

Responding with manaakitanga when children and young people say racist things



VOICES

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Aku mana, aku tātai, nō Ingarangi

Aku mana, aku tātai, kua tau ki te whenua o Patuharakeke

*Ka mihi atu au ki te tupuna whare o Rangiora, ki te
whakaruruhau o te tini, o te mano!*

*Ka whātoro atu aku ringaringa ki te reo rangatira, he
whāngai i te hinengaro, he whakapakari i te arero*

*Ko Helen Kinsey-Wightman toku ingoa, ko au te tumuaki o
te Kura o Ruakākā*

Tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou kātoa.

Taika Waititi is right – racism is alive and well in Aotearoa.

Tomorrow, I will be supporting a teacher to respond to a concern from a parent. Her daughter – who is of Southeast Asian heritage – came to our book parade last week dressed as Elsa. A boy in her class laughed at her and said, "I've never seen a black Elsa before!"

This weekend, I was at a wānanga with my 14-year-old son who has both Māori and Pākehā whakapapa. He speaks Te Reo fluently, is skilled in kapa haka, has his pou tahi in mau rākau and is training to be a kaihoe on a waka at Waitangi. On the way home, without any apparent distress, he laughingly told me a couple of the boys had nicknamed him "white pig".

Tomorrow, a hikoi will pass through Whangārei, headed to Paremata to protest the Treaty Principles Bill.

As educators how can we respond with manaakitanga and confidence in these teachable moments?

The Black Lives Matter movement gave us many opportunities to talk about racism. In 2020 The Conversation published ‘9 tips teachers can use when talking about racism¹. This should be in the kete of every kaiako. The writer emphasises the need to focus on change rather than blame or shame and to teach our young people how to respond to casual racism. I asked my son how he feels about the “white pig” nickname - right now he concluded it was just a joke and it is too complicated to challenge, but I think it is the beginning of a conversation about the complexity of colonisation and white privilege.

In 2020, I read Robin DiAngelo’s book ‘White Fragility: Why it’s so hard for white people to talk about racism² and wrote an article reflecting on the impacts of being raised in an overtly racist environment in 1970’s England.

In her book, DiAngelo says that in the past it was possible for individuals to express racist views and still be considered good people. In these more enlightened times, we consider racism to be inherently bad and as a result we cannot talk about racism without feeling fear and causing shame. I have therefore used the word manaakitanga intentionally.

How do we respond to and challenge racist language or thinking, whilst upholding the mana of the speaker – particularly when that speaker is a tamariki or rangitahi?

When it comes to talking to children and young people about behaviour, I find they are fascinated by neuroscience and psychology. An article called Racism on the Brain³ is one of the tools I will give to my Year 4 kaiako when talking to her class tomorrow. The article explains intergroup bias in kidspeak:

“Brains are really good at putting things into categories. Sometimes this is useful, like when you are a baby and you need to learn the difference between dogs and cats, or things that are safe to eat and things that are yucky. But it can become a problem when brains use those same automatic systems to put people into categories too. Brains especially like to put people into the categories of “people like me” and “people different from me”— the scientific name for those categories are “in-group” and “out-group.” And often, our brains tell us to be nicer to the in-group people than the out-group people.”

I will also be talking to our school librarian about what books we have that focus on the value of diversity and how to fight racism. Christchurch Library has an excellent list⁴ featuring New Zealand writers such as Mophead by Selena Tusitala Marsh as well as books focussing on the history of civil rights and anti-apartheid internationally.

As Taika said, “In real time. Now. You have the power to unteach racism. Will you? ... Nah but, will you?”

Let’s commit to always responding to racism and doing so with manaakitanga.

(This piece was written in early October 2024.)



Resources:

1. [The Conversation, 9 tips teachers can use when talking about racism](#)
2. [Kinsey-Wightman, H Does white fragility exist in Aotearoa? NZPF Magazine T4 2020, page 35](#)
3. [Weichselbaum C and Banks KH \(2021\) Racism on the Brain. Front. Young Minds](#)
4. [Christchurch City Council Library, Anti-racist books for kids](#)