



## TEACHING AND LEARNING TE REO MĀORI IN ENGLISH-MEDIUM SCHOOLS IN NEW ZEALAND:

### What we learned

# Language or Culture?

*Are language and culture one and the same? If not, then why do cultural outcomes dominate Māori language programmes in our schools?*

New Zealand's Māori education strategy, *Ka Hikitia – Accelerating Success 2013–2017*,<sup>1</sup> has a vision of “Māori enjoying and achieving education success as Māori”. It urges schools to value Māori students' identity, language and culture in ways that support them to engage in learning and achieve this success. One of the five key principles that guide the strategy – “Identity, language and culture count” – recognises the strong link between wellbeing and achievement, and the notion that students do better when their learning reflects and reinforces their cultural identity. The logic follows that building a strong sense of identity promotes wellbeing, and wellbeing is the foundation for education success – a pre-requisite for achievement.

So, what is the place of Māori language in this picture? It is generally accepted that te reo Māori is the front door to culture and identity. This is often one of the strongest rationales for teaching te reo Māori in New Zealand schools. In a 2018 study of Māori language in English-medium schools,<sup>2</sup> Māori language programmes were found to be a key strategy in supporting Māori student success. The inception of a Māori language programme in a school often provides the foundation for engaging purposefully with whānau in a productive relationship – another of the guiding principles of the Māori education strategy. It is a tangible way of affirming and valuing identity and culture. Also, the benefits of language learning to learning across the curriculum are becoming more widely understood. Further, as it is a taonga under the Treaty of Waitangi, we all have a responsibility for the survival of te reo Māori. It contributes to our sense of nationhood and our unique identity in a global world.

The 2018 research inquired into the outcomes of Māori language programmes in participating English-medium schools. The impact of the programmes on Māori student identity, validating Māori culture in the school and growing positive attitudes of all students to language and culture was notable. In describing their Māori language programmes, teachers spoke about the many cultural events and activities which permeate the school curriculum. They included things such as celebrating Matariki or Te Wiki o te Reo Māori; holding pōhiri to welcome new visitors to the school; and commemorating Waitangi Day. There is no doubt that these types of activities provide valuable learning and are worthy inclusions in any school curriculum. Arguably, however, they could, and should, take place even when there is no Māori language programme in the school. They are some of the things that define us as New Zealand schools, and could be distinct features in a school's localised curriculum.

<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Education, (2013) *The Māori education strategy: Ka Hikitia – Accelerating Success 2013–2017*, (p 5). Wellington: Ministry of Education.

<sup>2</sup> Haemata Ltd (2019). *WHAKANUIA TE REO KIA ORA: Evaluation of te reo Māori in English-medium compulsory education*. Unpublished report prepared for Te Taura Whiri i te Reo Māori.

However, this focus on culture and identity seems to be coming at a cost to language outcomes. Yes, there is an argument that language and culture are intrinsically linked. However, what seems to be happening is that the language learning that accompanies the cultural events and activities is minimal and narrow – isolated vocabulary, simple phrases learned by rote, and language in waiata and haka that is not well understood.

Other strong arguments for Māori language learning are its ability to support cognitive development and to promote te reo Māori as a useful, living language. To achieve these outcomes, students need more than a narrow, simple range of language. They need to have language that challenges their thinking and language that they can use. Most importantly, for students to want to continue to learn Māori in secondary school, they need to find learning fun, challenging and relevant.

Students in the research spoke about becoming bored in their Māori language lessons, mainly due to repeatedly having to learn the same language year in and year out. There is no easy answer to this while we have a shortage of Māori language skills amongst the teaching profession. Students certainly do want more though. They want to be able to use te reo Māori for real purposes.

Schools that are committed to delivering successful language outcomes have worked through the barriers and found innovative ways to meet the challenges. They have realised that while language outcomes will engender cultural and identity outcomes, the same cannot be said in reverse. The adage 'identity, language, and culture' is refocused as 'language, culture, and identity'.

## **Toi te kupu, toi te mana, toi te whenua.**

*Hold fast to language, cultural status, and land as markers of identity.*

'Kia ita!'

Te Taura Whiri i te Reo Māori  
MĀORI LANGUAGE COMMISSION



**Haemata** LTD

## **Reflect**

*To what extent are language outcomes the primary focus of your Māori language programme?*