

## Challenges of intergenerational language disruption: An impact of British colonisation on Māori identity and language in Aotearoa/New Zealand

---

*Dr Renée Gilgen*

*University of Waikato*

---

**Abstract:** This article draws from a qualitative PhD research study and presents some of the challenges experienced by a small cohort of Māori primary school teachers who were mostly raised in urban neighbourhoods located away from their own traditional tribal regions. The impact of not being fluent in their indigenous Māori language influenced their self-confidence to engage in traditional cultural experiences as Māori and as Māori schoolteachers. A cultural self-identity continuum was developed as a research outcome and reflects how Māori identity is underpinned by whakapapa (genealogical connections, lineage, descent), experience with tikanga Māori (Māori values and beliefs, protocols) and te reo Māori (Māori language). The continuum is a self-reflective tool that serves to respect and affirm diverse cultural realities experienced by Māori teachers positioned in 21st century English-medium state schools in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

---

**Keywords:** Māori, identity, indigenous language, colonisation, British imperialism.

---

### **Introduction: Socio-historical context of Māori and Aotearoa/New Zealand**

Māori are indigenous to *Aotearoa*/New Zealand. Their migration from the Pacific region to the islands of *Aotearoa* occurred over many centuries which is thought to have started from the 13th century AD (King, 2003). Indeed, the term 'Māori' translates to the word 'normal' and was not initially applied as a collective ethnic category to represent the indigenous peoples of *Aotearoa*/New Zealand until the arrival of the first British explorer, James Cook, in 1769. Māori became the term that represented the '*tangata māori*' (ordinary people) to differentiate themselves from the early European or, *pākehā*. The term *pākehā*

*[...] probably came from the pre-European word pakepakeha, denoting mythical light-skinned beings" (King, 2003: 169).*

Prior to the first contact with the British explorers, Māori were identified through kinship connections within tribal areas (King, 2003; Walker, 2004). They also shared common language and cultural values across all tribal regions despite some dialectal variations. Māori language was solely used as the form of communication by *tangata māori* in *Aotearoa* until British imperialism and its assimilative processes began in 1769.

## **A treaty agreement was signed: The Treaty of Waitangi, 1840.**

Signed on February 6th, 1840 between representatives of the British Crown and more than 500 Māori tribal leaders, *te Tiriti o Waitangi* / the Treaty of Waitangi sought to formally establish colonial relationships (Orange, 2004). The agreement provided a space for “systemic settlement from Britain” (Harker & McConnochie, 1995: 55). However, the treaty terms were hastily written in English and then translated into the Māori language by non-Māori early missionaries. As such, many of the Māori tribal leaders signed because of the cultural understandings placed on the words used when translated into their own language (Orange, 2004).

Subsequently, there were two versions of the treaty document. One was written in English and the other, in the Māori language (Orange, 1999: 257-259). Contentious translations from the first treaty article involved the terms *Sovereignty vs Kāwanatanga*. *Sovereignty* inferred “that which the chiefs were asked to give away to the Queen of England” (King, 2003: 160) compared to *Kāwanatanga*, which is a transliteration of ‘governor’, and hence meant literally ‘governorship’ (King, 2003: 160). Similarly, the second treaty article stated,

*[...] te tino rangatiratanga o ratou wenua kainga me o ratou taonga katoa (the unqualified exercise of their chieftainship over their lands, villages and all their treasures) (King, 2003: 160).*

In English, this was stated as

*[...] full exclusive and undisturbed possessions of their [Māori] Lands and Estates Forests Fisheries and other properties [...] (King, 2003: 160).*

When Māori refused to cede their lands over the following years after signing the Treaty of Waitangi with the Crown representatives, British troops were sent to New Zealand and initiated the *Aotearoa/New Zealand Land Wars* of 1845-1872 (Belich, 1996; Orange, 1989, 2004). Most of the Māori land confiscated by the British Crown provided a place for the large number of British immigrants arriving in *Aotearoa/New Zealand* to resettle and prosper.

