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What Would it Take to Successfully Introduce Compulsory Te Reo Māori in all Schools in Aotearoa New Zealand? A future-focused policy analysis

Abstract

While considerable ground has been made in education policy promoting te reo Māori, no government has yet been willing to implement this as a requirement for all schools in Aotearoa New Zealand. In this article I undertake a ‘future-focused’ policy analysis to consider what it might take to implement this by drawing on recent research involving key advocates and stakeholders. I propose a ‘radical incrementalism’ approach that increasingly normalises and values te reo Māori across all sectors of society and that is supported by the resourcing of teachers and teachers’ college institutions and their leadership.

Keywords te reo Māori, language revitalisation, biculturalism, future-focused policy, education

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The idea that every student in Aotearoa New Zealand be taught te reo Māori in school has gained traction in recent years. In 2019 Kelvin Davis, the minister for Māori Crown relations and associate minister of education, announced that he would like to see te reo Māori made compulsory in all schools. While this was not Labour Party policy, he said he would personally like to see it ‘as soon as possible’ (Bracewell-Worrall, 2019). Both the Green Party and te Pāti Māori announced their support in 2020 (Hurihanganui, 2020), and the former race relations commissioner, Meng Foon, has spoken out in support, adding that making te reo Māori compulsory will ‘help to unite Aotearoa’ (Perich, 2022). Yet while the sixth Labour government has committed significant funds to Māori education, to date no government has been willing to implement this. Indeed, in 2022 Kelvin Davis stated that Aotearoa is ‘not ready for’ compulsory te reo Māori

and voiced fears of a ‘backlash’ should the government make it compulsory (Walters, 2022).

In this article I pause to take stock of where we are at with te reo Māori education in schools, and consider what would be needed in policy today and in the future for the successful introduction of compulsory te reo Māori. This article therefore involves taking a ‘future-focus’ on a policy which is not currently implemented to reflect and consider the incremental policy required to achieve this transformative change. Halpern and Mason (2015) refer to ‘radical incrementalism’ as the accumulation of small changes in policy, alongside ongoing evaluation to ensure policies are effective.

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I believe that a ‘radical incremental’ future-policy approach that ‘normalises’ (Higgins, Rewi and Olsen-Reeder, 2015) the value of te reo Māori in Aotearoa New Zealand society is underway and one day in the near future will arrive at a ‘tipping point’ (to borrow a phrase from Kelvin Davis), when it will become ‘just the right thing to do’ (Walters, 2020).

Futures thinking has become an increasingly important part of policymaking (Government Office for Science, 2021). In New Zealand, a growing interest in ‘futures thinking’ is noted by the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, which describes policy futures thinking as ‘a range of techniques to help you think about the drivers of change that

are shaping the future and explore the implications of these for making decisions today – not only about what to do, but how and when to do it’ (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2021). Using this approach, this article reviews previous and current policies supporting te reo Māori and then, drawing on a small study of key stakeholders in Māori language revitalisation, considers policy steps towards the successful embedding of te reo Māori in every classroom in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Personal statement

My interest in this area stems from 30 years as a teacher of Māori descent in English-medium schools, where I made efforts

to ensure that te ao Māori was a more consistent part of my schools’ and their communities’ culture. In this role I worked to educate my schools about te ao Māori, particularly te reo Māori me ona tikanga. I am also part of the generation that lost te reo Māori due to assimilation policies like the Native Schools Act 1897, which had an impact on my fluent native-speaking great-grandparents, grandparents and therefore my father. These policies influenced our tūpuna Māori and their offspring into believing that it was not acceptable in New Zealand society to be acknowledged as a Māori person. They believed that it would be far more beneficial for them ‘to be like Pākehā’, and gave their children English names and ceased teaching them their

native tongue and cultural practices. As a result, I did not fully appreciate my taha Māori growing up in the 1970s and I only learned te reo Māori as a re-indigenised adult, when I had my own children and we had the opportunity to send them to kōhanga reo and kura kaupapa Māori in the mid-2000s.

It was fortunate that my father became a te reo Māori speaker at the age of 50, when began his mahi as a ‘pou o te haahi’ of our church and learned to conduct full services in te reo Māori, which he did for 30 years. However, while he was proud to serve his people, I do know that he was often whakamā about entering the gates of the kōhanga reo and kura kaupapa because he thought he might be asked to speak a greater amount of Māori than he felt capable of speaking in a Māori-medium setting: ‘not being Māori enough’ is a common feeling among our older Māori of a particular age and generation. The issue, therefore, about sustaining the language for all students in Aotearoa New Zealand became a huge passion for me and was the focus of my Master of Education degree, where I thought more deeply about effective policy development and implementation (Mercury, 2021).

