

# An interview with: Tokararangi Totoro



## Tokararangi Totoro

Tokararangi is the Pouarahi-a-takiwa (District Māori Advisor) for the Whangarei District office.

## Sonja Bateman

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Ko Hikurangi te maunga.

Ko Waiapu te awa.

Ko Te Whānau-ā-Tūhakairiora te hapū

Ko Ngāti Porou te iwi.

Ko Tokararangi Katea Tawhiti Totoro au.

*Can you just tell us a little bit about where you are from, your family ...*

I was born in Te Araroa. I am from a family of 10. I didn't grow up with my siblings. At the age of twelve months I became a whāngai to my aunty and uncle. I have two whāngai sisters. I went to school in Pōtaka, Te Araroa and Cape Whangaparoua.

*Was Māori your first language, Toka?*

Yes, Māori was my first language and it was the main language of communication in our home.

*So when did you start speaking English?*

Probably when we interacted with cousins and other tamariki of the same age. You had to speak English when you had to purchase something from the shop. Obviously we had to speak English at school. So while many of our parents spoke Māori fluently, the English language was becoming more prominent.

*When you went to primary school, were your teachers Māori?*

I probably had both Māori and Pākehā teachers. The two teachers who made an impact were Mrs Connie Katai and Nuki Williams. The boundaries of learning that they set for us were clearly defined and non-negotiable.

*Did you like school?*

I enjoyed school. I grew up in an area where most of us there were Māori. Not liking school wasn't an option because our parents got us up, dressed us, gave us kai and sent us off to school with our cut lunches, every day. If the bus broke down, we had to ride our horses to school or walk.

*Was your marae near the school – was it a big part of your schooling years?*

No, not really. The marae was close to the school but our mother was of the opinion that if we went to the marae we got in the way. So we were brought up with the marae tikanga at home. Although we didn't frequent the marae

as often as some of the other children, that home training helped us settle in to the marae easily. Hence the whakatauki, "Tangata I akona kit e kainga, tunga kit e marae, tau ana."

*When you went to high school was that in the same town?*

No, I won a government scholarship at Whangaparoua School and was shipped off to St Stephen's School.

*How did you find that transition, Toka?*

My world view was from Ruatoria to Te Kaha. There are no skyscrapers in that scenario. We didn't have power then, but we had access to kaimoana, kai from the rivers, bush and whenua. Suddenly in just one day, when I left for St Stephens, I saw things that I had never seen before. The transition was awesome.

*Can you remember what that felt like, if you just think back?*

Well, I just looked at this new world that was out there and I took it all in really. I knew that my parents had a lot of faith in me going to get an education and I guess that simply turning around and going home was not an option. They had a belief in me and I just kept going. I remember going to Papakura and I was nearly hit by a car because I didn't know how to cross the street. I was lucky I had an older person with me.

*Did you know anyone else there or did you go alone?*

I went on the bus with my cousins. They were going to Queen Vic in Auckland, I got off the bus and wandered up this driveway, because that was the only way to go. As I walked up that driveway, I was confronted by this huge concrete building that was to be my home for a while. I wasn't scared or anything, but it was like walking into the unknown.

*So how many times during the school year would you go back home?*

I only went home in the holidays. The first time I went home was in the May school holidays, and it was quite funny actually when I think back because I was frightened of getting my feet dirty. I think the cuzzies thought I was whakahīhi. I didn't even want to walk around barefoot on the grass. Before that I used to run barefoot on our metalled roads and walk in the mud even. Well, I guess that's what happens when you wear shoes for 14 weeks, for the first time in your life.

*When you left St Stephens, did you look back and think that you were given a great opportunity?*

Yes. I think for me at the time it was the right decision to go to that kind of a boarding school. I actually chose Te Aute because I filled in the form at school and took it home to get signed and my dad said I was going to St Stephens because that's where John Waitete was. Unfortunately when I arrived there he had left. Couldn't change schools though.

*They must have had aspirations for you. When you came back at the end of each term, did your whānau talk about what you were going to do or did you make that decision?*

Yes. Their aspirations for me were to be successful at school and to get a good job. While I was at Tipene (St Stephens), I made all the decisions related to my career path. I knew that the career I would finally choose had to be my "pay back" for the effort and hard work that my parents had to endure to keep me at school. I'm still honouring my parents now. Prior to me going to St Stephens, most of us looked at driving trucks or buses as a career.

