An Interview with Associate Professor Mere Berryman

Sonja Macfarlane

Recently, Sonja Macfarlane interviewed Associate Professor Mere Berryman, Faculty of Education at Waikato University. In this interview, Mere reflects on her personal learning journey as a teacher and researcher, and shares her wisdom and aspirations for Māori advancement, and the education of all learners.

Kia ora Mere. Thanks for agreeing to the interview. Could you talk us through your journey and the pathway that took you into Māori advancement?

Morena Sonja. It wasn't a 'one-off' thing; it was more a critical dawning – a conscientization. Several years ago, as a teacher working with Year 7 and 8 students in a large intermediate school, I became aware that within my class was a coming together of the 'haves' and the 'have-nots'. I realised that actually I needed to be part of the solution – part of the real solution. Up until then, in that same school, if there was a problem to do with Māori students, it was my problem. It didn't matter whether they were in my syndicate, or in another syndicate: if there was a problem to do with Māori students it would invariably come to me. So, this conscientization occurred in my own class and in my own syndicate. We had students whose parents were on the Board of Trustees, we had students with special needs, and we had by far the greatest percentage of Māori students in the school. And so, I think it was the coming together of those different groups of people, and seeing them in my class.

We could actually problem-solve, we could seek solutions; I became confident that the students who were potentially third generation beneficiaries had far better options open to them by the time they left my classroom. I guess the real frustration came one year when they started coming back from Year 9 and were asking me, "How could you change what's happening in the secondary school?" By the time they went to high school they were fast-tracked into the 'haves' and the 'have-nots'. Interestingly, not only the have-nots but some of the haves would come back to me and say, "I am really frustrated. How do I do this? Why is this happening to me?" One of the students who came back to me came back to say that he was in therapy and his therapist had told him that he needed to go back to the places and people he believed had trampled on his mana, and let them know that as part of this healing, but to also go back to the people who he felt had supported him in a different way. I remember him turning up one day and I was really surprised to see him. I knew he had been a leader in the secondary school that he went to, and he was now at university. He was Pākehā; a young, bright male, and that is actually important to the story. He talked about the past, not just about me, but about the conditions within our classroom: that it didn't matter who you were, everybody was respectfully able to be who they were. He recalled a young man with muscular dystrophy, and he said to me, "I can remember you sat at this young man's table and he sat at your table and we never knew what that was about but we knew that there was a reason why that was". He said the time that he'd spent with that class was so fulfilling and so rewarding; he succeeded, everybody succeeded, and it didn't matter who you were. He recalled another boy whose father was in jail, and he talked about the different children in the past who had all come together and I had never thought about that before that day. I knew that problems - the Māori problems in school - were delivered on my door step. By then, the mainstreaming of students with special needs had also begun - and my classroom was the only classroom that had a ramp built outside the door. So, it didn't matter if your legs were in braces, or you were in a wheelchair or you were blind, the first port of call in that school - if you had a disability - was my classroom. So that was a reflection: a reflection on the coming together of students with diverse needs, who in that classroom found a place and a space where they could be themselves and where they were able to help each other to succeed. For me, that is what I did as a teacher: that conversation began me thinking about why that was so special, and I'll be eternally grateful to that young man.

Would you say that that event changed the course of your career? Was that one critical juncture for you?

Personally, I wouldn't say that it was the one thing, but I'd had certainly been thinking about the Māori/non-Māori, the haves/the have-nots. I hadn't really thought about the ramp outside my classroom and how I was the one who met with the local educational psychologist with greater frequency than any other teacher in the school. I hadn't really theorised or thought deeply about what it was that I did that wasn't happening in other classrooms. I guess for the first time what it helped me to see is that I wasn't prepared to continue to fix up other people's problems; that actually, my fixing up people's problems was not only a problem for me, but it was a problem for them because they weren't giving themselves that opportunity to learn. I left teaching shortly afterwards. By then I'd started working with Ted Glynn. My aspiration was to create myself a job as a researcher, because I saw research as the pathway forward. However, I stepped down without having something firm to walk into. I had to build that possibility myself with other people, so I needed to find like-minded people; those who thought like me. Ted was one of them, and Kathryn Bluett was another one. I walked into writing proposals that would bring in some research money that would bring in the possibility of employment. So, it wasn't an easy decision to step out of a secure job; that did take a lot of courage but then I couldn't keep doing what I was doing, and like myself or what I was doing. I understood morally that what I was doing was not working, and I saw research as the way into understanding what might.

