

There's no place like home: Teaching te reo Māori in lockdown.

Trish Thomas and Alesha Chaston | New Zealand Tertiary College

This article supports the continued revitalisation of te reo Māori in Aotearoa New Zealand. It reports on findings from a recent survey on how early childhood education (ECE) student teachers in Tāmaki Makaurau (the Auckland region most impacted by lockdowns) utilised ICT programmes, resources and apps to facilitate te reo Māori teaching and learning experiences. During a significantly long lockdown period, ECE student teachers maintained regular connections to their early childhood centre communities remotely. In doing so, they participated in innovative ways of engaging in Māori language with young children whilst achieving a greater presence of te reo Māori in the home domain. Implications for teaching practice gleaned from this research, indicate that early childhood teachers anticipate a continuation of these technology-enabled practices in the future, thereby nurturing te reo Māori in the lives of young children and sustaining language learning connections across home and whānau contexts.

Introduction

The first case of Covid-19 in Aotearoa New Zealand came to light on February 28, 2020. Government restrictions began two weeks later requiring self-isolation for anyone entering the country and by March 19, borders had closed to overseas visitors. On March 21, the 4-level alert system was introduced, mandating social restrictions and home lockdowns in a level-based system when deemed necessary by the Government. After an initial period of restrictions in 2020 followed by a long-settled period of minimal community spread, all of New Zealand moved to Alert level 4 (the most restricted level) on August 17, 2021. The Auckland region in particular stayed at alert levels 3 or 4 until the beginning of December, meaning the majority of young children, their whānau and early childhood teachers were situated at home for a period of up to 15 weeks. These restrictions, common across many nations, imposed a number of barriers to accessing early childhood education (ECE) for children, whānau and ECE teachers. It was therefore important to explore the opportunities that presented themselves, including the teaching of te reo Māori with young children during this challenging time, and what this remote learning space looked like.

Māori language revitalisation

The history of Māori language in Aotearoa New Zealand depicts a strong and unique Polynesian language with regional dialects that sustains cultural values and traditions, and strengthens Māori identity (Barrett-Walker et al., 2020; Reese et al., 2018). Colonisation in Aotearoa over many decades has resulted in the devastation of the Māori language through language dominance and state policies of assimilation and integration, including the establishment of a Eurocentric education system and the “pepper potting of the Māori urban population to

prevent residential concentrations” (Walker, as cited in Greensill et al., 2017, p. 3). These adverse long-term consequences of colonisation for Māori whānau and communities have culminated in an era where te reo Māori remains vulnerable and requires nation-wide support, initiatives and innovation (Greensill et al., 2017; Ka'ai, 2017; Ka'ai-Mahuta, 2011; Trinick, et al., 2020).

Both homes and educational domains are significant places in which language revitalisation has been achieved (O'Regan, 2016; Keegan & Cunliffe, 2014). Joshua Fishman, a renowned sociolinguist, states that for a language to survive, it must experience a regeneration process where the language is passed on from one generation to the next, within both home and community contexts (cited in de Bruin & Mane, 2016; and Keegan & Cunliffe, 2014). Not surprisingly, the education sector is also a powerful space for reversing the language shift Aotearoa has experienced over this past century (Barrett-Walker et al., 2020). Currently, education services in all sectors are expected to cultivate equitable and culturally responsive pedagogy, have high expectations of all learners, and actively encourage ongoing professional learning and relationships in honouring the responsibilities inherent within Te Tiriti o Waitangi (Education Council, 2017; Jenkin, 2017; Glynn, 2016; Ministry of Education [MoE], 2017, 2019; Rameka, 2018).

Understandably, Keegan and Cunliffe (2014) recognise that the domain of technology is increasingly important for young people in contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand. They stress that “if a language is seen as archaic, rural or old-fashioned, then people, especially young people, may be less inclined to use it” (Keegan & Cunliffe, 2014, p. 388). Gaining knowledge about how ECE student teachers have stayed connected to children and whānau throughout an unexpected period of ‘distance early childhood education’ has been important to capture. Student teacher responses have revealed how they have upheld the goals of *Te Whāriki* to weave te reo Māori into the curriculum (albeit remotely) and in recognising that “children learn and develop best when their culture, knowledge and community are affirmed and when the people in their lives help them to make connections across settings” (MoE, 2017, p. 20).

