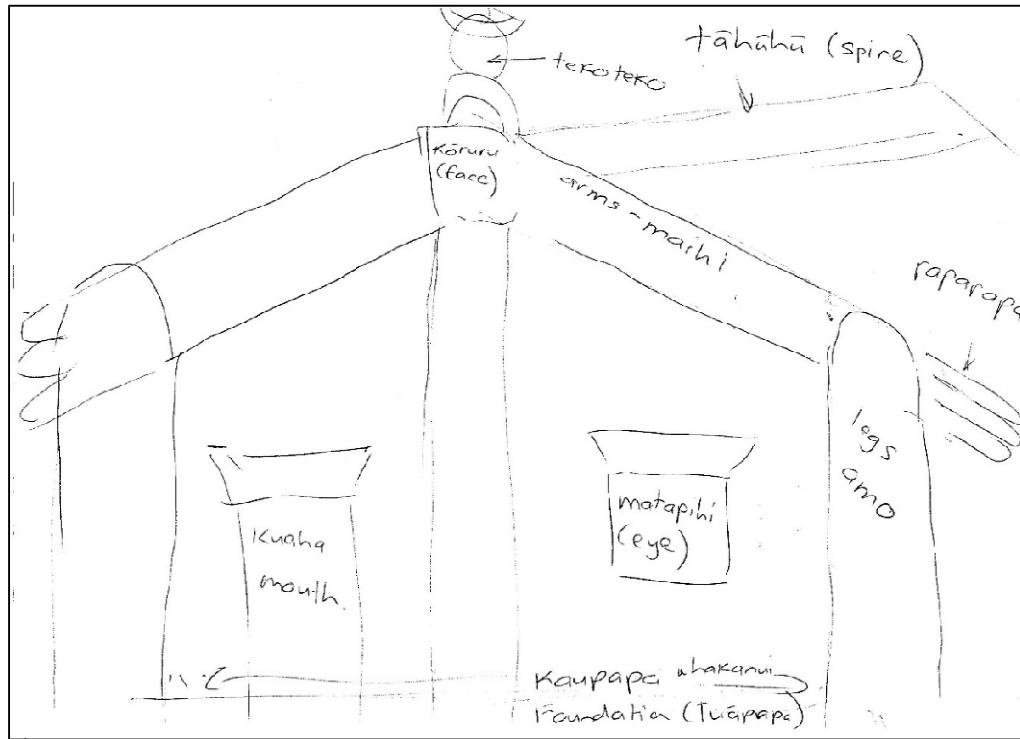
On deeper reflection however, perhaps I did inadvertently contributed to confrontation by trying to assert my authority. Rodgers, B., (2010, pg.15) explains, teachers who have a sharp voice...they don't look confident. Teachers who are slower, who scan the room, speak confidently and clearly...are able to convey a calmness'. Harker, R.K. (1990, pg.34) speaks of a teacher's habitus, "*a body of knowledge...acquired from the family of first socialisation and are embodied in the individual'* In times of stress I would often revert to type and demand student's listen to me and get on with the work that I had set, after all wasn't that what I was supposed to do as a teacher, take control? Those early months were a roller coaster of emotion, tension and hard work.

One day a 16 year old Maori boy, slender in build and six foot tall, humiliated me in front of his peers for nothing other than asking him to move an obstacle from the doorway. He then proceeded to lock me in my office, holding the door shut so I could not get out. Some weeks later I received a salient apology from his father and the boy which he extended from his whakapapa to me, my whanau and my ancestors. The exchange was so sincere that an energy seemed to fill the room. My pain felt recognised and I was deeply moved. I felt a salty wound could begin to heal.

I decided I needed to become more involved so I elected to be on the Behavioural Review Committee. My role was to redesign the current disciplinary pathway to something more visual and easy to follow. Reviewing the pathway I was surprised at how devoid it was of Te Reo. It felt and looked sterile, "white" and traditionally colonial. I thought there should be some Maori terms and values in there which led to an interesting discussion with one of our esteemed Te Reo teacher's. He explained to me the four cornerstones of Kaupapa Moari, taha whanau, family, taha tinana - physical, taha hinengaro – mental and taha wairua, the spiritual side and of how in his teaching practice he constantly refers to these principles.