Talk us through the next part of your journey: how did you move from that position to where you are now in your current role?

Well Ted, Kathryn and I wrote proposals to bring in money. We knew if we didn't, we wouldn't have a research centre. Our kaupapa was to develop a research centre where we could focus on what was happening for Māori students in education, to create a context for learning about that. It was pretty brave of Ted when you consider that neither Kathryn nor I had anything more than a trained teaching certificate. We had teaching experience, we had experience working with students with special needs, and we had the heart to make a bigger difference because we saw the students as our whānau and we knew that they were being underserved by the education system - so that was in the early 1990s. Ross Wilson who was the CEO of SES (Specialist Education Services) at the time agreed to set up a research centre [Poutama Pounamu Education Research and Development Centre] and he agreed to pay for the administration, and one extra person; that was Kathryn's position. What we then had to do was to create the salary for me and so it was pretty high stakes when we were able to get our first contract from the Ministry of Education. Our first paid research contract was Hei Āwhina Matua, and that enabled me to come in on a short-term contract to be the researcher working with Ted Glynn. We looked at how we could bring the voices of the home communities together with the school communities to create contexts where behaviour could be better-understood and more effectively responded to using the funds of knowledge of both groups. I think one of the important things about that first research was that we went back into the setting where I'd been teaching, and we listened to the students. We listened to a group of Māori students and they helped us to understand what it was that we needed to do – as researchers. I already had a strong relationship with those students because I'd been their teacher, I'd been their syndicate leader, and I'd worked in the classrooms with them. For the first time those young 12-13-year-old Māori students were able to share with us what we needed to do. So, that was my first research experience of actually listening to students, and being very lucky that students were prepared to share their wisdom with us. That was when Ted, Kathryn and I learned that having students as allies in our research was essential, and we wrote about that. By then Russell Bishop had joined us to evaluate our research. However, I don't believe the country understood the importance of listening to students, until almost ten years later when Culture Speaks was published.

What are you doing currently that you're finding really rewarding and exciting in that space, or in another space?

I guess being able to continually build on the research learnings, for example, Te Kotahitanga. The Ministry was very generous in the funding of Te Kotahitanga. They gave us 13 years during which time we able to learn from the schools within which we were working. I don't know of any other project that has had the same iterative 13 years of research before or since in New Zealand. What that gave me was a really strong understanding of building on both the positives and the negatives of what we were learning in the previous iteration. So not just thinking about what we need to do when things go right, but what we need to do when things don't go right, or when things aren't as clear. What do we do then? So, I'm still in the situation of trying to make sense of what I am learning now, by reflecting on Te Kotahitanga, for example, in order to work smarter in Kia Eke Panuku. Or, specifically in the new PLD (Professional Learning and Development) policy where I am expected to be an Expert Partner - there's

a bit of a problem because I don't feel like I'm an expert. I do have some expertise. I do think I can work with people who have expertise and together we can create new learning; we can co-construct new learning, new understandings, and I think that's so in terms of working optimally within the zone of proximal development – Vygotsky's notion of co-constructing knowledge in socio-cultural contexts. I think that is really important. What I'm currently seeking to understand is how that might look in terms of ako, specifically within the roles of tuakana-teina.

I believe that we have reached a stage where schools are expected to follow required pathways to form Communities of Learning/Kāhui Ako. From there they can request professional development hours, and access externally-approved accredited facilitator support. Within this context schools are also expected to engage with and develop cycles of inquiry. It seems we could be trying to turn teachers into researchers through this process of cycles of inquiry.

I've spent the last 20 years seeing the work of a pedagogy which goes in there as "learners alongside", working in an iterative manner. So that's where I am at the moment, and I'm enjoying the space because it's a space of learning for me. It's a space of challenge and I think learning and challenge often go together, but what worries me is that the research is no longer recognised as important and the research itself is being handed to schools and teachers to involve themselves in cycles of inquiry at the classroom level. I wonder about the criticality of inquiry such as this; I wonder about the interface of those diverse students who we miss out at our peril.

Can you name one standout learning experience that has made a real impact on you?

