Peer Reviewed Article

Kaiako wellbeing in Aotearoa: Pandemic insights for future practice

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This study explores the lived experiences of early childhood kaiako in Aotearoa during the COVID-19 pandemic, using Te Whare Tapa Whā as a holistic framework. Drawing on narratives from two teaching teams, the research highlights how disruptions across physical, emotional, spiritual, familial, and environmental dimensions impacted kaiako wellbeing. Relationships with people, places and things, particularly experiences in the natural environment, were found to be key in maintaining kaiako hauora during the pandemic. The findings remain highly relevant, providing valuable insights for addressing persistent sector challenges and shaping policies and practices that promote kaiako wellbeing.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic was one of the most significant and disruptive phenomena in the last 100 years. The pandemic story is our shared story, and although we are the authors of our individual chapters, the narrative is held together by a greater force that changed the way we worked, lived, accessed basic needs, and socialised.

The early childhood education sector (ECE) of Aotearoa was one of many workforces exposed to frontline pressures early in the pandemic, as ECE staff were required to continue offering their services in all alert levels below level 4 (New Zealand Royal Commission, 2024). The ECE sector provided a critical service, caring for and educating the tamariki of essential workers, and those who required care for a range of reasons. COVID-19 presented a unique challenge to an already struggling sector.

This article presents the pandemic stories of 12 ECE kaiako, captured in the immediate aftermath of COVID-19. The insights offered remain highly relevant as we continue to navigate ongoing sector challenges.

Methodology

The study focused on kaiako working in settings often underrepresented in previous research. Much of the existing literature reflects the experiences of kaiako within Kindergarten Associations, leaving limited insight into kaiako in privately owned or community-based services. This project aimed to address that gap by inviting two small teams to participate: one from a community centre and one from a privately owned service. From the two services, 12 kaiako participated in the study, providing a diverse range of experiential, cultural, and educational experiences and perspectives.

The research explored the experiences and impacts on wellbeing of these kaiako during the COVID-19 pandemic. Approval was granted by the Te Rito Maioha ethics board, and practices were maintained to ensure the confidentiality, anonymity, and mana of the participants were protected. Data were collected through open-ended questionnaires, semi-structured group interviews, and focus group discussions. Analysis drew on the five dimensions of Te Whare Tapa Whā (Durie, 1994), supported by thematic analysis.

Te Whare Tapa Whā is symbolised by a whare with four supporting walls, each representing a specific dimension of health and wellbeing. The health and stability of all four walls are necessary to ensure strength and symmetry upon the stabilising foundation of the whenua. The dimensions include Taha tinana | Physical health, Taha hinengaro | Mental and emotional health, Taha whānau | Family and social health, Taha wairua | Spiritual health, and Taha whenua | Connection to the natural world (Durie, 1994). All dimensions must be in balance for strength and stability. This model provided a culturally grounded lens for understanding kaiako experiences as relational and holistic, rather than isolated events.

Recognising these interconnections was critical. Kaiako narratives revealed that professional experiences could not be separated from personal lives, whānau responsibilities, and community ties. Analysing the stories through the holistic framework of Te Whare Tapa Whā recognised each kaiako as an active force and member within a greater whole, including whānau, community and the environment. For ECE kaiako, interconnected webs of relationships include their own whānau, communities, workplaces, and the tamariki and families they serve. The pandemic disrupted these connections, creating ripple effects across all dimensions of teachers' wellbeing. Te Whare Tapa Whā provides a culturally grounded lens for understanding how kaiako experienced these disruptions not as isolated individuals, but as people within a wider web of connected relationships and experiences.

Further to Te Whare Tapa Whā, the research was informed by social-constructivist and ecological theories, alongside notions of holism, which emphasise the interconnectedness of people and all things in the universe (Kovach, 2018). Notions of holism are rooted in the tribal knowledge of many Indigenous peoples; each group with their own interpretation, relationships, and understandings of the energy that binds and connects the whole person/peoples to all and everything. Holism recognises that the stories the participating kaiako have shared cannot be understood in fragments. Professional experiences are inseparable from personal lives, family responsibilities, community relationships, and cultural identities. Applying notions of holism and the Te Whare Tapa Whā framework to analyse kaiako narratives honoured this complexity, moving beyond narrow professional considerations to understand how the pandemic affected kaiako as people embedded within larger systems of relationship and meaning.

The key findings are reported below, within the five dimensions of Te Whare Tapa Whā and with connections to their relevance in today's ECE sector. The findings are then discussed, with implications for the ECE sector highlighted.