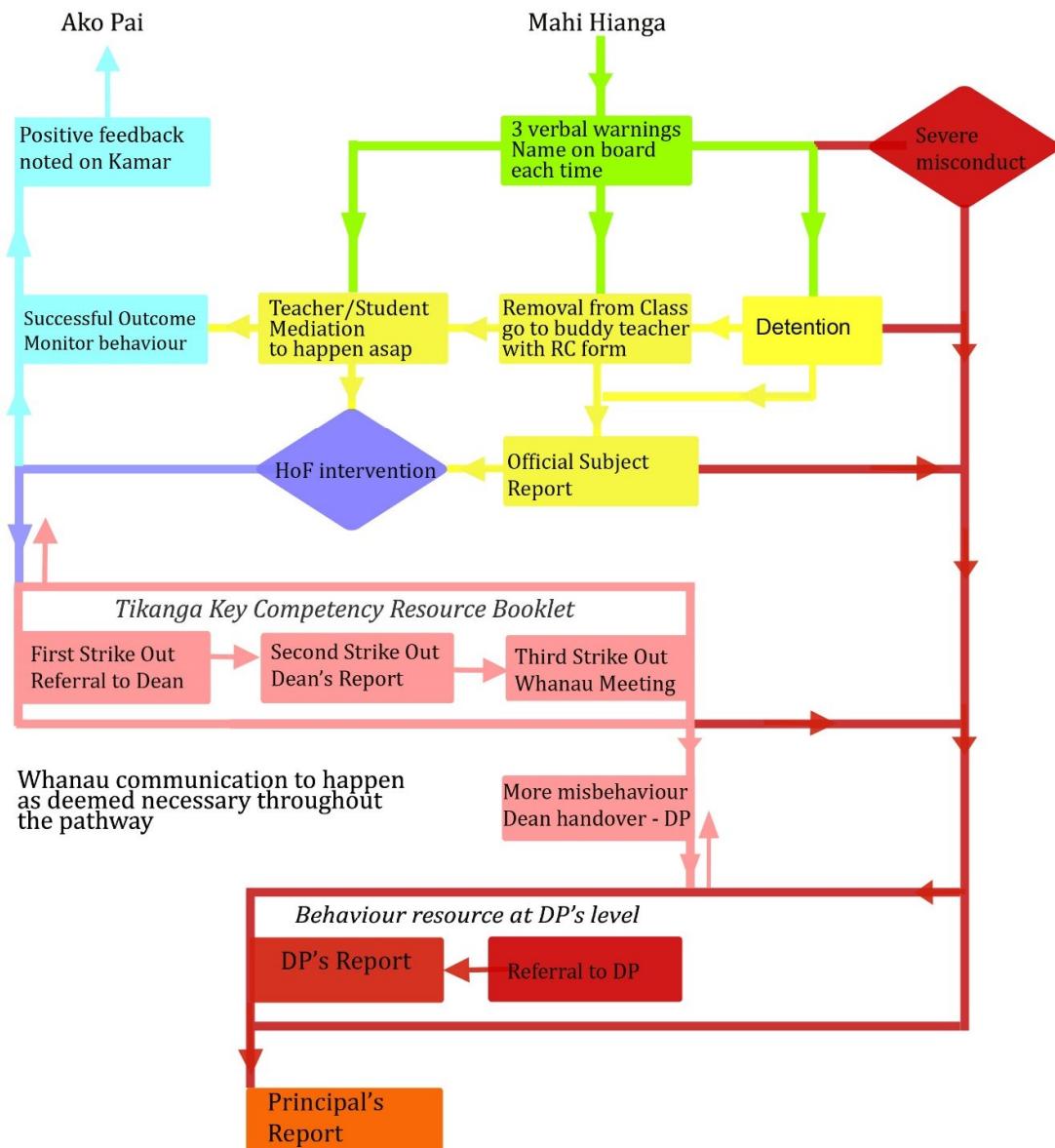


I asked how we might represent this concept visually and I suggested the idea of using the Whare as a symbol, but he informed me it would be culturally inappropriate to associate any negative behaviour with the tapu of the Whare. It would be better to create a learning resource that would encourage positive behaviour based on tikanga values with a focus towards the key competencies of the NZ Curriculum 2007.