The Māori became ethnic and cultural minorities in their own land by the 1850s largely due to the impact of the *Aotearoa/New Zealand Land Wars* and the subsequent rapid immigration of British settlers to the country (Belich, 1996; Orange, 2004; Sinclair, 2000). In contrast,

*Pākehā settlers, as colonial immigrants, became the dominant majority who framed the ‘dominant discourse’ (Gilgen, 2016: 13).*

## **A direct impact of British colonisation on the Māori language and culture**

Language and culture are intrinsically connected. Metge (1976: 95) states that “language is both a part of culture and a vital expression of it”. The understanding of this connection being central to cultural well-being is widely acknowledged by academic

researchers globally (Durie, 1998; Metge, 1976; Rogoff, 2003; Walker, 2004). Traditional Māori communities suffered significant disaffection from their own language as colonial assimilation practices rapidly ensued throughout the 19th century.

The first early 19th century Christian-based schools were established as “the first point of deculturalisation” of Māori (Gilgen, 2016: 13). By the late 19th century, early settler governments established public schools for their own children and Native schools were formally opened in some rural areas for Māori communities (Belich, 1996; Smyth, 1931). The purpose of the Native schools was to civilise Māori communities through educating Māori children in the English language and cultural values (Simon, 1998). As such, successive generations of Māori children were systematically encouraged to replace their own ‘inferior’ language, culture and traditions with the ‘superior’ English language, culture and traditions (Barrington, 1965, 2008; Simon & Smith, 2001). In 1969, the *Aotearoa*/New Zealand government closed the last Native school mainly because Māori were considered to have

*[...] acquired English language proficiently enough to learn within the monocultural and monolingual public school system (Gilgen, 2016).*

By the middle of the 20th century, the erosion of the Māori language, culture and traditions was almost achieved.

## **Urbanisation and cultural disaffection**

Urbanisation occurred following the land confiscations and then, after the end of World War II, many more Māori left rural areas and migrated to urban areas to find employment (Walker, 2004). This period of urbanisation was yet another significant deculturalisation process of Māori. Between the 1940s and 1980s, 85% of the total Māori population were living amongst *Pākehā* in urban centres (Durie, 1998; King, 2003). Many Māori had assumed the assimilative agenda of language and cultural inferiority and those who were able to converse in the Māori language confidently, were rapidly declining in numbers (Borrell, 2005; Metge, 1986; Smith, 2006). Inter-generational colonial hegemony influenced entrenched ways of interpreting Māori identity by Māori.

## **Cultural resistance and resilience: Educational contexts and Māori teachers**

*Aotearoa*/New Zealand experienced a Māori language and cultural renaissance during the 1970s and 1980s. Groups of urban Māori asserted their resistance in response to the disaffection they experienced from their language and cultural traditions. The social and political pressures generated during this time of resistance strongly influenced some systemic changes that included raising the profile of the Treaty of Waitangi as *Aotearoa*/New Zealand’s founding document and, the Māori language legislatively (Sharp, 1990; Walker, 2004). The Māori language was legalised as an official language of *Aotearoa*/New Zealand through the Māori Language Act, 1987.

A subsequent outcome from the era of urban Māori resistance influenced state educational contexts. The reformed Education Act 1989 legislated for *Kura Kaupapa* Māori-medium education as a state funded schooling context grounded in Māori philosophies and language. The (re)introduction of a Māori framed educational system addressed the government's renewed bicultural commitment to *Te Tiriti o Waitangi*/Treaty of Waitangi's three core principles of 'partnership', 'participation' and 'protection' (Richardson et al, 1988). From 1989, state school contexts and their governing Boards of Trustees were expected to ensure school policies and charters included references to how relationships with Māori communities and students were represented in the (re)established Māori-medium as well as English-medium state schools.

The impact of Aotearoa/New Zealand's colonial experiences on Māori communities significantly shifted the levels of engagement with their language, culture and traditions. The *Pākehā* dominant discourse maintained a firm grip on how government policies were conceptualised, developed and enacted. While Māori have experienced 178 years of formalised colonisation since the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi in 1840, *Pākehā* have experienced 178 years of systematic dominance (Gilgen, 2016). Therein lies the crux of the issue for contemporary Māori and *Pākehā* in 21st century Aotearoa/New Zealand. The dominant discourse had become societal 'norms' and for some Māori school teachers who were educated in monocultural school contexts, the journey of (re)claiming their own language and cultural traditions have been fraught with challenges and tensions to their personal and professional identities as Māori teachers.