Teaching te reo Māori at a distance

Sociocultural and ecological approaches to working with children and whānau are responsive to the social and cultural contexts and real lives that children experience. Consequently, this article leans into these theories in order to understand the unexpected transitions and unique circumstances children, whānau and the student teachers themselves experienced during this stay-at-home period. Currently, all student teachers enrolled in New Zealand Tertiary College's (NZTC) ECE teaching programmes are online self-directed learners who experience autonomy and flexibility afforded by a distance learning mode of study. Thus, it was of no surprise to lecturers to regularly hear about students describing innovative approaches and a range of practices they have implemented with children during their 15 weeks of lockdown.

Information and communication technology (ICT) enables learning for children in the 21st century. Research from Donohue (2015) suggests interactive technology on a range of devices can offer children “amazing interactive experiences on the screen” (p. 25) as well as enabling children to have connections with their peers and with the caring adults in their lives. It is recognised that ECE services both here in Aotearoa NZ and internationally, increasingly use digital media programmes including e-portfolios, to document children's

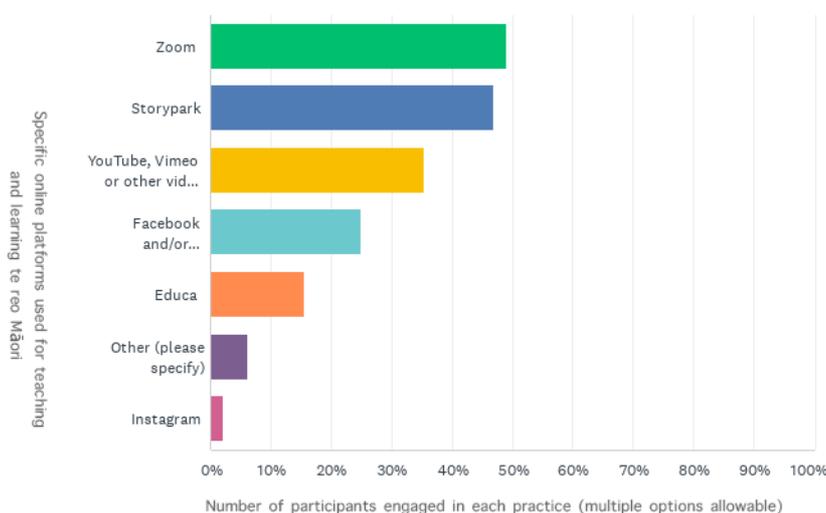
learning and to communicate with whānau (Hooker, 2015). As most children have been introduced to the world of digital media in both their home environment and their ECE setting from a young age (Donohue, 2015), we can reasonably assume they have been somewhat prepared to adjust to this mode of connection during Covid-19 required lockdowns. The New Zealand Education Review Office [ERO] (2021), in its *Living in a Covid-19 World Report* recognised that ECE centres needed to dramatically and quickly adapt to provide innovative ways to work with children, parents and whānau. In addition, they considered how kaiako would provide education and care differently, engaging with children and whānau in new online technologies during these challenging times (ERO, 2021).

To acquire a greater understanding of how student teachers from NZTC were able to continue teaching te reo Māori during lockdown, a questionnaire was sent to Level 7 students in the Bachelor of Teaching and Graduate Diploma in Teaching located in Auckland. Two hundred and seventy students responded and the average response rate for each question was 104. Students were asked a series of questions on resources, teaching practices and considerations for their practice in the future. Their responses are detailed below.

Technology-enabled platforms for teaching te reo Māori

Information and communication technology (ICT) and digital media have played an important role in the way children have stayed connected with their early childhood centre during lockdown (ERO, 2021; Hu et al., 2021; Read et al., 2021). Without the physically interactive means of connection between teachers and children, ICT became the obvious way to maintain relationships, communication and engagement in children’s learning. Keegan and Cunliffe (2014) suggest that to revitalise a language it is necessary for it to be “used normally across a range of natural situations” (p. 396). With technology becoming increasingly commonplace in homes, it is important to learn how technology was integrated into teaching practices including the use of ICT tools, resources and programmes to engage learners in te reo Māori during the home lockdown period. As the table below shows, Zoom was the most common online platform participants used to communicate, closely followed by Storypark at 49% and 47% respectively. Video programmes, Facebook/messenger and Educa were also utilised notably as indicated below.

