

Cultural dispossession within education in Aotearoa

Introduction

Colonisation in New Zealand is a topic that is finally being discussed. Most people who live in Aotearoa now accept the fact that Māori land was forcefully stolen by British settlers. However, something that I think is less discussed is the idea of cultural dispossession. It was not just land and authority that was taken away from Māori, but the ability to speak te reo Māori and practice the culture was, and still is, heavily impacted by colonisation. In this essay I wish to explore this idea of cultural dispossession in the context of education in Aotearoa. I begin by giving some historical context to education in New Zealand, and how the British went about trying to assimilate Māori into British education systems. I then talk about my own personal experiences of cultural dispossession as both a Māori and pākehā person, and how I believe my experiences of education has led to a disconnection from my Māori culture. I discuss how Māori language and culture is still very much in need of revitalising and how it has become something that is mostly engaged with if you are Māori, rather than the general language/culture of our country. I end by claiming that the way to help future tamariki growing up in Aotearoa to learn about the language and culture of tangata whenua, is to teach it in schools in a much more intense way than we are now.

History of colonisation and dispossession of culture within education

New Zealand's history of colonisation has not only taken land away from Māori, but it has also led to the near death of the language and culture. When the British came to New Zealand, they were set on imposing British culture on the indigenous Māori, assimilating them into their world, as they saw the western way as superior (Pihama, 2019). The main way this assimilation took place was in education, with Māori being sent to English boarding schools away from whānau and iwi, to learn the ways of the English (Pihama, 2019). For a while after the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi, Māori was still the dominant language in New Zealand and many British settlers spoke it in order to communicate and negotiate with Māori (Ballara, 2022).

However, the early 1900's saw a change in our mostly bilingual nation, as more English arrived in New Zealand, English became the dominant language and culture (Ballara, 2022). In 1877 the native schools act was established that stated that English was to be the dominant language taught in schools, and that Māori was to be avoided if possible (Ballara, 2022). This meant that Māori kids were brought up in Pākehā education systems, where they were not allowed to speak their native language (Ballara, 2022). A common phrase that Māori kids were told was to “leave your reo and tikanga at the door” (Neilson, 2020) . Pākehā teachers of this time were known to beat and severely punish children if they were caught speaking Māori at all or displaying their culture in ways the teachers deemed inappropriate (Neilson, 2020).

Many Māori kids brought up in this time period describe that their parents began to encourage the use of English rather than Māori, as they believed that their kids would do better in the changing society if they were more accustomed to pākehā ways (Tocker, 2017). They believed that being brought up in English was the best thing for their kids, that it would help them in being successful in their lives (Tocker, 2017). This meant that Māori language began to die out, with less and less of it being spoken in homes (Tocker, 2017). Pākehā ways became dominant, and much of Māori culture was kept alive only by the older generations (Tocker, 2017).

Parents who had been physically abused for speaking Māori were a lot less likely to pass the language onto their children (Neilson, 2020). They were afraid (and rightfully so) for their children's wellbeing and did not want them to grow up with the same hatred and abuse towards them (Neilson, 2020). When you are beaten for something, it creates shame and fear around it, even if that is unconscious. Māori were told over and over, while being hit, that speaking Māori was a bad thing and that they were to never do it again (Neilson, 2020). This abuse creates

whakamā, which is then passed down onto the next generations (Neilson, 2020). This is where our language died out, because most of that generation of children who were abused did not pass on their language to their kids (Neilson, 2020). This is described by Dr Ēnoka Murphy in (Neilson, 2020) as “intergenerational reo trauma”. Many did not pass down their stories or cultural practises because they felt so much shame and fear around it (Neilson, 2020). So, this removal of culture and language in education is one of the biggest reasons why many are so disconnected from māori culture now and why our language almost died out entirely. Our culture and language were taken away from my, and many others tūpuna, and we are still suffering the consequences of that.

My personal experience of cultural dispossession

I am Māori myself, and as a Māori person I definitely feel the effects of this dispossession of culture. While I am Māori, I have grown up in a mostly pākehā society, surrounded by mostly pākehā people. My education involved kohanga reo until I was four, but that was the end of my bilingual and bicultural education. My parents spoke Māori to me when I was little, but not fluently and not enough for me to retain much past the basics of being told to get down from whatever I was climbing, or to stop before running onto roads. Once I hit primary school and was no longer in that bilingual environment, my reo dropped off and I became about as proficient as any other pākehā kid brought up in our school systems. The Māori taught to us in primary school didn't go past “kia ora”, “kei te pēhea koe?”, “ka kite”, the colours, and how to count to 10. And the part about it that always annoyed me was that we never got taught any more than that. It did not get more complex as I got older and went through year groups in school like any other subject, we were only ever taught the same basics over and over again. And this was the same in high school, even where it was compulsory to take Māori as a junior. The only way I was able to advance my reo within the education system was to electively continue taking it throughout high school, and now into university. But this is a choice that I

have to make, and courses that I now have to pay for, rather than it just being my birthright to learn the language of my tūpuna. It should not be this hard, and I credit this lack of education to early colonisers actions of removing te reo from schools.

Aside from language, I am a classic example of a pākehā-presenting Māori who has had so little of my culture passed down to me. My name, along with my cousins are the first two Māori names in our whānau for six generations. The language has not been spoken fluently in my whānau for many, many generations. I am currently learning, and trying to bring that part of our culture back but it is incredibly hard when it has been lost for so long, and our education systems are not helping me do that.