### **A small cohort of Māori teachers reflect on their past and present realities**

The six teacher participants, Ara, Terina, Rose, Mere, Deb and Hugh, were raised in second and/or third generational urban family structures during the 1970s and 1980s. The research participants were expected to 1) self-identify as Māori and, 2) be an experienced teacher working within English-medium primary school settings. During the doctoral research period, all were employed in schools located in Auckland, New Zealand. Auckland is home to about 33% of the country's total population and 23% of Māori live in Auckland. However, they no longer form the largest ethnic group in one suburb (Statistics New Zealand, 2015). Māori teachers make up 10% of the total teacher ethnicities in state schools across Aotearoa/New Zealand (Ministry of Education, 2015b) and their minority status as teachers is reflected in Auckland's English-medium primary schools and classrooms (Ministry of Education, 2015a).

The teacher participants were not exempted from the colonial legacy of urbanisation, assimilation and disaffection from experiencing Māori language and cultural values as children. Nor were they exempt from receiving comments aligned with fixed stereotypes and racist attitudes held about Māori expressed by predominantly non-Māori colleagues as adults.

*Te reo Māori* (Māori language) was perceived to be a dominant cultural marker by the teacher participants and similar to many urban Māori, they had little or no ability to confidently express themselves in this language. Furthermore, despite being an official language of *Aotearoa*/New Zealand and an increased access to *te reo Māori* since the 1980s, acquiring *te reo Māori* as a second language had been fraught with challenges to their Māori identity both personally and professionally.

### A cultural self-identity continuum: A self-reflective tool

Creating a space for the teacher participants in this study to locate themselves culturally as well as strengthen shared understandings of Māori values and belief systems was highly important to their personal and professional identities. While ethnicity refers to the cultural experiences of belonging within a specific group of people and informs an individual’s sense of self or ethnic identity, the concept of culture refers to values and belief systems that govern ways in which individuals engage within particular groups of people (Gay, 2000; Macfarlane, 2007; Nikora, 1995; Rogoff, 2003).

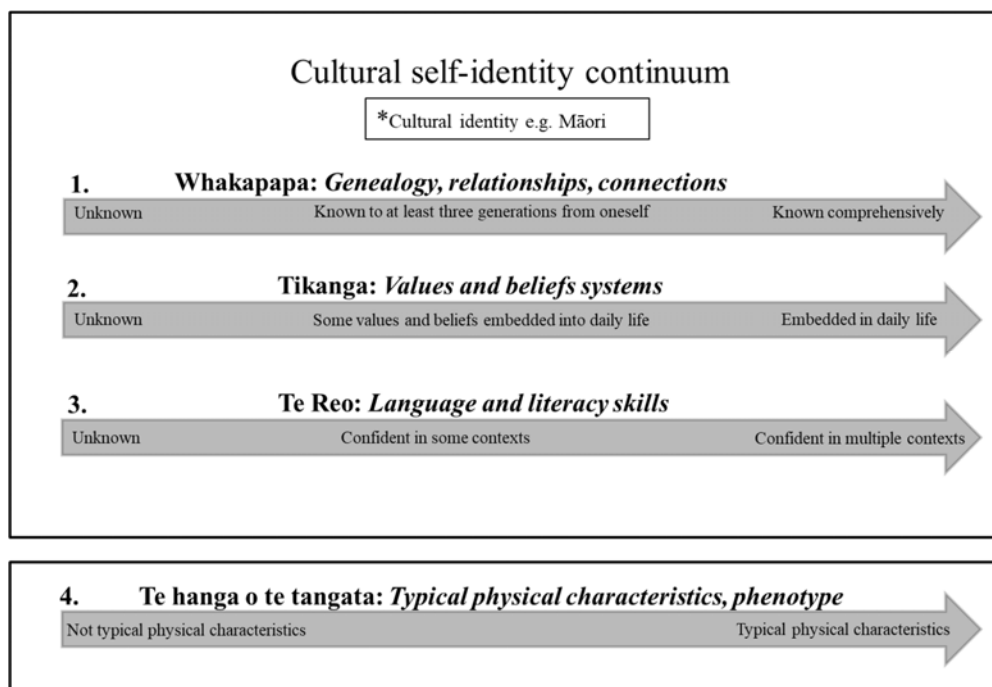


Figure 1: A cultural self-identity continuum

Drawing from the participants narratives of experience and framed within *kaupapa* Māori research methodologies (Bishop, 2003; Smith, 1999), I developed a cultural self-identity continuum as a strategy that reflects core cultural dimensions that connect perceptions of ethnicity to cultural values and attitudes. Despite experience and fluency with the Māori language being perceived as the core cultural dimension, the cultural

self-identity continuum serves to highlight additional core cultural dimensions such as whakapapa (genealogy connections) and *tikanga* (values and belief systems).