Table One: Online platforms

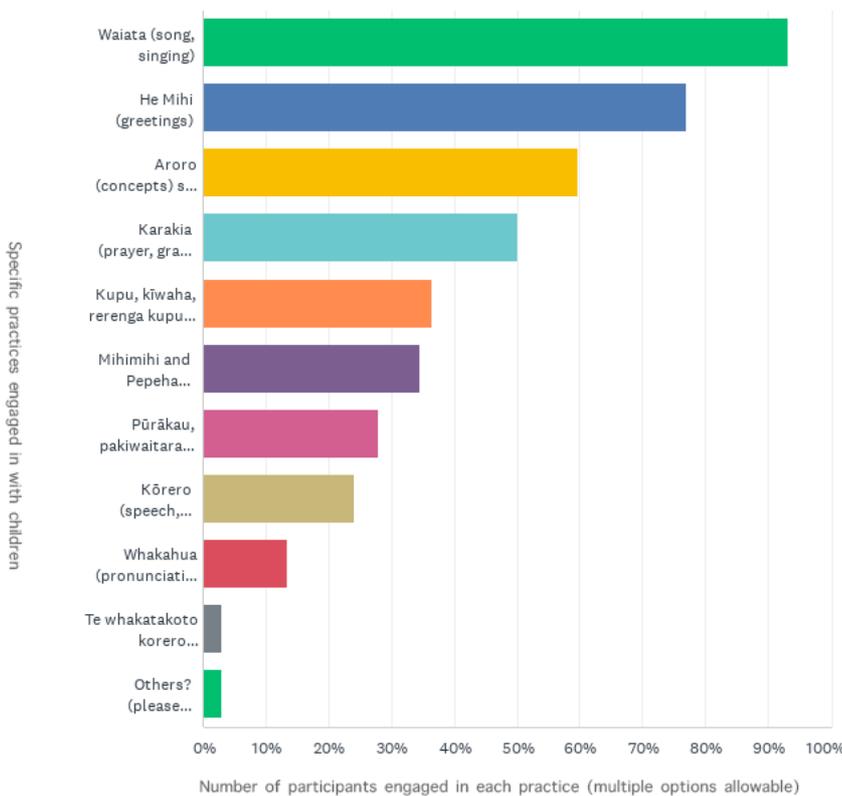


It is important to recognize that whilst many early childhood centres would regularly rely on established educational platforms such as Storypark and Educa to share with whanau; during lockdown Zoom was the most commonly used platform and with YouTube, Vimeo and other video programmes in third place, it perhaps indicates a greater innovative use of previously overlooked technologies.

Te reo Māori teaching and learning experiences

Teachers are encouraged to engage with both traditional and contemporary waiata in support of authentic learning opportunities of te reo Māori. Trinick and Dale (2015) highlight the role of singing in helping “[to] store and release information when needed, offering a potentially powerful pedagogical and cultural tool for fostering procedural memory, an important component of language acquisition” (p. 87). *Te Whāriki* also promotes engagement in waiata throughout the curriculum in support of te reo Māori learning opportunities to “enhance [children’s] identity and sense of belonging” (MoE, 2017, p. 33). The table below illustrates the specific te reo Māori learning experiences engaged in with children. Most noteworthy 93% of student teachers participated in waiata. This was followed by 77% engaging in he mihi closely followed by aroro 60%, and karakia 50%. Other activities in decreasing numbers including mihimihi and pepeha; pūrākau, pakiwaitara can also be identified. Practicing use, pronunciation and communicating in te reo Māori during this lockdown have supported children to realise curriculum learning outcomes in *Te Whāriki* that state “te reo Māori is included as a natural part of the programme” (MoE, 2017, p. 44).

Table two: Specific practices engaged in with children



The participants' responses provide some indication of specific practices that they perhaps feel more confident and competent in and also signposts which areas they may need more support, thus allowing initial teacher educators and associate teachers greater insight into student learning needs.

Using *Te Reo Māori: He taonga mō ā tātou mokopuna*

In the early childhood sector, Māori language resources suitable for young children are becoming more prominent. New technologies are regarded as crucial for language regeneration as each community is able to establish and implement their own culturally suitable materials, resources and teaching approaches (Warschauer, as cited in Ka'ai, 2017; Te Huia, 2019). In response to the questionnaire, participants demonstrated their support in respect to the use of *Te Reo Māori: He taonga mo a tatou mokopuna* (Rokx, 2016). This te reo Māori teaching resource was created for teachers in early childhood settings to have an "appreciation of te reo Māori as a living and relevant language" (MoE, 2017, p. 42). It has been distributed to students and early childhood centres in both hardcopy and electronic versions for over five years by New Zealand Tertiary College, and teachers have found it to be an effective practical resource (Seve-Williams et al., 2017). Survey results indicate that 79% of participants used *Te Reo Māori: He taonga mo a tatou mokopuna* for a range of purposes to support their use and teaching of te reo Māori during lockdown.