*Did it change your perspective going to St Stephens?*

Yes it did. Working in close contact with other students created a positive competitive educational environment for us all to work towards achieving our goals.

*So what did you choose after leaving the kura?*

I went into teacher training. That was at Ardmore Teachers Training College not far from Papakura. I stayed there for two years.

*Were there many other Māori enrolled at that time?*

Yes, there were other Māori students enrolled at Ardmore. Some of the men and women in my year were from Māori boarding schools. So Ardmore was an extension of that environment.

*That would have been another change as well, wouldn't it?*

Yes. The lecturing staff were all non-Māori. So any matter relating to tikanga Māori and Māori students' welfare we dealt with ourselves or got assistance from Māori welfare officers. We had to learn to interact with members of the opposite sex and Pākehā students.

*So Toka, you graduated from college and you started teaching?*

Yes.

*And did you go into a big school or was it a small country school. What was your pathway in teaching?*

I chose to do country service first so I headed down to a place called Te Matai Māori School. It is now Te Kura Kaupapa o Te Matai.

*And was the school one which was embedded in te reo and tikanga Māori?*

No. It was a school where there were a lot of Māori children and three Māori teachers. The principal and the teacher in charge of the infants were Pākehā. Teachers and children in Māori schools had to cover the same curriculum subjects as Education Board schools.

*How long were you there?*

I was there for one year. During that time you were placed in a school for one year to complete your teacher training as a probationary assistant teacher. At the end of the third term if you met all your obligations as probationary assistant you would graduate as a trained teacher. I graduated in Rotorua.

*Where did you go on leaving that school?*

I went down to Raupunga, which is just south of Wairoa. I stayed there for a couple of years and from there I went right up to Moutautau District High School, which is close to Kawakawa. Māori schools became museum relics during that period.

*So you shifted to a high school teaching position?*

No, I went into a primary position but it was a district high school, similar to what is now known as an area school. I did do some secondary teaching while I was there.

*Did you choose to get into any senior management roles during your teaching career?*

I had mainly acting roles really. I was acting deputy principal at a couple of schools. I also became a senior teacher at another school. I was a course supervisor at Northland Polytechnic, an area supervisor in Career Services, Māori senior lecturer at the Auckland College of Education, a programme leader at Northland Polytechnic and for GSE acting regional manager Māori strategy and acting service manager.

*What brought you into special education?*

*Was there a significant event or did it just happen?*

In 1999 I became a Resource Teacher Learning and Behaviour (RTLB) in Whangarei. I held that position for five years. The move in to special education wasn't planned. Someone suggested I apply for a job in special education services (SES), as it was then, because they need a kaitakawaenga. I got the position and started at SES in July 2001 as a special education advisor/kaitakawaenga.

*It often happens that someone else sees your potential and you don't see it yourself.*

Yes, probably.

*Despite the fact that education is going down an inclusive pathway, our Māori tamariki appear to be struggling in many areas. What do think is going wrong for them?*

That's a big question. If we could isolate one reason why our tamariki are struggling at school, RTLBS and some GSE field staff will probably have to find new jobs or go back into the classroom to teach. There are a number of reasons – whānau struggle with poverty, drugs, gambling, relationships or liquor, to name a few. Schools sometimes have environments where Māori tamariki have difficulty in becoming part of the school community. Sometimes our tamariki are unclear why they need to be at school every day.

While teacher trainees leave our universities with better qualifications, I'm not so sure about the ability of some to set goals, to plan how they are going to achieve their goals, to evaluate their work and plan to improve children's learning or to take them to a higher level of learning. I'm also not sure about the kind of training education faculties provide for working with children with behavioural and learning difficulties, and special needs.

*From the special education perspective, how can we improve what we are doing in regards to Māori?*

GSE has a very powerful Māori strategy. Its key achievement areas are clear and the symbolism of the Māori carved meeting house provides us with a strong and clear, but calm, message. Developing Māori capability needs to happen from the top down and bottom up. We need to give the Māori strategy, Te Urunga mai o Te Rā, higher and more visible profile.