Whakapapa (genealogy) refers to kinship connections and is a defining cultural dimension of Māori identity (Graham, 2009). *Tikanga* represents knowledge and engagement levels with Māori cultural values and how these values are applied in practice (Mead, 2003) and, *te reo* refers to the level of experience and fluency with Māori language. In contrast to the first three cultural dimensions, the fourth continuum, *te hanga o te tangata* (typical physical characteristics), refers to a conflict between self-perceptions of an individual's connectedness between his/her ethnic phenotype and cultural 'norms' when compared to others' assumptions of an individual's connectedness between his/her ethnic phenotype and cultural 'norms'. In this context, *te hanga o te tangata* represents the assumed expectations and attitudes this cohort of Māori teachers experienced as professionals in their respective work spaces.

Intergenerational disruption and disconnection to these cultural dimensions left some urban Māori attempting to capture and sustain what little they understood of Māori identity. Mead (2003: 2) noted that

*[...] one's understanding of tikanga Māori is informed and mediated by the language of communication.*

However, this does not suggest that only experienced Māori language speakers are privy to knowing and practicing Māori values. Rather, Māori who are not experienced or fluent with the Māori language begin their learning and engagement with these core cultural dimensions from a different entry-level compared with experienced Māori language speakers. Such is the diverse understandings and representations of Māori identity in 21st century schools across *Aotearoa*/New Zealand.

The following narratives reflect some of the challenges experienced by the teacher participants in this study. Their individual and collective narratives underpinned the set of cultural dimensions identified in the self-identity cultural continuum.

### **Whakapapa (Genealogy, kinship connections)**

The teacher participants' narratives reflected the different entry-levels on each continuum that exist. For example, Mere's reflections referred to an understanding of whakapapa (genealogy and connections). She expressed

*What does it mean to be Māori? I still ponder that all the time. I think it's the way we are as a people then I think well, what does that mean? [...] you know, our whānau [family] and - all those connections.*

Deb shared how her grandmother was influential in maintaining a level of cultural continuity. She reflected

*These are things that I learned through my nana, through my mum, through my whānau [family].*



### **Tikanga (Values and belief systems)**

Practicing Māori cultural values and belief systems reflected the teachers' diverse interpretations and experiences. *Tikanga* Māori cultural values are multi-faceted and weaves many concepts as opposed to being practiced as prescribed action as singular definitions (Mead, 2003).

Included within the teachers' narratives were concepts such as *whanaungatanga* (developing positive relationships and connections with others). For example, Terina reflected on her reluctance to attend her own graduation from teacher training college and the support she received from her grandmother,

*[She] said 'you're going to your graduation because I'm going to come' (Terina).*

Mere reflected on a cultural construct of *aroha* (feeling and demonstrating empathy for others) and shared that

*my belief is that it's our aroha...that makes us Māori...I believe that our [Māori] kids should know who they are and even if they come from another culture [or] country, they should know who our people [Māori] are...we've got [people from] all the different countries in New Zealand which is good, I like that. I like it for the fact that they keep coming here because they know that it is a good country and they know we are a good people.*

*Wairuatanga* refers to an innate connection of cultural beliefs and values beyond the physical world. Ara connected *wairuatanga* to her intuition and shared that

*[...] it's so easy to lose sight of what's really important and it's those times of actually balancing and stopping that allow the 'gut' to say 'this is the most important, go down this route and never mind everything else' (Mere)*

*Māhaki* refers to the ability to recognise, appreciate and demonstrate humility. Humility is highly valued, appreciated and understood within Māori communities (Mead, 2003). For example, Rose expressed moments of feeling overwhelmed and reflected that

*It wasn't until I went into university that I started my whakapapa [genealogy]. I started speaking te reo, I started writing it [...] I couldn't believe that this was Māori culture because to me I thought I had it already [...] I would start to cry and get all emotional in here [gesturing to her heart].*

### **Te Reo (Language)**

The ability to converse in the Māori language was connected to confidence as well as knowledge and experience. For example, despite having a high level of competency with Māori language following university studies, Ara shared the tensions she had to negotiate as a Māori language schoolteacher:

*I've been in contexts where they've been heavily dominated by Māori kaupapa [purpose] and my perspective of what's going on is that I felt in those contexts quite inferior and then the same in the Pākehā contexts [framed by the dominant discourse] so it's like where the hell do I fit?*

Similar to Ara, Rose completed her teacher training in a Māori-medium programme offered by the university despite having very little experience with Māori language as a child. She reflected that

*It was hard in rūmaki [Māori-medium] teacher training [...] I had no idea what they were saying honestly [...] the second year [of teacher training] was way better for me so as that time went on, that was really good.*

Conversely, Hugh, Mere, Terina, and Deb's engagement with the Māori language was in context as trained schoolteachers. Hugh's perceived lack of experience with *tikanga* Māori and *te reo* Māori meant he felt culturally inadequate to participate with school programmes that required knowledge of Māori protocols:

*[I] felt exposed when it came to tikanga Māori...because I don't know te reo or the tikanga. I felt quite [...] shy and whakamā (ashamed) that I couldn't get up to whaikōrero [formal speeches]*

Rose reflected that even though she had a limited knowledge of *te reo* Māori as a child, her entry level into learning *te reo* Māori (language) was by enrolling her own children into a Māori language kindergarten "so I could learn the reo and my kids could learn and go on this journey together". Similar to Mere, Terina assumed the role as a Māori language teacher in English-medium state school in order to develop her confidence alongside the students she taught:

*It was ok because I was the only te reo Māori teacher there and I had nobody judging me [...] I was challenged by the kids to extend my reo' (June 2012).*

Deb, on the other hand, shared the complexities of learning the Māori language as an adult and stated that

*I'd like to have more of it [te reo Māori] but it's not that easy to learn when you're not in a situation where it's constantly spoken and when you're not forced to speak it. You tend not to want to use it or when you're in that situation [...] clam up in case you make a mistake..*

## **Te hanga o te tangata (typical physical characteristics / phenotype)**

The fourth and final continuum reflects the assumptions experienced by the teacher participants of them by non-Māori teacher colleagues. The assumptions are unpinned by socio-cultural perspectives that exist in *Aotearoa*/New Zealand about Māori as an ethnic group. For example, Hugh shared that as a Māori male teacher, he was often questioned about his presence in a school setting:

*My first day on the [teaching] job, I was sitting in the staff room and one of the Caucasian teachers walked in, he said 'Oh giddy chap, how are you? You must be the new caretaker.*



Rose also shared the stereotyping she experienced and reflected how she struggled to meet the musical expertise commonly expected of Māori teachers by non-Māori teacher colleagues:

*[...] when you're saying 'no I can't play a guitar' it's like 'eh? A Māori that can't sing and play a guitar? You're not a real one [Māori]*

Unrealistic expectations to be expert Māori were imposed on these teacher participants irrespective of the level of experience and support they had with tikanga (cultural protocols of values and beliefs) and *te reo* Māori (language). The impact of *Pākehā* and other non-Māori teachers' ignorance of *tikanga* Māori protocols is reflected in Ara's statement:

*Being Māori in mainstream [English-medium state schools] means isolation [...] you sit there alone so you do the best that you can do.*

## Conclusion

Participation in this research study not only supported a small group of Māori teachers to express their personal and professional realities in a culturally safe context, but also served to acknowledge and understand the disruptive impact that colonisation has had on their own cultural identity as Māori and as Māori teachers in English-medium state schools in *Aotearoa*/New Zealand.

Colonial perspectives of *te reo* Māori as an 'inferior' language continues to significantly impact on how Māori identity is perceived by some urban raised Māori who teach and learn in 21st century English-medium state school in *Aotearoa*/New Zealand. The cultural self-identity continuum indicates that confidence and fluency with the Māori language is only one cultural dimension inherent to Māori cultural identity. The continuum also offers a strategy that may disrupt the negative assumptions held about Māori by Māori teachers as well as non-Māori teachers positioned within these schooling contexts.

Responding to Māori teachers' diverse cultural realities and affirming their diverse cultural identities needs to be understood as a Treaty of Waitangi honouring response that is legislatively expected of all 21st century English-medium state schools in *Aotearoa*/New Zealand.

## References

- Barrington, J. (1965) Māori education and society 1867-1940. MA thesis: Victoria University, Wellington, New Zealand.
- Barrington, J. (2008) *Separate but equal? Māori schools and the crown 1867-1969*, Wellington, New Zealand: Victoria University Press.
- Belich, J. (1996) *Making peoples: A history of the New Zealanders, from Polynesian settlement to the end of the nineteenth century*. Auckland, New Zealand: Allen Lane The Penguin Press.