Findings

Taha tinana | Physical health

Taha tinana is concerned with how the body feels, moves, and is sustained. Physical exercise, sleep, nutrition, and substance use influence the processing and functioning of the physical body and can affect moods, mental health, and social relationships (Mental Health Foundation, 2025). Attention to physical health supports the management of life's challenges, as feeling physically well supports mental wellness (Mental Health Foundation, 2025). For participating kaiako, health and wellbeing within this domain were shaped by pandemic policies and practices, including restrictions on physical contact, changes to workplace environments, and heightened health anxieties related to COVID-19 transmission. Like many globally, kaiako were deeply impacted by lockdown isolation. However, their experiences varied significantly depending on living circumstances.

Kaiako who were locked down within "bubbles" that included their whānau found silver linings; using the enforced pause to slow down, go for walks, exercise, get much-needed rest, and spend quality time with their loved ones amid uncertainty. In contrast, kaiako who lived alone faced significant struggles with isolation from people, places, and meaningful activities. For these kaiako, lockdown brought increased stressors,

exacerbation of pre-existing health conditions, and heightened vulnerability to physical and mental illness.

> I live on my own, so the first lockdown was extremely hard. I have a chronic health condition, so I was very worried about how COVID would affect me. So, the only time I left my property was to go to the chemist for my medication. There was also the financial side of things that caused me extreme anxiety, as I was the only earner. Through this distressing experience, I got very depressed and ended on antidepressants and am still on them. When the second lockdown happened, my daughter and her husband contacted the health department to get special permission to travel from Wellington to stay with me because of how the first lockdown affected me … and they were given permission … if they weren't able to stay with me, my mental health would have been worse.

During lockdowns, kaiako working in different services experienced varying workload expectations. Participating kaiako described being supported to focus on their whānau and wellbeing during this time. However, some who had worked in different services during earlier pandemic stages described overwhelming workloads, unrealistic expectations, and pay reductions.

> It was so much work with COVID, and then having additional things thrown at you … we were getting paid 80% of our income while working probably more than I ever worked in the centre, so it was kind of a bit of a slap in the face.

Post-lockdowns, kaiako described an influx of illnesses impacting operations and staffing.

> In the backdrop to all of this, we had isolation periods where staff and their families had COVID, and sometimes these rolled over weeks at a time. Often followed by other general sicknesses and a huge dose of RSV … influenza, vomiting, and diarrhoea. You name it, we had it through the centre.

Upon returning to onsite learning, pandemic practices, such as new health protocols and complex illness management, affected everyone's wellbeing in multiple ways, amplifying pre-existing challenges.

Contemporary relevance: The taha tinana challenges remain highly relevant for today's ECE sector. Pandemic-era regulatory changes and additional compliance requirements continue to shape today's operational realities (Bates, 2018, 2021) and kaiako continue to face ongoing concerns about policy directions and regulatory changes (Ministry for Regulation, 2024). These conditions may further strain working environments and kaiako health. The findings suggest that kaiako without adequate workplace and personal support systems could be experiencing heightened vulnerability to both physical and mental health challenges.

Taha hinengaro | Mental and emotional health

Hinengaro refers to the female dimension of the mind that encompasses both conscious and hidden aspects. It is the seat of emotion, intuition, and mental processes such as thinking, perceiving, remembering, and responding (Pere, 1997).

Data revealed recurrent themes of heightened stress, anxiety, and powerful emotions. One centre manager reported that the kaiako began to live on edge, waiting and attempting to prepare for whatever was to come next. Kaiako felt deep worry, not only for themselves and their whānau, but for their centre tamariki and whānau. They laboured emotionally for the most vulnerable, especially for those living within adverse conditions, including poverty, addiction, and social isolation.

> This was a really scary situation, not knowing what was going to happen or how long it was going to go on. I felt worried for our tamariki and whānau, being at home, isolated. I feared for the safety of some of our tamariki. I know addiction is in our kids' households; this played on my mind a lot.

Many kaiako experienced significant stressors related to financial security. Several lived in households where income was impacted, and wider economic pressures were concerning. Worries were exacerbated by mandates for kaiako to be vaccinated against COVID-19 to maintain employment (New Zealand Royal Commission, 2024).

The vaccine mandate was one of the most provocative topics during data collection. A centre owner/manager spoke of how the mandate affected them as a centre whānau, describing devastation in having to terminate the employment of three experienced teachers, and the grief they all felt. Data revealed that labours of leadership heavily affected kaiako in positions of accountability.

