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Revernacularisation of te reo Māori and critical pedagogies in Kōhanga Reo

Mere Skerrett with Jenny Ritchie

This article examines how government policies have undermined equity and access in early childhood care and education in Aotearoa. While flaxroots initiatives have historically fostered inclusive, community-centred, low- or no-cost early childhood models, recent policies favouring commercial providers have intensified disparities, particularly for Māori and Pacific communities. The analysis situates these developments within broader patterns of structural injustice and cultural erosion, especially for Māori. It argues for renewed government commitment to early education as a public good, in order to ensure funding of provision that honours cultural identities, supports linguistic revitalisation, and meets the realities of an increasingly diverse population, positioning early childhood care and education as a vital public investment and foundational education pillar of a just society.

Contextualising preface: Regulatory reform, recolonisation, and the fight for te reo Māori

The following interview continues a vital thread from our previous issue's coverage of Kōhanga Reo by situating the movement—and the political and pedagogical leadership of Associate Professor Mere Skerrett—within the increasingly fraught context of regulatory reform in Aotearoa. As the current coalition Government advances a raft of legislative and regulatory rollbacks—such as the repeal of early childhood education (ECE) licensing regulations C5 and C6, the Treaty Principles Bill, the Regulatory Standards Bill, and proposed changes to the Māori Language Act 2016—it becomes clear that these moves are not simply technical policy adjustments, but ideological assaults on Māori rights, language, and tino rangatiratanga.

Regulations C5 and C6 have been pivotal in affirming the Treaty of Waitangi as a living document in the ECE sector. They recognise the role of te reo Māori, tikanga, and mātauranga Māori in shaping the learning environments of tamariki Māori. Their removal threatens to erase decades of progress made by Māori educators and whānau who have fought tirelessly to reassert Indigenous values and knowledge in spaces historically dominated by Western monocultural norms. As Mere Skerrett argues, such actions undermine both the Treaty and the fundamental right of Māori children to see themselves reflected in their learning environments.

This is not a new struggle. As this interview recounts, the Kōhanga Reo movement has always been more than language immersion—it is a political project of decolonisation, rooted in critical pedagogy, resistance, and transformation. Drawing on Paulo Freire's (1970/2018) concept of praxis—reflection and action in pursuit of justice—Mere's work demonstrates how Kōhanga Reo has acted as a site of conscientisation, revernacularisation, and sovereignty-building. These efforts are both pedagogical and revolutionary, challenging the marginalisation of Māori language and identity caused by colonial policies of assimilation and cultural dispossession.

What we are witnessing now is a recolonising moment, where policies masquerading as regulatory reform are being used to weaken Māori protections and silence Māori voices in public institutions. In this context, the revitalisation of te reo Māori becomes an urgent act of resistance. It is not just about preserving a language; it is about preserving whakapapa, mana, and Māori futures and our Aotearoa Nation.

This interview provides critical insights into the lived experiences of those at the frontline of the language struggle—whānau, kaiako, and kaumātua—who continue to resist and reimagine what education could and should be for our tamariki. It reminds us that regulatory reform is never neutral: when it is so colonially driven it either uplifts or undermines. In this political moment, we are called—in the spirit of Freire—not to stand aside in silence, but to act with courage, conviction, and clarity. Te Whakaputanga and Te Tiriti o Waitangi stand as the constitutional backbone of this nation. To erode their guarantees of sovereignty is to dismantle the very integrity of Aotearoa—what weakens Māori justice weakens the whole of our democracy.

Kōhanga origins, politics, and pedagogical foundations

Jenny Ritchie: I thought you would probably consider your main contributions were your home-based Kōhanga Reo, Te Amokura Kōhanga Reo, and your research you did within Te Amokura, and then your research once you've entered academia. I think really the Kōhanga work is very, very important, and what you've done subsequently in terms of revernacularisation of te reo and pedagogies for that, which you developed yourself in Kōhanga, and then your ongoing analysis of what's required in terms of revernacularisation.

Mere Skerrett: My aspirations began right at the start of the Kōhanga Reo movement. I was very aware I belonged to a generation that wasn't speaking te reo Māori, despite growing up around native speakers—my parents, grandparents, aunties, uncles. It created a deep sense of inadequacy. I didn't want my children to feel that same disconnect, and that's what inspired me to join Kōhanga Reo.

At the time, I was still in Australia, but I'd come back to help with fundraising for Kōhanga Reo. I'd also long been involved in kapa haka, but it became clear that cultural performance alone wasn't enough. We needed fluent, Māori-speaking children—and I hadn't seen any growing up in the cities. Urbanisation and assimilation policies had scattered us, and te reo was being rapidly lost.