- Bishop, R. (2003) Changing Power Relations in Education: Kaupapa Māori messages for 'mainstream' education in Aotearoa/New Zealand. *Comparative Education*, 39 (2), 221-238.
- Durie, M. (1998) *Whaiora. Māori health development* (2nd ed.). Melbourne, Australia: Oxford University Press.
- Education Act. (1989) New Zealand Statutes. Retrieved from: <http://www.legislation.govt.nz/act/public/1989/0080/latest/whole.html>
- Gay, G. (2000) *Culturally responsive teaching. Theory, research and practice*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Gilgen, R. (2016) *Tihei Mauri Ora: Negotiating primary school teachers' personal and professional identities as Māori*. (PhD Thesis, University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand. Retrieved from: <http://hdl.handle.net/10289/10262>
- King, M. (2003) *The Penguin History of New Zealand*. Auckland, New Zealand: Penguin Books (NZ) Ltd.
- Macfarlane, A. (2007) *Discipline, democracy and diversity: working with students with behaviour difficulties*. Wellington, New Zealand: NZCER Press.
- Māori Language Act. (1987) New Zealand Statutes. Retrieved from: <http://www.legislation.govt.nz/act/public/1987/0176/latest/whole.html>
- Metge, J. (1976) *Rautahi: The Māoris of New Zealand*. (Revised ed.). London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Metge, J. (1986) *In and out of touch: Whakamaa in cross-cultural context*. Wellington, NZ: Victoria University Press.
- New Zealand Ministry of Education. (2015a) Teaching staff. Retrieved from: [http://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/statistics/schooling/teaching\\_staff](http://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/statistics/schooling/teaching_staff)
- New Zealand Ministry of Education. (2015b) School rolls. Retrieved from: <https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/statistics/schooling/student-numbers/6028>
- Nikora, L. W. (1995) Race, culture and ethnicity: Organisation of Māori social groups. In: L. W. Nikora, and T. M. Moeke-Pickering, (eds.) *Māori development and psychology*. Hamilton, NZ: University of Waikato.
- Orange, C. (1989) *The story of a treaty*. Wellington, NZ: Allen & Unwin.
- Orange, C. (2004) *An illustrated history of the Treaty of Waitangi*. Wellington, NZ: Bridget Williams Books.
- Richardson, I., Ballin, A., Brunce, M., Cook, L., Durie, M. & Noonan, R. (1988). *The April Report 1988*. Wellington, NZ: The Royal Commission on Social Policy.
- Rogoff, B. (2003) *The cultural nature of human development*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Sharp, A. (1990). *Justice and the Māori. Māori claims in New Zealand political argument in the 1980s*. Auckland, NZ: Oxford University Press.

Simon, J. (Ed.). (1998) Ngā kura Māori. Native schools system 1867-1969. Auckland, NZ: Auckland University Press.

Simon, J., & Smith, L. T. (2001) A civilising mission? Perceptions and representations of the New Zealand native schools system. Auckland, NZ: Auckland University Press.

Sinclair, K. (2000) A History of New Zealand (Revised ed.). Auckland, NZ: Penguin Books.

Smith, C. (2006) Being tangata whenua in Aotearoa in the 21st century. *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous People*, 2 (1), 90-113.

Smith, L. T. (1999) Decolonizing methodologies: Research and Indigenous peoples. London: Zed Books.

Smyth, P. (1931) The problem of educating the Māori. In P. M. Jackson (Ed.), *Māori and education, or the education of natives in New Zealand and its dependencies* (pp. 230-248). Wellington, New Zealand: Ferguson & Osborn Limited.

Statistics New Zealand. (2015) Mapping trends in the Auckland region. Retrieved from: [http://www.stats.govt.nz/browse\\_for\\_stats/Maps\\_and\\_geography/Geographic-areas/mapping-trends-in-the-auckland-region/ethnicity.aspx](http://www.stats.govt.nz/browse_for_stats/Maps_and_geography/Geographic-areas/mapping-trends-in-the-auckland-region/ethnicity.aspx)

Walker, R. (2004) Ka whawhai tonu matou. Struggle without end (Revised ed.). North Shore, NZ: Penguin Group (NZ).

