

Striving to make schools “anti-racist” spaces



VOICES

Ben Roth-Shank

Ko Massanutten te Maunga
Ko Shenandoah te Awa
Ko Monacan te iwi mana whenua ō kora
He tauwi ahau
Ko Ben Roth Shank tōku ingoa

Tēnā koutou katoa

In his video introduction on the Unteach Racism site, Taika Waititi extends a wero to us teachers: ‘You’ve got the real-life ability to make a difference for kids in the face of racism. There’s so many things their benevolent and successful future selves would love to go back and unteach them. But you’re the ones who can choose to do that. In real time. Now.’

For me, responding to this wero first involves confronting the various ways I’ve internalised and been complicit in systems of white supremacy.

As a white male growing up in the rural United States, I learned implicitly that ‘normal’ was white, Christian, middle-class, and meritocracy-based. Moving to Aotearoa New Zealand catalysed my journey of unlearning this racism.

As I’m discovering, responding to this wero requires an ongoing stance of confident humility (a phrase I encountered in Adam Grant’s Think Again). We can be confident in our need to actively and explicitly address white supremacy’s influence on ourselves and our curriculum to

create a safer, more 'just' classroom; we can do so with humility, recognising that we have endless amounts to learn from each other, our students, and our wider communities. Rather than being frustrated that we'll never 'tick all the boxes,' we should embrace the chance to live the process of lifelong learning we hope to model for our students. What a release for us teachers to confess that we are still discovering how to better navigate the world's complexities, too!

Maya Angelou said, 'Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better.'

More and more, I'm recognising discomfort as an invaluable teacher, not something to be alleviated as quickly as possible. The moments where I wonder 'How could I not have realised that?' force me to 'know better.' In turn, this awareness helps me be patient with myself when the next stretch of discomfort arrives.

The Unteach Racism resources are stepping stones to help us know better as we strive to make our schools anti-racist spaces. In Term 2 at Wellington High School, we used a modified version of the 'Unteaching stereotypes and representations framework' to begin auditing our curriculum choices in faculties, considering cultural representation and messaging, particularly related to tangata whenua. In our English faculty, we've used the 'Guide to safe and productive conversations about racism' to help us normalise conversations about race with each other and with students.

Open-invite Friday lunchtime meetings have helped us to process the Unteach Racism modules as well as deepen our understanding through other readings, like excerpts from Glenn Singleton's *Courageous Conversations About Race*, Lisa Delpit's *Other People's Children*, Tema Okun's '[White Supremacy Culture](#),' and Maia Hetaraka's [Te Kauae Tuku Iho: Inheriting the Sacred Jawbone](#) (via Ann Milne's *Decolonising the Curriculum* course). By reflecting on the challenges, missteps, and successes in our daily practice, we help each other identify concrete actions we can take to maintain actively anti-racist, culturally sustaining classroom spaces, while recognising that we will inevitably learn more as we go.

And yes, our learning will continue to be uncomfortable, but I think that's a sign of change, a sign that transformation is happening not just in the head but in the heart. We teachers must have the confident humility to take up this wero in real time. Now!

Thank you to my Wellington High School colleagues Maeve Reid and Catherine Hill for their help developing this piece.



Resources:

- [White Supremacy Culture by Tema Okun](#)
- [Te Kauae Tuku Iho: Inheriting the Sacred Jawbone by Maia Hetaraka](#)