

The implementation of te reo Māori for student teachers and certificated teachers within early childhood education

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As part of honouring Te Tiriti o Waitangi, teachers in Aotearoa New Zealand are expected to embed te reo Māori in their teaching practice, and *Te Whāriki*, our national curriculum for Early Childhood Education (ECE) emphasises the importance of teachers weaving te reo Māori me ōna tikanga into their everyday curriculum. To support Te Tiriti-honouring practice, pre-service teachers are expected to develop Māori language and cultural competence skills throughout their programme of study. Research presented in this paper investigated a small group of pre-service and in-service teachers' experiences of how te reo Māori me ōna tikanga is incorporated in ECE centres. The findings reveal that participants identified the need for more Māori speaking teachers, clearer leadership, and professional learning and development to support holistic integration of te reo Māori in ECE settings. The findings also emphasise the importance of taking a team approach, avoiding tokenism and increasing teacher confidence.

Introduction

Before the arrival of Europeans, te reo Māori was the only spoken language in Aotearoa New Zealand. British arrival led to colonisation and assimilation, where Māori lost land, culture and language. Despite the far-reaching commitments embedded within *Te Tiriti o Waitangi*, including protection of [taonga tuku iho](#), subsequent policies and practices of the British government had adverse impacts on Māori language, culture and identity. This marginalised Māori people and drastically reduced the practice of te reo Māori and tikanga Māori, leading to the devaluing of te ao Māori. By the mid-20th century, te reo Māori was at risk of becoming a permanently lost language (Mita, 2007).

For Māori, te reo Māori allows connections to [whakapapa](#), [tūpuna](#), [atua](#), [whenua](#) and intergenerational knowledge through [waiata](#), [mōteatea](#) and [oriori](#), providing a unique sense and connection to the world in which Māori live (Chan & Ritchie, 2020). In 2021, 7.9% of the population in Aotearoa could speak te reo Māori (Statistics New Zealand, 2022). *Maihi Korauna: The Crown's Strategy for the Revitalisation of Te Reo Māori 2019–2023* (Te Puni Kokiri, 2019) has a vision for te reo Māori to be used by everyone, every day, every way and everywhere, as a normal part of everyday life in Aotearoa New Zealand. This vision requires that all certificated teachers implement te reo Māori within their practice, so that language acquisition and proficiency can be nurtured through early childhood and beyond (Simmonds et al., 2020). The embedding of te reo Māori me ōna tikanga (Māori language and associated beliefs and ways of being) within ECE education ensures that [tamariki](#) Māori are provided with equitable opportunities to thrive in their identity, and that all tamariki (Māori and non-Māori) hear and learn the first language of the land, and one of our official languages.

Literature review

Martin (2008) discusses the importance of te reo Māori in Aotearoa by explaining that language is reflective of culture. In other words, our ways of being, knowing and doing are inscribed within our verbal and non-verbal languages. In addition, Skerrett and Ritchie (2021) argue that it is the Māori language and culture that defines *all* New Zealanders as unique and from Aotearoa New Zealand. They go on to point out that the pedagogies advocated by *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017), our national curriculum for ECE, place high expectations on kaiako to actively promote te reo Māori me ōna tikanga.

The call for Māori language, identity and culture to be at the forefront of contemporary teaching methods has been recognised by many (e.g., Gerlach et al., 2014; Pihama et al., 2014; Romero-Little, 2010; Sims et al., 2008). In addition, *Te Whāriki* emphasises that all children should be able to access te reo Māori in their ECE setting, as kaiako weave te reo Māori me ōna tikanga into the everyday curriculum. Further, the professional standards set out by the Education Council of Aotearoa (2017) require all certificated ECE teachers to implement te reo Māori and te ao Māori perspectives into their practice. It follows that pre-service ECE teachers need to develop their Māori language and cultural competence skills. Māori language and cultural competence skills are intended to support pre-service ECE teachers to be advocates and role models for future generations in the places where they will practise (McMillan et al., 2017). Within their pre-service teacher education, student teachers therefore need to

learn and understand the pivotal role they will have as teachers in the use of te reo Māori in ECE settings (Durie, 2011).

Tragically, the ongoing impacts of colonisation continue to result in change inertia. This includes ongoing under-representation of te reo Māori being implemented within ECE centres (Shareef, 2020), meaning that not all certificated ECE teachers are meeting their professional commitments. Chan and Ritchie (2020) suggest that the majority of certificated teachers are not committed to the inclusion of te reo Māori and te ao Māori, evidenced by the invisibility of the concepts in their practice. Holder (2015) identify examples of visits by the Education Review Office (ERO) where ECE centres would borrow te reo Māori resources from the library for the day of the ERO visit and then return them the next day, earning ERO's praise for rich biculturalism even though there was little te reo Māori spoken in everyday practice. Simmonds et al. (2020) also raise concerns about the quality of te reo Māori me ōna tikanga implementation within the ECE sector. Van den Branden (2009) point out that many teachers teach in ways that they themselves were taught, showing strong resistance toward radically modifying the teaching behaviours that they are familiar with. This reliance on familiar pedagogies has implications for supporting shifts in education: teacher change can be slow and complex.