Current education policy status of te reo Māori in Aotearoa New Zealand

The primacy of te reo Māori me ona tikanga is established in te Tiriti o Waitangi/the Treaty of Waitangi in article 2, where it states:

The Queen of England agrees to protect the chiefs, the subtribes and all the people of New Zealand in the unqualified exercise of their chieftainship over their lands, villages and all their treasures. (Waitangi Tribunal, n.d.)

The Tribunal notes that ‘treasures’ or ‘taonga’ ‘refers to all dimensions of a tribal group’s estate, material and non-material – heirlooms and wahi tapu (sacred places), ancestral lore and whakapapa (genealogies), etc’ (ibid., note 8). Despite this, te reo Māori has not been treasured in Aotearoa New Zealand since 1840, and indeed was banned by the Native Schools Act 1897. In recent years, several policy initiatives have

indicated a growing commitment to te reo Māori in schools. The current focus rests upon years of work by activists and advocates, as well as policies which have both promoted and hindered the growth of the Māori language, and persistence by whānau, iwi and hapu to sustain te reo Māori.

While space allows only a very brief history here, it is important to acknowledge several 'change-makers' who had a massive impact on Māori language policy in Aotearoa. Ngā Tamatoa (the warriors) was an influential Māori activist group formed in Auckland in 1970 which operated throughout the decade to promote Māori rights, fight racial discrimination and confront injustices perpetrated by the New Zealand government, particularly violations of the Treaty of Waitangi. They were instrumental in bringing attention to Māori issues and worked alongside the New Zealand Māori Students' Association and Te Reo Māori Society, based in Wellington, to combat the threat of the decline of the Māori language by rallying and organising tens of thousands of Māori to sign a petition to revitalise te reo Māori. In September 1972, Ngā Tamatoa presented a petition to Parliament with more than 30,000 signatures to have Māori taught in schools. Titewhai Harawira was strongly involved in this campaign for the Māori language. She said in 2009: 'We were determined to rescue our language because we felt and we believed, and we believe today, that a people without its language is a people that die' (RNZ, 2009). Other initiatives by the organisation helped to enforce real social and political changes in New Zealand, with the establishment of Māori language nests, kōhanga reo, and the kura kaupapa Māori immersion schools. In 1987 the Māori Language Act was passed, giving te reo Māori official language status.

Recent policy initiatives

The sixth Labour government's education work programme has included a strong Māori education focus. The Māori Education Strategy, Ka Hikitia (Ministry of Education, 2021a), aims to develop a long-term commitment approach to equitable outcomes for tamariki and rangatahi Māori in our education system,

embedding it across all developing strategies and reviews. Second, Ka Hikitia has been refreshed and aims to accelerate Māori student educational achievement alongside Tau Mai te Reo – the future-focused provision by the government for an essential strategic framework for Māori language in education and an annual implementation plan (Ministry of Education, 2021b). The status of the Māori language has been embedded in New Zealand education policy and the national education and learning priorities (NELP) introduced in August 2020 (Ministry of Education, 2020). While not compulsory yet, the learning of te reo Māori me ona tikanga is included in these priorities and spread right across all the objectives.

4–8 students, and is freely available for download from the NMSSA website (National Monitoring Study of Student Achievement, 2021).¹ However, despite this, there still is no national policy on making te reo Māori a core subject in English-medium schools (Albury, 2018).

Priorities for future policies in te reo Māori

My study involved interviews with 12 selected stakeholders with a vested interest in te reo Māori in schools; they included Māori, Pākehā, Chinese and Samoan teachers, principals and one member of Parliament (see Mercury and Wood, 2021 for further details on the methodology). From these interviews, a thematic analysis

The most commonly referred to idea that emerged from participants was that te reo Māori itself needed to be valued if any future policy is to be a success.

The NELP statement says that all early childhood learning centres, schools and tertiary institutions should 'meaningfully include the Māori language and tikanga in their everyday life' (RNZ, 2020).