Well, I got a growling once in public! We were engaged in the process of whanaungatanga for over an hour and a half and I leant across to one of my colleagues and said, "If we don't get this through we're not going to be able to do what we need to do!" And Aunty Nan said, "Hoihoi Mere; this is what we're meant to do!" That was a beginning of me learning that we have knowledge, we have metaphors in te reo Māori that may well be more powerful in solving our problems than the ones that the colonial system has been trying out on us for a long time. Aunty Nan and I talked about that later and I remember in that discussion another very wise Tūhoe woman said, "You know, whanaungatanga is the intervention. It's not just the cultural bit on the side, the brown frills ... it is the intervention". That learning was a very powerful piece of learning. Here I was worried about 'the stuff': I was worried about me and what I had prepared and what I needed to get through with this group of teachers. So, what worries me today is that I'm expected to go in and be the expert, but the things that are culturally located and important for me as a Tūhoe woman, what happens to them? I've watched people engaged in whanaungatanga: I watch non-Māori see the importance of those relational contexts - created through whanaungatanga - for learning about each other. To me it's the relational context that gets lost, marginalised, and made invisible. We go in, open up our box of tricks, we share them with people, we close our box of tricks, and we walk out the door. I've learned that expert knowledge without the relationships, Māori as well as Pākehā people will say, "Well that was interesting, that was great, that was fine, okay what's next?" We want to effect change in a way that becomes deeply embedded, a new status quo; I know people are overusing this piece of rhetoric, but to continue doing what we're doing risks wasting time and resource if it is not going to make the difference that we need at a system level and as a country.

What is one real challenge that stands out for you, for us?

I think that the biggest challenge that stands out for us still is that our voice is not being heard by sufficient people or by the 'right' people. It's how our voice is disempowered, how our voice is not represented clearly enough, how our voice can be appropriated and used by others. It's still the power imbalance under the Treaty of Waitangi that continues to see one group of people benefit more than the other. We are still a Treaty partner but the partnership is generally defined by the most powerful group in society. Students who have enjoyed and achieved education success as Māori are still saying, "Yes, education has worked for me but it's not working for some of my mates and some of my mates aren't Māori". So, we know that education is working for some students who are Māori and who are prepared to play the game that is education. We know that it's still not working for some Māori students who aren't prepared to play the game but what these students are really telling us is that there are other students in our education sector who need the same, or a similar, response. So what I'm learning more about is what sits within the rhetoric that came out of Te Kotahitanga, because it was rhetoric: 'what works for Māori works for all'. What does this rhetoric really mean? And, who holds the power to legitimate whose voice is heard? And so I do believe that is still our biggest problem: that our voice continues to be silenced in one way or another.

On the basis of your thinking and your reflections, what would be one aspiration that you have for Māori advancement?

The notion of Māori self-determination and cultural revitalisation that came through the kaupapa Māori movement, that's still critical. The whole notion of revitalising and making normal things Māori, that language and cultural revitalisation I think is critical and exciting. It's also the resistance: the resistance to the colonial agenda, so the decolonising of education - both of those things are still really important. I was very interested this year because I was invited to the University of Exeter in England and I was invited to talk at a conference on decolonising teacher education and I thought, "Wow! Why would I say no to that?" But we're not talking about decolonising teacher education in New Zealand and here are the colonisers talking about decolonising teacher education, so I still think those two things are important: language and cultural revitalisation on the one hand, and decolonisation on the other. We still need to hold onto those kaupapa Māori aspirations from the 70s and the 80s.

If you were able to change one thing, an aspect of research policy and practice that you think could further unlock Māori advancement, what would it be?

The Ka Hikitia policy finishes this year when actually it's been a policy for years without any support, but if we could throw some support behind Ka Hikitia, real support not just badges, not just the rhetoric, but if we could support schools to understand - because we know now what that looks like now - that would be the one thing: Ka Hikitia with support. There isn't another country in the world, there isn't another indigenous group of people who have a policy like that and it could spell the beginning of the end of inequity for Māori youth.

Mere, what is one achievement you're really proud of, something that you really hold to your heart that you're really proud of achieving?

That's really hard because I have been privileged in having my achievements recognised. But I think the one thing that I am really proud of is my grandchildren. They are my biggest achievement but it's also the thing that I haven't achieved, if that makes sense, because when you look at education for the vital importance that it offers our future, we're not there yet. Not just the future of Māori but the future of Pākehā as well, because actually, they can't do it without us. And we've never wanted to do it without them, well we have in a couple of instances but we did that I think out of frustration and out of the need to protect what is rightfully ours. So, I think that the things I'm most proud of are my grandchildren because for me they are our future and they provide an opportunity for a different way of coming to understand the world where they do not have to apologise for being Māori, which was my reality. So yes, I'm very proud of my grandchildren and for the potential future that they represent and how we might all contribute to that future.