Along with feeling all of this sadness around not being connected to my culture, I also know that I perpetuate this problem in ways. I do not look Māori. The pounamu around my neck is about the only defining feature of my Māori-ness that you can see just by looking at me. And while I know that being white does not make me any less Māori, there is the privilege that comes with it that I do have to acknowledge. I know rationally that I have every right to my culture as the next Māori person does, but it is difficult navigating that while knowing there are others who have struggled far worse than I ever will because of colonialism. I feel that sometimes those people who have been through worse and struggled so much more, should be the ones who get the first access to reclaiming language and culture. Colonialism has meant that pākehā (or at least pākehā presenting) students have more opportunities to higher education (Theodore, 2016), and I know that I benefit from those opportunities. Yes, it has taken until now for me to be able to properly learn te reo māori and that is sad, but even being here at university to do that is a privilege. And maybe it is a privilege I do not deserve to have over

someone else. So not only has colonisation taken away so much access to language and culture, it has created a class divide between Māori, which leads to more guilt and shame.

Cultural disconnect in this day and age

Moana Jackson (2020) describes colonisation as “an ongoing process of dispossession”. He discusses how colonisation is often talked about in past tense, as if it is a historical event that is now over (Jackson, 2020). Moana disagrees with this, he claims that colonisation, while potentially not as physically violent and overt, is still very much occurring and impacting people’s lives (Jackson, 2020). Colonisation did not end with the dispossession of land, it continues to this day with the dispossession of culture and autonomy for Māori (Jackson, 2020). Colonisation takes place everywhere every day, it is just such a normal process to us now that we do not notice it. I see colonisation in the education system that I was brought up in. Forms of colonisation were present with language not being taught properly or enough, with Māori narratives left out of history or told from a pākehā perspective. This way of education dispossesses Māori of our right to our culture and tikanga. I believe education is the place where we can begin to heal some of these issues. Because education is the bringing up of the next generation, what is taught in schools is what is then reproduced in society. If what is taught is a lack of Māori heritage and culture, then that is what society is based on. However, if we can change that and make our education system a place of cultural learning and understanding, then I believe the next generation will be able to reclaim some of the culture that I have been unable to.

Moon (2018) explains that Māori has become an exclusive language, where the majority of people who speak it are Māori themselves. Rather than the language becoming normal for anyone who lives in New Zealand, as an official language should be in my opinion, it is still

sectioned off as a language that you only speak if you whakapapa Māori. This means that Māori culture is alienated because it is specified as belonging to only particular parts of society (Moon, 2018). If Māori language is properly taught throughout the entire school system, then this will allow a whole generation of new Māori speakers, whether pākehā, Māori, or other. The ideal future that I see for Aotearoa is one where everyone is bilingual, and te reo Māori is just a normal part of everyday life. This will not be easy, but the first step is in education.

Solutions to help taurira reclaim reo and tikanga

Tocker (2017) describes the experiences of education from her mothers, her own, and her daughters' perspectives, and their different connections to Māori culture because of those experiences. Tocker (2017) describes how her own experience of being put in pākehā schooling and being brought up in English, disconnected her from her culture rather than preparing her for life in the ways that her parents had hoped it would. She describes her daughter's upbringing which was influenced heavily by Māori tikanga and culture, and her education in kohanga reo and kura kaupapa (Tocker, 2017). Her experience compared to her daughters is very different with her feeling this disconnect and lack of knowledge of her culture, while her daughter has been so enriched by Māori teachings (Tocker, 2017). To me this example shows how dispossession of education for Māori can so heavily impact the lives of those who are forced out of their culture, and the measures that it takes to bring it back. For Tocker (2017) she was able to bring back the culture that was lost for her to her daughter by immersing her in te ao Māori. I believe that this is what we should be doing to enhance those cultural understandings for everyone growing up in Aotearoa. Teaching all kids in the ways of kura kaupapa. Since most kids are learning English at home, learning reo in school is a great way to encourage bilingual and bicultural normality in our society.

According to Aranga (2016) an important step to properly introducing Māori culture in schools is to teach according to Māori values such as manaakitanga and kaitiakitanga. This will teach taurira not just language, but important values that inform Māori culture. I believe that values such as whanaungatanga and whakapapa are ones that are inherently important to living life in general and teaching according to these, rather than translations which do not entirely encompass the full meaning of the words, can only enhance learning.

By teaching not only te reo Māori but teaching based on Māori narratives of history, and mātauranga Māori, we would be able to bring back the culture that has been ripped out of our society. The culture that belongs in our society. We need to involve hapū and iwi in their views on how we should be educating our tamariki, so they can grow up to aid the decolonisation process rather than growing up unconsciously reproducing and reinforcing colonial narratives the way that so many of us have already.

I believe that any child growing up in New Zealand should be learning Māori language and culture. For far too long our education systems have failed Māori, and this history of dispossession and loss of culture needs to end. This is how we end it- by educating our tamariki, the next generation, so that Māori culture becomes a normal part of everyday life in Aotearoa.

Conclusion

When Aotearoa was colonised, the British took away Māori land, tino rangatiratanga, access to culture, the right to speak te reo, and more. They did this by targeting education, and it worked, leaving Aotearoa as a mostly single cultured colonial society. Māori across Aotearoa including myself are still feeling the effects of colonisation through this disconnect from a culture we should have been brought up in. While I try my best to connect and learn more about

Māori culture, I know that my experiences of the pākehā education system have informed my world view and lead me to perpetrate this problem in ways. I believe that the only way forward is to create drastic changes within our education systems, ones that honour tikanga, mātauranga Māori, and Māori values.

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