A further recent strategy is Te Ahu o te Reo Māori, which is the mainstream te reo Māori cluster training initiative for school staff (principals, teachers and support staff). This initiative has included a pilot programme in 2020 across four regions: Te Taiuru (Taranaki-Whanganui), Tainui (Waikato), Te Tonga (Manawatū-Pōneke) and Ngāi Tahu (Te Waipounamu). This pilot programme aims to improve the proficiency of all teachers in Māori language learning and involves upskilling classroom teachers in te reo Māori (Ministry of Education, 2020, 2021a, 2021b). A further recent digital te reo resource for primary school teachers is based on the National Monitoring Study of Student Achievement (NMSSA) and its assessment of learning languages with year

identified four themes with strong support from all participants which provided significant insights for future policymaking to implement te reo Māori in all schools in Aotearoa New Zealand. Many participants wished to be named as part of their contribution to this study.

Valuing te reo Māori

The most commonly referred to idea that emerged from participants was that te reo Māori itself needed to be valued if any future policy is to be a success. While this point is an obvious one, and previous studies have identified the importance of valuing te reo Māori (Barback, 2017; Kāretu, 2008), the emphasis placed on values cannot be understated. As one tāne Māori, Jack Adams, stated:

It needs to be valued by everyone, not just the government, and schools, but the families need to value it as well. Te aroha mo te reo Māori, na reira, maumau taima

[Have compassion for the language, otherwise, it is a waste of time].

Some saw the recent resurgence in interest in te reo Māori and tikanga as a 'renaissance', and felt that this moment needs to be made the most of: 'I would support that. I see a renaissance and willingness to learn te reo Māori, and we have to seize the moment and get on board with that.' This was reinforced by several younger participants who described this revitalisation as part of a generational shift that was more 'bicultural' and contained a

boys coming through recently. The parents say they are loving having Māori here because there was nothing at primary school. (Louise Carter, wāhine Māori)

One impact of this was that it showed te reo was valued enough to be made compulsory, as Luana Carroll, a wāhine Māori, reflects:

Allowing Māori to reclaim our language back and challenge those who are coming into the teaching profession in

leadership. School leadership is vital if an educational policy reform is to be successful (Ball, Maguire and Braun, 2012; Fullan, 2001; Viennet and Pont, 2017). Participants noted that leadership needed to be at both the national and school level for a compulsory te reo Māori policy to be effective. Successful and sustained educational change can only be achieved by the collective action of all professionals involved (Fullan, 2001) and participants described the need for leaders to lead authentically and by example: 'If the leaders do not buy into the kaupapa, then it is not going to happen; I need to see some really good leadership come from the Ministry too on this and value it' (Luana Carroll, wāhine Māori). The schools that had experimented with compulsory te reo Māori for their year 9 students found that cumulative growth was challenged by the lack of te reo Māori teachers in the schools to take the learning beyond this; this is linked to the third key theme from participants, teacher expertise.

Teacher expertise

A key feature in the literature on teaching te reo Māori is the need for a well-qualified teacher workforce to deliver this and for ongoing professional development for all staff. As Ngāpō (2013) argues, the quality of who is teaching, what is taught and how it is taught is essential, and he proposes that teacher trainees need to participate in compulsory te reo Māori classes for the entirety of their degree. The evidence gathered from research participants reveals this as a critical concern as well. School-based participants all agreed there currently weren't enough teachers being trained or available to teach te reo Māori and there was still a long way to go to achieve this goal, as this Pākehā principal explains:

The issue we have had is finding the teachers to do the work. We have [had] a desire to do it for some time ... We have had real difficulty in getting staff who can stay and grow with us. (Gael Ashworth, wāhine Pākehā)

Teacher education is vital to this, as Jack Adams makes clear: 'It needs to start with

[Te Taura Whiri, the Māori Language Commission] are taking a nationwide educational and 'normalisation' approach by ensuring that te reo Māori is seen and heard across as many media platforms and as much as possible, so that all New Zealanders are exposed to it and this can produce a wider attitudinal change.

generation of Māori speakers (Kāretu, 2008) who will pave the way forward:

That is where Aotearoa is heading. The younger generation wants to be bi-cultural, and we want to be bi-lingual and honouring te reo Māori as an official language because it is an official language. (Abby Robertson, wāhine Pākehā)

Some teachers represented schools that had made te ao Māori programmes compulsory at year 9 and therefore had some experience in compulsory language introduction. One participant reflected on how successful this had been:

We integrated te reo Māori for year 9. Students cycle through half a year of te reo Māori. There are such a variety of

Aotearoa New Zealand about why they are there. We need to be bold and show that we genuinely value te reo Māori.