*You feel that there is a space for Māori at the management level?*

Yes. I think we really need to have a look at encouraging Māori staff into management positions. We can't rely on the notion of growing Māori staff from within the organisation into management because the organisational and managerial experience is absent. So we have to target Māori leaders in other organisations and encourage them across to GSE. The other option is to encourage Māori staff to apply for management positions in outside organisations and hopefully they'll want to come back later.

*I understand that you work alongside non-Māori in your role, Toka. What is the key message that you would give to our non-Māori colleagues who work with Māori tamariki and whānau?*

To observe, to listen and to respect the whānau. To seek support from Māori staff or Māori in the community that you come into contact with. The message for Māori staff is to find a way to work with field staff without compromising their professional integrity.

*Toka, when you were growing up, I'm just thinking about when you went to high school, and then on to training college – you have been required to walk in both worlds.*

*What is your view about that? How important is it to be able to do that?*

In my role as district Māori advisor and a member of the district management team, understanding the Pākehā world view and the Māori world view is very important when one is trying to establish Māori protocols, procedures and tikanga into the work we do without marginalising the other culture.

*So during your time with special education have you seen things move along? Do you feel that it's actually going in the right direction for Māori?*

We have one Māori focus team in Aotearoa, four powhakarewa matauranga regional positions, several Māori service managers and pouarahi-a-takiwa positions. I have not included kaitakawaenga, SEA and E1 Māori because they are established positions. Success depends on where you are and who you are working with. There is some good work being done in GSE, but there is always room for improvement.

*Do you think those years between teaching and becoming an RTLBB were significant – and, if so, why?*

Yes, because while you are teaching adults, you still need to plan and organise your work and make your presentations fun and worth their while turning up for your lectures.

*You commented earlier that many young tamariki do not know or understand why they are at school (and therefore do not take everything out of the experience that they could). During your time working in adult education, had many of these adults learners come from that place?*

I have come across a number of mature students in polytechnics, colleges of education and universities seeking a second chance at gaining educational qualifications.

*You have done some presentations around leadership and your views on leadership have some powerful messages. What are the tensions for many Māori who adopt a more kaupapa Māori view of leadership, as opposed to the more Westernised perception – particularly in organisations like GSE?*

The tensions for Māori who adopt a kaupapa Māori style of leadership can be overcome in a quiet, peaceful and well-organised manner. Tensions can occur from non-Māori not understanding kaupapa Māori and Māori not understanding that the leader is responsible for everyone. So the leader has to adopt a kia āta haere kaupapa (work steadily) and mahia ngā mahi i runga i te tika, te ponā ma te aroha (be accurate, be truthful and compassionate).

*What is your approach to leadership – how would you describe your leadership style?*

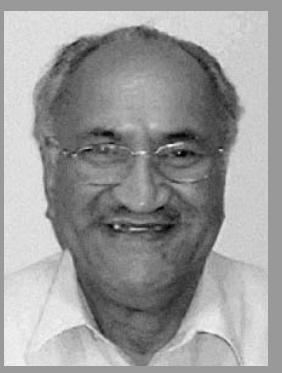
I've never really considered myself to be a leader. People ask me to do things and I oblige. Whakanuia te mana o te tangata, ka noho māna hei whakahokia. (Treat people with respect and they will return that respect.)

I whānau mai au he Ngāti Porou.  
I was born Ngāti Porou.  
I tipu mai au ki roto o Te Whānau-ā-Tūwhakairiora.  
I grew up in Te Whānau-ā-Tūwhakairiora.  
Engari ko ngā mātua tipuna a ōku kōka, no Hokianga, no te awaawa o Mangakahia.  
However, the ancestors of my mother are Ngāpuhi.  
Ko tōku hoa rangatira no Ngāti Hine, no Ngāti Kororā.  
My wife Pauline (neé Kawiti) is Ngāti Hine and Ngāti Kororā.  
We met at Ardmore Teachers' College.  
We have two sons, two daughters-in-law, and seven mokopuna with Māori names.  
Mauriora ki a koutou katoa.

#### **AUTHOR PROFILE**

Sonja Bateman has affiliations to the Ngai Tahu tribe of the South Island and is an experienced special educator and practitioner. Her passion for improving educational outcomes for at-risk students has seen her move from classroom teacher, to Resource Teacher of Learning and Behaviour (RTLB), to her present position of Practice Advisor Māori – a national position – for the Ministry of Education; Special Education in New Zealand.

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