Te Reo Māori: He taonga mo a tatou mokopuna has been utilised in a variety of ways as evidenced by a range of responses. Forty six percent of participants indicated that they used this resource to engage in words, phrases, numbers and colours and 20% accessed waiata to support their teaching during the lockdown period. Additionally, participants acknowledged they accessed *Te Reo Māori: He taonga mo a tatou mokopuna* for support with pronunciation, grammar and spelling, along with guidance relating to mihimihi and pepeha.

Te Wiki o te reo Māori

On the 14th of September 1972, a presentation of the Māori Language Petition was made to parliament and in commemoration of this event Te Wiki o te reo Māori has been recognised since 1975 as an initiative to celebrate and promote te reo Māori, consequently bringing heightened public awareness, support and media

engagement to communities (Te Taura Whiri I te reo Māori, 2021). In 2021 the theme associated with Te Wiki o te reo Māori was “Kia Kaha te Reo Māori - Let's make the Māori language strong” (Te Taura Whiri I te reo Māori, 2021), and it occurred during the Covid-19 lockdown period for Aucklanders. Whilst it was celebrated throughout the nation in a variety of ways it was also pleasing that 83% of the participants actively planned for and engaged with activities to honour and celebrate Te wiki o te reo Māori with children and whānau remotely. Mining further into the responses, 44% of participants reported providing a range of waiata for children. Other activities provided during Te Wiki o te reo Māori included a range of pūrākau, pepeha, karakia, kupu and kiwaha, along with acknowledging respect for Māori culture and cultural practices. One participant detailed their approach as:

“Firstly, I uploaded a post on Storypark to acknowledge to our learning community that the week was Māori Language week. Then I filmed a video about a popular waiata and posted it on Storypark to share with our tamariki and whānau for extending our te reo Māori learning together.”

Key learning with children in the home context and important connections to whānau

Participants reported that their key learnings from their engagement with children and whānau during the lockdown were:

- greater respect for Māori language and culture
- increased vocabulary, phrases and pronunciation
- connections between ECE and home
- new innovative learning opportunities through ICT
- opportunities for wider whānau engagement

These responses align to the intentions and underpinning theories of *Te Whāriki* where “children’s worlds are rapidly changing and connected across time” and their learning is “mediated by participation in valued social and cultural activities” (MoE, 2017, p. 61). The voices of different participants illustrate examples of key learning as follows:

“Learning new phrases/words also gained knowledge from pūrākau. Tamariki acknowledging the importance of taking care of our earth, gardening, recycling etc.”

“Through this online learning children were able to keep in touch with the language. We did a treasure hunt too, with a list of things they could find around the house. This helped to increase their vocabulary.”

“Online modes helped to participate, engage and involve in a meaningful way. It gave a sense of warmth, aroha, kindness, manaakitanga and whanaungatanga.”

Participants were also asked to provide both positive and negative feedback from parents and whānau about their teaching and learning experiences and how they may have contributed to te reo Māori learning and use in their home. All participants responded that parents and whānau were positive about joining in with their children in experiences to learn te reo Māori. Participants reported that parents and whānau engaged in opportunities for learning te reo Māori alongside their children; there was a positive support for the use of te reo Māori in a general sense; and parents and whānau participated in the specific learning activities, as represented by different participant responses below:

“It’s a fantastic chance for parents and whānau to learn about te reo Māori with children together.”

“It helps to raise parents’ awareness of the importance of revitalising te reo and tikanga Māori.”

“Parents get together with children and are keen to learn and promote Māori language and culture. They also appreciate the importance of Māori language in ECE centres.”

“We have celebrated different events through Zoom that whānau enjoyed. Even some parents have learnt some basic words of Māori that helped in their children’s learning.”