Most of the interview participants recognised that having some form of compulsion would take a genuine commitment from all parties involved:

The keys steps would first be the philosophy, the vision; it has to have a major focus. We are going to have to let some other things go so that we can focus on that. You can only have one or two priorities if you really want to follow it through. (Nicola O'Halloran, wāhine Pākehā)

National and school leadership

A second key aspect of policymaking participants identified was school

the right people delivering it. The training of the kaiako is crucial. Me Māori tonu te kaiako. It has to be delivered by Māori.’

Resources and time

For language policy to be successful, macro-policies need to align with resourcing at the level of classroom micro-policies. In a study of three Pākehā primary school teachers who attempted to incorporate te reo Māori into their classroom, Barr and Seals identified that ‘the most crucial resource for te reo Māori use at all schools was time’ (Barr and Seals, 2018, p.443). Participants in our study agreed that both human and financial resources were crucial to the success of a future compulsory te reo Māori policy. As Robyn Thompson, wāhine Chinese, stated: ‘More schools are aware that effective policy implementation needs to happen, but many do not have the tools, the resources. There is a lack of capability issue within schools too to do this.’

Future planning for te reo Māori in all schools

While this was only a small study, it identified the main areas that require policy attention if all schools can successfully embed te reo Māori language learning in their classrooms. In this final section I undertake a futures-thinking approach to consider policy incrementally by identifying drivers of change (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2021). Deeply valuing te reo Māori me ona tikanga goes beyond one policy initiative and extends across several realms. As Kāretu (2008) reminds us, we must fully commit our time and effort to the cause of te reo Māori revitalisation at all levels, beginning by valuing te ao Māori and te reo Māori within the whānau, and extending this to the wellbeing of individuals and the knowledge of community and society. If there is no genuine commitment, then there is no survival.

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Valuing te reo

The most strategic aspect of embedding a policy that requires all teachers to be teachers of te reo Māori is to enhance the valuing of the language. This is the most difficult, yet important, part of future policy planning. Gaining a sector-wide commitment will not happen overnight; instead, incremental steps that equip teachers with greater foundational history and knowledge and exposure to te reo Māori will contribute to wider buy in. I believe the revitalisation of te reo Māori and the teaching of it in every school in Aotearoa New Zealand will require a radical incrementalism in policy (Halpern and Mason, 2015). This entails an approach that prioritises the ‘normalisation’ (Higgins, Rewi and Olsen-Reeder, 2015) of the language across multiple sectors. Te Taura Whiri, the Māori Language Commission, adopted such an approach using extensive evidence. They are taking a nationwide educational and ‘normalisation’ approach by ensuring that te reo Māori is seen and heard across as many media platforms and as much as possible, so that all New Zealanders are exposed to it and this can produce a wider attitudinal change.

The significant role of tangata tiriti (non-Māori Treaty of Waitangi allies), our current youth population (the tamariki and rangatahi in our schools now), and ngā uri whakatipu (our future generations to come) cannot and must not be underestimated. It is their enhanced understanding, commitment and loyalty to this kaupapa that will make the greatest difference with the ‘value’ factor.

Resourcing teachers

It is clear that teachers will have a much greater commitment to teaching te reo if they themselves have been taught well. This necessarily involves the teachers’ training colleges and resourcing the teaching of te reo Māori for all teacher training lecturers,

and then in turn the teacher education trainees. Prioritising training institutions will be cost-efficient, as such teachers can then share their expertise in schools once they graduate.

Leadership

Teaching te reo Māori in all schools in Aotearoa New Zealand requires considerable bravery and leadership. As one of the study participants, MP Marama Davidson, said, ‘we still haven’t quite seen the bravery and the courage to put the resources and the commitment into a plan yet’. It will require leadership in every sector of government and education.

When I was a primary school principal, I worked closely with the senior leadership team to canvass the community and see what they thought. We were able to move forward with the following:

- The board of trustees and staff undertook te Tiriti o Waitangi and cultural responsiveness training.
- I facilitated the development and implementation of user-friendly, accessible te reo Māori resources and programmes for teachers in classrooms.
- Our team monitored and evaluated te reo Māori implementation once a month.
- I taught compulsory kapa haka for the entire school on a weekly basis.
- We created links with Te Wānanga o Aotearoa to use our school facilities and run weekly adult te reo Māori classes for 36 weeks a year for three years running. It took time, but we got there eventually.

Making time to ensure such a policy is implemented well instead of rushing things through is essential and will significantly benefit all. From the scale of the government, to members of society, and within our education system, te reo Māori can be sustained if we treasure it.

¹ <https://nmssa.otago.ac.nz/reports-and-resources/learning-languages-resources/>.

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