Diverse initiatives to support language and cultural learning of ECE teachers include professional learning and development opportunities, online support, centre leadership, removing the barriers, and ensuring there is a team approach within the environment to support the growth and implementation of te reo Māori (Holder, 2015). McCauly (2008) emphasise that centre leaders need to be capable of motivating, influencing, and encouraging staff to freely understand and implement ideas. In view of this, centre management and head teachers must validate and affirm the use of te reo Māori me ōna tikanga within their centres.

It is clear that achieving even basic te reo Māori in mainstream centres is a challenge (Jenkin, 2016, 2017; Ritchie & Rau, 2006). Furthermore, ECE teachers who are new learners of te reo Māori typically begin with greetings and farewells, commands, colours and numbers. In teaching practice, however, employing commands in te reo Māori for instructions such as "listen," "sit down" and "come here" can inadvertently portray te reo Māori as bossy language and its use appears tokenistic (Ritchie, 2017). It might be that teachers need to understand the language of praise in te reo Māori in order to counteract te reo Māori being portrayed as a bossy language.

Methodology

The intent of this exploratory research project was to investigate a small group of pre-service and certificated teachers' experiences of implementing te reo Māori within the ECE sector, listening to and understanding their stories of the affordances and barriers that exist. As this research focused on the enhancement of te reo Māori it was appropriate that a kaupapa Māori approach was adopted. Kaupapa Māori theory provides an opportunity to embrace [mātauranga](#) Māori and Māori ways of being and doing (Tocker, 2020). It also locates the agenda of research initiatives clearly within Māori aspirations, preferences and practices (Berryman et al., 2013).

In order to investigate how ECE student teachers and teachers can be supported to use te reo Māori and tikanga Māori in their educational practice, two focus groups were convened: one with four pre-service teachers in their third year of study, and one with four practising teachers, from four different ECE centres. As feelings and experiences of including te reo Māori me ōna tikanga in ECE practices were being discussed, the emotional safety of each participant was an important consideration. Given the expectations of teachers' implementation of te reo Māori in *Our Code, Our Standards* (Education Council, 2017), some participants may feel [whakamā](#) about their current practices and/or the need for additional support.

Smith et al. (2005) identified qualitative research as a crucial method when research is reflective of indigenous communities as it enables representation of storytelling and sharing of experiences, identities and realities that affect our lives. Analysis was inductive, involving reading and re-reading the data to identify themes that were then consolidated (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Participants

Across the two focus groups, participants included two Pākehā student teachers (ST2, ST3), one Māori student teacher (ST4), one Samoan/Māori student teacher (ST1), two Pākehā certificated teachers (CT2, CT3), one Fijian/Māori certificated teacher (CT4) and one Māori certificated teacher (CT1). None of the participants identified as being fluent in te reo Māori.

Findings

Key themes that emerged from the data align with subheadings within the article.

The importance of using te reo Māori in ECE centres

Participants in both focus groups were well aware of their professional obligations as teachers and discussed how te reo Māori is an official language of Aotearoa, as well as their commitment as kaiako to meeting [Te Tiriti o Waitangi](#) obligations and the professional standards outlined in Our Code, Our Standards. Comments indicative of this include:

The Treaty of Waitangi principles in the curriculum promise all students the opportunity to acquire knowledge of te reo Māori me ōna tikanga. Te reo Māori is our indigenous language, it is the gateway to our culture and our identity [and] is important for both Māori and non-Māori. (CT1, written response)

Significantly, participants saw value in using te reo Māori in ECE settings that reaches beyond a professional obligation to do so:

My ideas around te reo have evolved through the course of the degree. Now, in year three, I can see the value in te reo Māori and tikanga practices for the betterment of our country and the development for children. (ST2, written response)

If you are living in Aotearoa then you should know the culture, know the land and embrace te reo and tikanga Māori. If you don't know it then you should be willing to learn about this. Not only is this vital for the culture of Aotearoa, it also supports language learning as well as social interaction for tamariki. (ST4, focus group kōrero)

So many benefits, having seen children getting to enjoy and experience different aspects of te reo, [pakiwaitara](#), for example, or waiata, and then wanting to repeat the experience shows there are benefits in broadening their knowledge, skills and confidence, while learning another language so young is beneficial for brain development. (ST2, written response)

Barriers to using te reo Māori in ECE settings

Despite a shared understanding of the value of embedding te reo Māori me ngā tikanga in ECE centres, participants expressed frustration and disappointment that these practices were not as evident as they should be. Student teachers had concerns about their teaching support within the ECE settings where te reo Māori wasn't being met, or being met at the bare minimum.