Technology use for future teaching practice

Participants were asked if they would continue to use online methods for teaching and learning te reo Māori in the future. A considerable 88% of participants reported that they would continue to use online methods. The most commonly identified were Zoom, Storypark, Youtube, Educa and Facebook. Participants were also asked about the main benefit of these methods in supporting teaching and learning of te reo Māori for children. The future benefits shared included a continued use of te reo Māori for children and whānau; increased awareness of tikanga Māori; support for Te Tiriti based practices; and parent/whānau-child learning connections, as can be depicted by the following:

“The more people who engage in learning te reo in this way, enables more willingness and engagement for everyone within the home environment to have a go at speaking te reo and support the learning process for tamariki and the wider community.”

“For children to understand that te reo Māori is a living language. To practice Māori values and te reo language for children.”

Future Professional Development Opportunities

In a final question, participants were asked what ways have te reo Māori experiences during lockdowns, been helpful to your teaching and professional development. Fifty eight percent responded indicating te reo Māori learning increased through this period, with the majority of these participants indicating an increase in knowledge, skills or awareness of te reo Māori. Other responses included an increased knowledge of and skills in digital media/ICT to support their future teaching; stronger connections with whānau; and increased confidence to use te reo Māori.

“It has encouraged me to use more te reo in the classroom with the tamariki and one child has started greeting all kaiako individually in this way which was amazing as English is his second language [primary language not indicated], so speaking te reo has encouraged me to continue to speak as much as possible within the classroom environment and also in learning stories for parents to learn and understand.”

Discovering new frontiers for teaching and learning

Covid-19 has been a major barrier to accessing early childhood education for many throughout this new and uncertain world in recent years. Alongside these stressful and real challenges, we can also view this Covid-19 impacted period as an important opportunity for discovering, *new frontiers* for teaching and learning. Venturing further into online technologies whilst being based safely from home has been a lived experience for a considerable number of people, including ECE student teachers, young children and their whānau (ERO, 2021; Hu et al., 2021). Fortunately, responses to the questionnaire reveals that despite having to adjust to new ways of studying and teaching; journeying this sometimes challenging space has in fact empowered student teachers to gain more knowledge, confidence and skills in te reo Māori whilst using innovative ways to engage with and connect to children in the home domain; a space that is consistently valued as critical for language learning (Keegan & Cunliffe, 2014; Reese et al., 2013).

This research also positively indicates that lockdown experiences have meant significant numbers of student teachers will continue this language teaching via the online methods they have experienced, moving forward into their everyday teaching practice.

Conclusion

Digital online technologies are progressive forms of communication that children and young people are increasingly drawn to, therefore they must be an important part of the teaching and learning spaces that we envision for their future (Keegan, 2017; Reese et al., 2018). Te reo Māori is dependent on this generation of children and young people as kaitiaki, encouraged and affirmed by their whānau and teachers to acquire, use and value te reo Māori every day in their homes and in their educational contexts. Twenty first century educational approaches require careful deliberation of how technology enables interactive and engaging

opportunities that do not take over, but rather complement the intergenerational transmission and necessary relational qualities of Māori language transmission realised in *kanohi ki te kanohi*.

This small-scale research project has highlighted the need for more research into technology-enabled approaches that promote the vitality of te reo Māori for very young children. It has also reinforced the ongoing potential and benefits of education providers and services to champion te reo Māori and sustain it by investing into people, resources, ICT programmes and applications. The phrase *no place like home* has been utilised in this article title to emphasise that by reaching out and into children's homes to teach te reo Māori through digital technology, a wide range of learning experiences for young children alongside increased whānau connections, have been enabled. Te reo Māori is a precious taonga connected to these sacred lands. It requires an authentic commitment to Te Tiriti o Waitangi and future thinking by all teachers towards their learners, to the communities they serve and to a collective vision for a bilingual nation.

Glossary

Aroro – Concept

He mihi – Acknowledgement, greeting

Kaiako – Teacher

Kaitiaki – Custodian, guardian, caregiver

Kanohi ki te kanohi – Face to face, in person

Karakia – Prayer, ritual chant, incantation, grace

Kīwaha – Saying, colloquialism

Kōrero – Speech, narrative, story, news, discussion, conversation

Kupu – Word, vocabulary, talk, message

Mihimihi – Introduction, greeting, pay tribute

Pakiwaitara – Legend, story, fiction

Pepeha – An introductory and acknowledgement process

Pūrākau – Myth, story, ancient legend

Rerenga kupu – Phrase

Taonga – Treasure, anything prized or valued

Te whakatakoto – Grammar, plan, set in place

Te Wiki o te reo Māori – Māori language week

Waiata – Song, singing

Whakahua – Pronunciation, recite, express

Whānau – Family, family group, extended family

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