When my first son was born in 1984, I decided to return home to fully commit to the Kōhanga movement, which had started in 1982. It hadn't yet reached Waikato, so I became involved in setting up Kōhanga Reo there. I soon realised it wasn't straightforward—there were internal politics, different agendas, and a lack of alignment with the kaupapa. So, I decided to start my own Kōhanga in the early 1990s, encouraged by my grandmother and mother.

My grandmother named it *Te Amokura*, after the rare red-tailed bird once used for ancestral navigation across Te Moana Nui-a-Kiwa to Aotearoa—symbolic of our children as carriers of ancestral knowledge and future aspirations. Both she and my mother strongly supported what we were doing. Nana had been a founding member of the Māori Women's Welfare League and was actively involved in early Māori Affairs work related to Kōhanga.

We faced many challenges. People would try to hijack the kaupapa—bringing in English Christian songs or expecting to dictate how we operated. I remember telling one couple who were wanting to convert our Kōhanga Reo to an English language, Christian hymn supporting playgroup. I said, "That ain't going to happen here," followed by ongoing discussions with our local Tino Rangatiratanga Unit (TRU) as they were called back then. When someone from the TRU came to investigate, we rallied around and got the support of all the whānau, including our Kōhanga kaumātua. The investigator backed down as soon as she saw my grandmother sitting there and she was blown away with the language abilities of our children.

That was common. Officials would show up and try to impose licensing demands or curriculum requirements that didn't fit our kaupapa. I remember a roll audit where a Ministry of Education worker declared that I was the only one "legally" allowed to be the Kōhanga Reo—even though all the adults present, who had been working alongside the tamariki, were the parents of those tamariki. That is the kaupapa of Kōhanga Reo—to be whānau-driven. Many of them happened to be qualified teachers as well. But just because they didn't have "Whakapakari" they were told they should not be there. Some were getting upset, so I rang through to our National Operations to talk directly to the late Iritana Tāwhiwhirangi who later became Dame Iritana Tāwhiwhirangi because of her leadership of the Kōhanga Reo movement. I asked Iritana, "What on earth is going on, we have this Ministry official who is upsetting our whānau?" Iritana said, "I don't know who he is, kick him out." So we did, much to his chagrin.

Kōhanga has been a highly political movement, and an effective conscientising apparatus. It was about decolonising minds. But many Kōhanga didn't have the same analysis or support. That's why so many have shut down—from about 900 in the movement's heyday, to 400 or 500 now. It's a tragedy, and it points to the need for deeper politicisation and critical awareness across the movement, not only in terms of the language revitalisation goals but also in terms of the need to be vigilant to the ongoing concerns, and harmful impacts, of colonialism.

Pedagogies of revernacularisation

Jenny Ritchie: Your Kōhanga was known for its sophisticated pedagogies. Can you talk about that?

Mere Skerrett: We wanted to tap into the advanced metalinguistic awareness of young children. Research on bilingualism shows that even when bilingual children are speaking in one of their languages, their brains are operating bilingually. They are reaping the benefits of being bilingual. Having access to multiple languages builds the sophisticated executive functioning of the brain and advancing problem-solving skills. They very early on learn to flip between worldviews, values, and meanings.

We constantly modelled this in front of the children—thinking about language out loud: "He aha the kupu Māori mō tēnei? What's the word for this? How would we say that in a sentence?" That's metalinguistic awareness—thinking about language while using it. Having advanced metalinguistic awareness means being able to think about and reflect on how language works—such as understanding that words are symbols, noticing differences between languages, and manipulating language to create meaning.

To demonstrate this, one time I used the word *toroa* as a transliteration for *drawer*. I was talking out loud, reflecting on language use, when I said, "I'm not sure about using the transliteration 'toroa' for 'drawer' because a toroa is a fabulous bird, an albatross." One of the children, Tilly, said, "Well just use toroapa."

I went straight to the Wiremu Dictionary and sure enough, it wasn't in there which meant "toroapa" didn't have some alternative meaning so we could use that word from then on—and it worked! That's language invention, and it shows how creative our tamariki are.

We also debated the place of the English alphabet. When one of our tamariki came in singing the Sesame Street ABC alphabet song, I thought to myself, gosh, we haven't got an equivalent. I knew we had to create our own. So we invented *Te Arapū*—our own alphabet song, using named letters consistent with Māori phonology. Once we had put it to music, the kids picked it up in 10 minutes. I wanted to avoid using the word "arareta" (a transliteration of "alphabet"), and instead leaned into Hirini Melbourne's work and song "*Anei ngā pūkupu Māori, a, e, i, o, u*". Kate Cherrington put my lyrics to music and her Dad helped to coin the word "Arapū" which is a combination of the "ara" from "arareta" and "pū" from "pūkupu", to get "arapū". That was another invention.