> My mental health has taken a beating. From an easy-going person who takes everything in my stride, to someone who nearly broke this year. COVID, staffing, ever-changing information, staffing, expectations, staffing, release of new initiatives, e.g., learning priorities, He Māpuna te Tamaiti, NELPs, policies and procedures, funding notices, new wash up systems, no claw backs/claw backs, COVID claims, daily registers … Oh, and did I mention staffing … we are a small centre with no corporate office who employ people to make policies or decipher information … painstakingly we made it through ourselves.

This manager highlights leadership stress and reveals how pedagogical leadership became secondary to survival.

Contemporary relevance: These findings remain relevant today because of ECE's relational nature, where kaiako and leaders' wellbeing is intrinsically connected to their communities' welfare—"The wellbeing of each child is interdependent with the wellbeing of their kaiako" (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 20). In a stressed sector, pedagogical leadership, kaiako practice, curriculum implementation and relationships with tamariki and whānau remain at risk as kaiako and leaders scramble to manage ongoing policy instability, staffing shortages, and intensified emotional labour. ECE kaiako require specialised skills to provide vital relational support, essential for children's development and wellbeing. Yet kaiako can only draw from their own wellbeing resources, which is a challenge when these resources are depleted (Majcen et al., 2022). Further to this, without policy and vision supporting ECE leadership's relational and pedagogical dimensions, leaders can become trapped in reactive operational management, creating contexts where pedagogical leadership is sidelined and pedagogically focused resources, like He Māpuna Te Tamaiti (Ministry of Education, 2019), are experienced as additional administrative pressures rather than meaningful support for educational practice.

Taha whānau | Whānau health and social relationships

Durie (1994) highlights Taha Whānau as recognising our interdependence within family, extended family, and social relationships for overall health and wellbeing. Taha Whānau pertains to identity, belonging, and purpose. In te ao Māori, relationships of interdependence with whānau are valued and regarded as a strength (Durie,1994). Family includes not only blood relatives, but those with whom close relationships are shared, including friends, colleagues and community.

ECE kaiako have many roles within their whānau and community, including professional educators, parents, grandparents, friends and colleagues. Data revealed that kaiako invest heavily into their relationships, emotionally, mentally, and physically, sometimes at their own wellbeing's expense.

> I do think sometimes that's to the detriment of our own wellbeing that we tend to put other people first.

> This has been tough. Going back to 'normality' was hard on my tamariki. A lot of stress and anxiety from school put extra pressure on myself. Going back to work and trying to support my tamariki wellbeing was tough and at times, I was struggling mentally. I had Mum guilts too.

Kaiako described relational challenges when working with tamariki post-lockdown.

> After lockdown, we had a lot of children coming with separation anxiety and behavioural issues. You could see aggression in children towards other children, and also teachers.

Kaiako felt that more tamariki were presenting complex health and behavioural needs, placing strain on teaching teams. At home and in centres, COVID-19 vaccination orders were divisive topics. Some kaiako shared that the topic was banned from their homes and dinner tables, describing strained interpersonal relationships due to polarising views.

Contemporary relevance: The social challenges highlighted by kaiako in the study remain highly relevant for today's ECE sector. ECE kaiako continue navigating complex webs of responsibility across professional, family, and community relationships while prioritising others' needs "to the detriment of our own wellbeing." Supporting tamariki presenting with complex emotional and learning needs is a persistent reality for many kaiako (Hargraves, 2022). Many whānau also face social pressures including housing instability, cost of living increases, and family stress. The interdependent relationships that traditionally sustained kaiako through challenges remain under pressure from high staff turnover, funding constraints, and workload intensification (Andres et al., 2022). Polarisation around health mandates highlighted broader societal divisions that continue to strain relationships within ECE communities.

Taha wairua | Spiritual health

Pere (1997) describes the spiritual dimension of wairua as being the realm of ĀĪŌ Wairua, the Divine Parents, the Great Spirit, and the Creators of everything across the universe. Pere asserts that everything has wairua and the key to wellbeing is maintaining balance. Taha Wairua is generally regarded by Māori to be the keystone of overall health and wellbeing and implies a sense of one's capacity for awareness of the human situation and the divine. Taha Wairua can encompass religious beliefs and practices but is not defined by any particular denomination or faith (Durie, 1994).

