



Barna Heremia makes a point to his class.

Kei roto i te whare kura

Story by Charlton Clark Photos by Bill McNicol

"Haere ki te tiki turu."

A small boy scampers out the classroom door and returns moments later with chairs for the visitors.

The children become noisy and restless. John "Barna" Heremia raps out another instruction in rapid Maori. The noise stops and small hands suddenly appear clasped on small heads.

Although Barna's standard three and four pupils prefer to speak English among themselves, there is no doubt after spending a morning in his classroom that they know what's being said when he speaks in Maori — and that includes the minority of pakeha children.

"He aha tenei ra?" White hands shoot up as fast as brown ones. A pupil correctly tells him that it's "Te rua tekau ma whitu o Hurae" (July 27).

Throughout the session, Barna moves easily and naturally from English to Maori and back again. The children take it all in their stride, including little Rachel, who has only been at the school 18 months. She is English, and her father came out to work on the nearby Huntly power

station.

"He aha te kupu pakeha mo 'Ko Potatau te kingi tuatahi'?"

A forest of hands shoots up, and a little girl tells Barna it means "Potatau is the first king." Potatau was the first king, he corrects her, illustrating a point that sometimes the tense of a statement in Maori must be taken from the context, rather than from the form of the verb.

But perhaps more importantly, such teacher-pupil exchanges illustrate another point about Rakaumanga's teaching philosophy — Maori things matter as much as pakeha things in the education of young New Zealanders.

King Potatau matters as much as Captain Cook. New Zealand's history is recognised as having begun long before Abel Tasman discovered it in 1649. In this way, Maori children are helped to grow up feeling equal to their pakeha peers, and proud to be Maori New Zealanders.

Later, something about mist and fog comes up in the lesson.

"He aha te kupu Maori mo 'foggy'," Barna asks. No one can remember. He

reminds them that it appears in a song they like to sing. Blank faces still. "It's pukohukohu," he reminds them.

The children's concentration is beginning to flag, so Barna pulls out his guitar and they take a break by singing the song in question.

It's a slow, beautiful tune, and the children sing the words with a pronunciation which would put most radio and television announcers to shame.

His pupils' ability with the Maori language gives Mr Heremia a useful tool with which to boost their confidence when they find the going tough.

"The kids here are all experts at Maori spelling," he says. "Maori is a phonetic language, so they find it easier to learn its spelling than English, so that gives them their success. So what we do when we get stuck on difficult English spelling is we give them some spelling work in Maori, and they succeed with that, and success breeds success."

As for the way he switches frequently from Maori to English and back again — sometimes from one sentence to another — Barna ex-