We always connected language to real-life contexts. Weekly kaupapa became songs, which we wrote up on the walls—not just for the children, but for the parents too. We had vocab displayed in each play area: carpentry, dolls, playdough, kitchen. That way, we had immediate access to useful words without always turning to the dictionary.

Once the wall charts and photographic records came down, we bound them into books. The children could revisit them, strengthening the connection between oral language and print. The theory we worked on was that children need to encounter a new word at least seven times in context for it to stick. So, we used new language deliberately and repeatedly.

Jenny Ritchie: And the children could revisit all those language-rich experiences in their own books.

Mere Skerrett: Exactly. They were reading, writing, and even singing from a very young age. One day, one of our very young babies, just a few months old, was singing *Te Arapū*, our alphabet song, so catchy was it. The excitement was always infectious.

We embedded rich language structures and metaphor in every activity. Even roll call was about name recognition, capital and lowercase letters, and biliteracy development. We created tactile murals with shells and textures—numbers and words side by side—teaching mathematical concepts like cardinality through movement and real experiences, like counting jumps on the trampoline.

All of this was grounded in research. We were always learning, analysing, and adapting. That's the danger with some educators who finish a 3-year degree and think they know it all. If they're not researching while working, they can quickly become stale.

Ongoing critical work

Jenny Ritchie: What about your post-Kōhanga research? Anything you'd like to highlight?

Mere Skerrett: I've kept writing and reflecting on the ongoing struggle. We're in a tough global context right now—white supremacy is on the rise, and racism is increasingly overt, even here. Just look at Seymour with his Atlas astroturf, and Hobson's PaleoPledgers with the coalition's austerity apostles and the repeated negative discourses around Māori ancestors.

Dame Anne Salmond and other commentators reject the notion that Māori rights are a form of ancestral "privilege", arguing that such ideas arise from colonial, binary thinking and racism. Te Tiriti o Waitangi refers to *rangatira* and *hapū*, not race—because, in whakapapa, identity is formed through relationships, not the racial hierarchies imported by the British. Besides, all humans have ancestors; what matters is how ancestral knowledge and responsibilities are honoured and passed on through generations.

That's why it's critical to stay pedagogically alert—keep developing critical consciousness and spreading that analysis. The fight to revernacularise te reo Māori isn't just about language—it's about identity, decolonisation, and survival.

I have spent the last year writing submissions and giving oral presentations to select committees including attending a weeklong Waitangi Tribunal claim for te reo Māori because of the current coalition desires to eradicate te reo Māori in the public sector. It's in breach of our Māori Language Act 2016, and then there was the Treaty Principles Bill which was proven to be a nonsense, and the Regulatory Standards Bill which is dangerous, Section 7AA of the Oranga Tamariki Act—so many—and then of course in the ECE sector there is the proposal to remove ECE licensing regulations C5 and C6. These regulations recognise the unique status of Māori as tangata whenua and the importance of cultural heritage in early learning environments. I have argued that eliminating these regulations will deprive tamariki Māori of the opportunity to see their culture reflected in their learning spaces, which is crucial for their identity and wellbeing. I further contend that this move undermines the Treaty of Waitangi and diminishes the nation's commitment to biculturalism and multiculturalism. Such changes could lead to increased cultural ignorance and social division, negatively impacting all learners in Aotearoa and precisely the opposite of what we have been trying to achieve over the past 30-odd years. So, ka whawhai tonu mātou we must.

Reference

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Associate Professor Dr Mere Skerrett

Ko Mere Skerrett tōku ingoa. I whakapapa ahau ki Ngāi Tahu, Waikato/Maniapoto, Te Arawa (Ngāti Pikiao), me Mataatua (Ngāti Pūkeko). I am a mother of five and taua of two. I am an Associate Professor at Victoria University of Wellington, Te Herenga Waka, specialising in education, Māori language revitalisation, and Indigenous knowledge systems, with a particular focus on early childhood education. My research addresses te reo Māori revitalisation, ecological justice, and the identification and challenge of structural inequalities and racism within society. In 2019, I graduated as Kirikawa from Te Panekiretanga o te Reo, cementing my commitment to language revitalisation and cultural preservation. My academic work integrates mātauranga Māori and promotes equity in education.

Professor Jenny Ritchie teaches at Te Herenga Waka Victoria University of Wellington. Her experience includes being a childcare worker, kindergarten teacher, parent, Tiriti educator, Kōhanga and Kura whānau member, teacher educator, researcher, and grandparent. She focuses on education for social, cultural, ecological and climate justice.