If you were to give one piece of advice for any budding Māori researcher, someone who perhaps was in a school like you were all those years ago and was at that point where they were thinking, "I want to do this", what piece, or pieces of advice, would you give them?

Probably not leave a good job and go and be a researcher! No, I think the one piece of advice would be to seek higher qualifications; that for me helped me to understand 'me' and I think once you understand who you are and what you want to stand for then you are better placed to undertake your role, whether that role is as a teacher or a researcher or a mechanic or whatever. I've come to understand the importance of higher education. I certainly didn't understand that when I left school but I think sitting alongside that, it's believing in your innate potential to achieve at the highest level. So, it's both of those things together; it's not one or the other, and I think the belief in yourself to learn more so that you can aspire to higher things.

Mere, if you had to acknowledge people in your journey, is there a standout person or is it bigger than that?

Without a doubt, it's kaumātua who I've worked with and continue to work with: they are my standout people because they've taught me that academic knowledge is one thing but actually it's the cultural knowledge and wisdom as well, that is located in the elders, and the elders are in every community; those older, more knowledgeable, more experienced people. If I wanted to acknowledge an academic then it would have to be Professor Sir Mason Durie. He would have to be the standout person: when I'm not quite sure of where I'm going I always go back to his writings and I love his humility and I love his strengths and I love his wisdom.

Mere, this has just been such a wonderful interview. I have learned so much and feel very privileged. In closing, is there anything else that you'd like to add here, or comment on?

I don't know that there is Sonja unless it's to acknowledge people like yourself: it's the sort of relationship that Māori have with each other and

having the colleagues around us who we may not work with on a regular basis, or not see for six months, twelve months, but who we are intimately connected with and I wouldn't want that to go unacknowledged. The people alongside us who are working in the same field as ourselves, who we respect and in some cases who we grow to respect - I think the importance of those people should be acknowledged. It's having people to grow with; it's having people to grow from, and the elders and Mason - I've grown from their learnings. I also think that growing our youth is so important, and our role in being the very best academics to promote learning of our students. How do we do that? How do we ensure that we are growing the next group of Māori academics who will replace us, and need to?

Biography: Associate Professor Mere Berryman

Ngāi Tūhoe, Ngāti Awa, Ngāti Whare

ONZM, PhD, MEd (Hons), BA, TTC

After more than 20 years in the classroom, Associate Professor Berryman changed direction towards a career as a researcher. In that capacity she was a research assistant and became the Director of the Poutama Pounamu Education Research and Development Centre; she was the Director of Te Kotahitanga professional development and became the overall director in 2012. She was the Director of Kia Eke Panuku from 2014 to 2016 when it finished. She is an Associate Professor at the Faculty of Education, University of Waikato. She has served on a number of national reference and advisory groups in fields of Māori education; conduct disorders, personalizing learning, literacy, assessment, and curriculum exemplars for learners with special needs.

Associate Professor Berryman has published extensively in her research fields of literacy and behavioural interventions in both Māori and English medium settings; oral Māori language and literacy assessment tools, earning her a national and international reputation. Drawing on kaupapa Māori and critical and socio-cultural theories she has collaborated with Māori students, their families and communities to assist school leaders to bring about change for Māori students and all students.

She has received a number of awards: Officer of New Zealand Order of Merit – for her contribution to education and Māori in education (2016); Amorangi National Māori Academic Excellence Award (2008); as well as group awards with the Te Kotahitanga research team: NZARE Group Award (2015); WISE award (2013); and with the Poutama Pounamu Education Research and Development team: NZARE Group Award (2004). In 2017, Mere was one of the three finalists in the 2017 Kiwibank New Zealander of the Year Award.

INTERVIEWER PROFILE

Sonja Macfarlane (PhD)

Sonja Macfarlane (Ngāi Tahu, Ngāti Waewae) is an Associate Professor in the School of Health Sciences at University of Canterbury, working as a Senior Research Fellow. Her research and teaching collectively focus on culturally responsive evidence-based approaches in education, psychology, counselling and human development. Sonja has previously been a classroom teacher, an RTLB, a special education advisor, and the national Professional Practice Leader: Services to Māori in the Ministry of Education, Special Education.

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