Data revealed that important cultural and spiritual practices such as tangihanga were significantly disrupted during the pandemic. One kaiako spoke of rāhui impacts and being unable to access places of cultural significance:

> Throughout the lockdowns, we were restricted to the whenua of our own properties, which I found was positive for looking after our own environment, but I missed the freedom of connecting with our awa, marae, and graves of loved ones. Also, the yearning for wanting to connect to other whenua I whakapapa to.

Many kaiako described challenges to their wairua through isolation from the natural environment during lockdowns. One kaiako asserted their "wairua remained strong but was definitely tested [through] not being able to connect with what was important to me, like the rivers and beaches."

When asked what they need to support overall wellbeing, Kaiako shared common beliefs that society does not understand ECE's value. Many asserted that although research and theories confirm how important the early years are for lifelong learning and wellbeing, they felt a lack of the professional status and societal recognition afforded to primary school, college, and tertiary education teachers. Kaiako recognised that language and labels shape social and cultural realities. They spoke of "childcare" terminology, and how this communicates the purpose of care as opposed to education, potentially lowering perceived status and influencing how society and employers treat kaiako.

Contemporary relevance: Currently, ECE kaiako continue to navigate spiritual and cultural disconnection in an increasingly fragmented post-pandemic world. Societal undervaluing of ECE connects to persistent spiritual harm caused by professional

diminishment, when society fails to recognise that ECE teachers' work requires high levels of skill, professionalism, and ongoing recognition and support.

Taha whenua | Connection to the natural world

Findings reiterated recurring connections between kaiako wellbeing and their relationships with whenua. Participating kaiako live in a semi-rural rohe laden with native bush, rivers, and bordering oceans. For many, these landmarks are tūrangawaewae—places of belonging, significance, and whānau gatherings. These places are commonly utilised recreationally, spiritually, and for hunting and gathering kai. Many kaiako made explicit connections between their pandemic wellbeing and their relationship with whenua.

> My connection with nature is what held it all together. When I got overwhelmed at times, I would walk the river, garden, or go bush, and I still do. I have been tramping more, connecting with the ocean again, and surfing. These are my at-peace places, where I am me.

Many kaiako expressed understanding of the significance of the whenua, its spiritual essence, and healing energies. One kaiako asserted connecting with whenua benefits all dimensions of wellbeing, stating it "is a great way to process, let go, re-balance, and put things into perspective." She noted connecting with whenua provides mental, physical, and emotional benefits. Kaiako highlighted the ocean as a significant place of grounding, connection, and revitalisation. Many reported using their first days of lockdown freedom to reconnect with local beaches.

Restrictions from accessing familiar places of restoration, including rivers for reflection, bush tracks for clearing mental fog, and beaches for emotional reset, highlighted the fundamental role that natural environments play in sustaining wellbeing.

Contemporary relevance: The wisdom that "connection with nature held it all together" during the pandemic offers valuable guidance for addressing today's kaiako wellbeing crisis. Natural environments provided grounding, restoration, and balance when other supports were inaccessible. Yet, as workload pressures, regulatory demands, and teacher shortages intensify, opportunities for kaiako to access restorative spaces are increasingly limited.

Discussion and implications

The pandemic stories shared by kaiako revealed fractures across all dimensions of Te Whare Tapa Whā that continue to reverberate through today's ECE landscape.

Kaiako experiences of **taha tinana** disruption, from heightened health anxieties to physical exhaustion from increased compliance demands, foreshadowed current reality where operational pressures may continue to compromise kaiako physical wellbeing. Overwhelming workloads reflect ongoing systemic issues where operational demands continue to compromise kaiako physical wellbeing through excessive hours, inadequate compensation, and unrealistic expectations (see Bates, 2018, 2021). The "influx of complex illnesses" that affected centres post-lockdown remains persistent, with centres still managing staff absences, increased sick leave, and the demands of enhanced health protocols.

Significantly, the pandemic revealed how quickly physical health deteriorates when workplace conditions fail to support basic needs for rest, reasonable workloads, and financial security; conditions that remain precarious across the ECE sector today. The research demonstrates that supporting taha tinana requires more than individual wellness initiatives; it demands systemic change to address the working conditions, employment practices, and policy frameworks that either sustain or undermine kaiako health and resilience.