It is dependent on the centre environments and their use. Most centres are using minimum te reo Māori to just meet the teaching requirements. (ST4, focus group kōrero)

The minimal te reo Māori being used in some environments sometimes diminished the confidence of student teachers. This is problematic given that successfully passing teaching placements requires student teachers to demonstrate the first teaching standard and implement te reo Māori alongside tamariki.

If I was the only one using it then I felt awkward because I lacked the support from within the centre. There is always that fear of getting it wrong. (ST2, written response)

Being a Pākehā I am worried about getting words or sentence structures wrong and being made fun of. It is also extremely hard to use te reo Māori that I have learnt when you feel like you don't have the support from the other teachers and you are not hearing it enough to be able to use it yourself ... When transitioning into the profession it would be nice to have teachers that genuinely care about the language. (ST3, written response)

When you go into centres and there is no team approach you can feel really out of place. I think it is negative feedback if you are using te reo Māori and it's not supportive. (ST1, focus group kōrero)

In other words, student teachers were greatly impacted when placed in centres where te reo Māori was not regularly used as part of the centre's everyday practice. The positive influence of student teachers was also noted:

You're going into their space and you don't want to feel like you're taking over. It is also sometimes about realisation. It wasn't until I asked an associate teacher of mine to support me in filling out my practicum tasks and my requirements for an assessment to implement te reo. It wasn't until then that the centre recognised they weren't using it, so they had a hui to discuss how to incorporate te reo Māori. (ST3, focus group kōrero)

ECE centres need to both model the use of te reo Māori for student teachers, and welcome the input and leadership that they might be able to offer in terms of including te reo Māori as part of the centre's everyday practices. On the other hand, some practising teachers expressed concern that student teachers sometimes only use te reo Māori when visiting lecturers arrive to observe and evaluate the student's teaching practice:

It is only when the lecturer arrives to observe them in practice that we begin to hear the student using their te reo Māori, which is a shame because these students could be leading the way with the knowledge that they now hold. (CT2, focus group kōrero)

Challenges around tokenism and what this looks like in practice were also raised. For example, different views emerged about the place of printed cards with [kupu](#) Māori on the walls, others cautioned that this approach can come across as tokenistic. It seemed that a shared understanding of why certain approaches were adopted was useful—and that these could (and should) be shared with student teachers as well as with centre families and whānau.

Leadership and a team approach

Participants recognised that for the use of te reo Māori me ngā tikanga to be sustained and to grow, strong leadership and a team approach are needed. Leaders empower and provide resources for a team to achieve goals.

For myself being a centre owner and leader, it is important to encourage staff to learn. In other settings I believe it is what standard is set and the expectations of leaders and centre owners. (CT4, focus group kōrero)

Another centre leader and owner expressed how she encouraged her team to use te reo Māori:

I am creating rituals for [hui](#) time within the centre and within staff meetings which include [karakia](#), [karanga](#), waiata, [pūrākau](#) and simple kupu that can be used around the centre. While I might be leading this I am very fortunate to work alongside passionate teachers who want to learn te reo Māori. (CT1, focus group kōrero)

Part of the implementation plan included providing a safe space for learning together:

How do we empower each other? Ensuring that it is a safe space and that it is okay to make mistakes? By doing it together and being on the same [waka](#). (CT1, focus group kōrero)

In the absence of clear leadership and a whole-team approach, teachers talked about how they can become discouraged.

My team leader is negative and shuts it down. I've never heard her speak te reo Māori and she's been in the industry for like 20 or 25 years. I have another teacher that will shut it down flat because it's one thing she's having real difficulty with. I just feel like if you've got someone in the centre who does speak Māori ... just all you need is that one teacher and then the rest, they kind of build that confidence and they learn from one another from there. (CT2, focus group kōrero)

Visibility of and encouragement to use te reo Māori is also essential for student teachers to see and feel during teaching placement. This can be achieved by providing student teachers with certificated kaiako who are comfortable and confident to lead the team and generate comfortability to use te reo Māori. When student teachers see and feel this leadership, it fosters a sense of support and encourages them to develop their own comfort and confidence in using te reo Māori. In general there was a strong sense that the use of te reo Māori me ngā tikanga needed to be holistic, emanating from a deep-seated belief in the value of this approach:

Genuine drive comes from love and care of the culture. (ST1, focus group kōrero)

Te reo Māori cannot be taught or developed in our teaching practices in isolation. Our classroom settings must be immersed in the context of cultural values through meaningful interactions. In the Māori world these cultural values are the essence of tikanga Māori. (CT1, written response)

In addition to clear leadership and a team approach, there was a call for more kaiako Māori to be appointed:

Employ more Māori speaking teachers. We need more Māori speaking teachers in our environments. Having Māori in the centre, Māori kaiako in the centre is essential. (CT3, focus group kōrero)

In some cases, community expectations also need to be addressed:

We as kaiako need to change the stigma that society still holds between the two cultures (Māori and Pākehā). Regardless of race, if you are in New Zealand, learn the culture. To change this stigma, kaiako need to come together and model this for tamariki. (ST1, focus group kōrero)

Teacher professional learning and development

Participating teachers reported a lack of accessible professional learning and development (PLD) and the necessary time to pursue ongoing PLD:

I feel like if we had more PLD and more regularly it would keep that excitement, and invigoration. Like, we've got a great feel at our centre, passionate teachers, we have tikanga Māori, we do karakia, we sing waiata, [whanaungatanga](#) practices are strong, but it's being able to extend that and we're not. I think we need to continue having education to keep that fire burning, a couple every year is not enough. Or we should be made to engage in classes, Māori language classes within our teaching times. (CT3, focus group kōrero)

Teachers need more opportunities available to learn the language and at a time where we can do it ourselves and complete the courses when we can. (CT4, written response)

Additionally, while there are many resources available, they did not always fit the needs of the centre:

As a team we all decided together to enrol into the course. They were all cookie cutters. They basically had different providers all doing the same thing—basically sending us templates, cut outs and pop ups for spaces, something we were trying to avoid and we didn't understand or know how to use these resources. (CT1, focus group [kōrero](#))

Discussion

From the data presented above, it is evident that participating student teachers and teachers identified many benefits of using te reo Māori in ECE settings—for themselves, and for all [tamariki](#). Simmonds et al. (2020) explain that it is important that the use of te reo Māori is not viewed as benefiting Māori exclusively, but that bilingualism has cognitive and social benefits, extending literacy and social skills and supporting identity development for all tamariki growing up in Aotearoa.

The importance of leadership was a key theme emerging from the findings. Leaders can influence and empower kaiako to value and use te reo Māori, and they therefore hold a responsibility for sustaining the language within ECE environments (Bushouse, 2008). Further, Jenkin (2011) asserts that ECE teachers will continue to face barriers such as confidence, knowledge and skills during their development and implementation of bicultural practice and their use of te reo Māori unless they have leaders to effectively support this within their team environments.

Jenkin (2010) argues that having one leader to sustain the learning and use of te reo Māori within ECE environments can be difficult to achieve. The findings suggest that student teachers' development of te reo Māori and cultural competence during their tertiary education can support the growth and implementation of te reo Māori within ECE settings.

Jenkin (2010) further suggests that bicultural practice and the use of te reo Māori can include the use of kupu Māori in English sentences. Johnson and Houia (2015) explain that learners of any language need to have a starting point irrespective of the delivery method as this will allow the learner to build confidence in using the language.

To be able to develop te reo Māori within teaching practices and further extend knowledge beyond leaders, the participants of this study stressed the need for PLD

during employment hours. This need aligns with Chan and Ritchie's (2020) identification that time and commitment are required to harness te reo Māori and mātauranga Māori, including the correct pronunciation of te reo Māori. For sustained change, teachers need to commit wholly to their own ongoing learning, and shift their teaching methods.

O'Sullivan (2007) and others highlight the need for an equal partnership between Māori and Pākehā. However, colonising processes and attitudes continue to prevail. As pointed out by participating student teachers, there is a lack of willingness to learn and use te reo Māori among some teachers and in some centres. Stewart (2014) emphasises that the survival of te reo Māori for the future depends on all teachers and not solely on the Māori-medium sectors. Ritchie (2002) and Skerrett (2007) state that English and te reo Māori need to be applied equally for te reo Māori to be flourishing in learning environments. Davidman and Davidman (1997) argue that without a team approach to cultural competence, te reo Māori will remain elusive.

In conclusion, the data highlight the significant benefits of integrating te reo Māori in ECE settings, not only for Māori children but for all tamariki, as it enhances cognitive, social, and literacy skills while supporting identity development. The role of leadership emerged as critical in promoting and sustaining the use of te reo Māori. Effective leaders empower kaiako and create environments where the language is valued and used consistently, helping to overcome barriers such as confidence and knowledge. However, sustaining the use of te reo Māori cannot rely on one leader alone; a team approach, supported by ongoing professional development is essential. Furthermore, the equal partnership between Māori and Pākehā in promoting te reo Māori remains crucial, as the survival of the language depends on the commitment of all teachers, not just those in Māori-medium education. For te reo Māori to thrive, it must be applied equally alongside English, with a collaborative and committed effort from the entire teaching community.

He aha te mea nui o te ao? He tāngata, he tāngata, he tāngata.

What is the most important thing in the world? It is people!

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