The visual model we decided on was quite a conventional representation. Originally I had proposed an English and a Maori version but we settled on just using just a few Maori words to begin with.

# Kaupapa Whakanui – Project Respect



## Legend

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| <span style="background-color: #00FFFF; border: 1px solid black; width: 15px; height: 15px;"></span> | Positive Pathway              | <span style="background-color: #00FF00; border: 1px solid black; width: 15px; height: 15px;"></span> | Classroom Management         |
| <span style="background-color: #FFB6C1; border: 1px solid black; width: 15px; height: 15px;"></span> | Dean Intervention and Support | <span style="background-color: #6A5ACD; border: 1px solid black; width: 15px; height: 15px;"></span> | Head of Faculty Intervention |
| <span style="background-color: #A52A2A; border: 1px solid black; width: 15px; height: 15px;"></span> | Deputy Principal Intervention | <span style="background-color: #FF8C00; border: 1px solid black; width: 15px; height: 15px;"></span> | Principal's Pathway          |

Following one of these meetings a spontaneous discussion between myself and a Maori colleague developed where she explained to me what really happened prior to the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi. Maori had a coherent structured society built on reciprocal relationships. A hierarchical system, which included the rangatira (chiefs), tohunga, (reverred holders of knowlidge) kaumatua and kuia (elders). The colonising process robbed Maori of their socio political structures, their land and their identity. The consequences were far reaching and evident even today.

I observed other teacher's with their students and noticed how different students were. We have a Fijian Indian teacher, a young white English teacher and their classes looked fun and relaxed. I attended a conference where the constant themes were 'letting go of control' O'Reilly, N. (2013) in classes and employing 'project based learning' Crockett, L., Rush, P., (2013). Leonard J., (2013) explained '*Informal friendships comes before formal friendships with Maori*' they care about who you are before they care about what you know. What an interesting concept, although this wasn't new to me, it seemed to resonate louder with me. Reviewing this now I realise in the environment I grew up in, it is the other way around. What you know is more important than who you are, for knowledge is power. Growing up in a working class family, it was education that would take you places in the world.

As the weeks have past I've noticed a shift within myself. I have become calmer in my classes and I have started to notice there are fewer confrontational interactions. I give students more choices, I persevere with my Maori pronunciations and I even admitted to myself I was having fun. I have lifted the lid on that austere authority which was so prevalent in my own schooling days and try to become more fluid and at home with the classroom noise.

I notice the desks with graffiti less and instead enjoy the sound of the kapahaka practice from my office or the waiata filling the corridors. I am proud when I am in the company of Pakeha to say I work at a predominantly Maori school, where else would you be able to watch tamariki practice their tika but I am also saddened by the number of students dropping out early of education. Saddened by the students who move from school to school, who come to school with no lunch and who aspire to being in gangs or gangsters.

This journey, my journey is about belonging and being accepted by a culture that was damaged and broken by people of my origin. It's not about fixing anything and it's not about trying to make them like me. What it is about is honouring their whakapapa through education, aroha (love) and tika (truth).

*The colour of my skin holds a history  
Of a time when white people known as the Pakeha exploited whakapapa  
The Pakeha tore the fabric of the kaupapa Māori  
They formed ridiculous rules,  
Broke a working society  
And stole their land  
They marched their men to war, England's war.  
Mixed from the wounds of brown and white skin.  
The red froth of spilled blood formed pools in the mud.  
Whose was Maori, whose was Pakeha?  
Who cared?*

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