Kaiako experiences of **taha hinengaro** disruption, from living "on edge" in constant anticipation of crisis to carrying deep emotional worry for vulnerable tamariki and whānau, revealed the unsustainable mental and emotional demands that continue to characterise ECE work today. The "labours of leadership" described reflect ongoing realities where ECE leaders remain overwhelmed by ever-changing policy requirements, staffing crises, and administrative burdens that leave little capacity for the pedagogical leadership that should be at the heart of their roles. Financial insecurity has evolved into persistent economic pressures across the sector, with many kaiako continuing to face inadequate compensation while managing intensified emotional labour. Teaching is a deeply complex and emotional profession that requires sustained effort and wellbeing.

Significantly, the pandemic revealed how quickly the emotional wellbeing of kaiako deteriorates when policy instability, resource scarcity, and crisis management become the norm rather than the exception. The research suggests the need for systemic approaches that address policy stability, adequate resourcing, and workplace

conditions that allow kaiako to focus on meaningful educational work rather than constant crisis management.

Kaiako experiences of **taha whānau** disruption, from community divisions over health policies to the strain of maintaining multiple caregiving roles simultaneously, exposed the relational vulnerabilities that persist in today's ECE environments (Andres et al., 2022). The research revealed how kaiako placed their own wellbeing secondary to supporting others, illustrating a systemic pattern where the interconnected nature of ECE work generates emotional demands that spill beyond professional contexts into personal and family life. Without adequate support, challenges such as supporting children with complex learning needs can intensify over time. The grief and team fractures described due to staff departures and mandates could parallel current retention issues, where the loss of experienced colleagues disrupts the stable relationships that are fundamental to effective ECE communities. These interdependent relationships that traditionally sustained kaiako through challenges remain under pressure from high staff turnover, funding constraints, and workload intensification (Andres et al., 2022).

Significantly, the pandemic revealed how quickly relational wellbeing deteriorates when kaiako are forced to navigate competing loyalties, conflicting community values, and professional demands that stretch across multiple relationship systems simultaneously. The research demonstrates that supporting taha whānau requires more than individual relationship skills. There is a need for workplace cultures and policy frameworks that recognise the interconnected nature of kaiako wellbeing and provide sustainable support for the complex relational work that is key to quality ECE practice.

Kaiako experiences of **taha wairua** disruption during the pandemic exposed how workplace demands can systematically erode the cultural and spiritual foundations that sustain kaiako. The spiritual exhaustion described by participants, where workload pressures left no space for restorative practices or cultural connection, reflects current realities where administrative compliance and burdens can take precedence over the spiritual nourishment essential for meaningful pedagogy. Tensions around childcare versus education terminology reveal deeper spiritual wounds where a lack of recognition harms teachers' sense of professional mana. Supporting taha wairua requires policies that protect time for cultural connection; professional recognition that honours the status of ECE work through adequate remuneration; and systemic acknowledgment that meaningful education cannot occur without nurturing the wellbeing of those who deliver it.

Taha whenua insights about the power of connection to place and the wisdom that "connection with nature held it all together" provide guidance for addressing today's wellbeing issues. Current policy continues to overlook the fundamental need for grounding in the natural world, despite evidence that place-based connection supports resilience and culturally responsive practice (Penetito, 2009). Pedagogies that honour the tikanga of place provide a framework for understanding how kaiako wellbeing and effective ECE practice are fundamentally grounded in deep connection to whenua (Penetito, 2009). For ECE settings, this understanding calls for integrating regular outdoor experiences not just for tamariki, but as essential professional practice for kaiako wellbeing, honouring the fundamental human need for whenua connection.

Ka mua, ka muri: Walking backwards into the future

Te Whāriki is "a mat for all to stand on", and in ECE, we pride ourselves on inclusion, manaakitanga, and holistic wellbeing for tamariki and whānau. It is past due that policy makers and employers make room on the mat for kaiako too, and for the principles of Te Whāriki to be extended to those responsible for curriculum implementation. The multidimensional wellbeing of kaiako must be addressed if we are to achieve quality ECE for tamariki, whānau, and communities.

The kaiako voices captured in this research, calling for professional recognition, fair remuneration, and acknowledgment of their crucial role, remain as urgent today as during the pandemic's immediate aftermath. Without addressing the holistic wellbeing needs identified through Te Whare Tapa Whā, the ECE sector will continue to face the retention crisis, quality concerns, and systemic instability that the pandemic exposed but did not create. These stories remind us that supporting kaiako wellbeing is not just about individual recovery from crisis: It is about building sustainable foundations for an education system that can serve kaiako, tamariki and whānau with the manaakitanga and excellence they deserve.

Author notes

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