

Te kotahi a ngā manu ō Māhaki

Tikanga and mātauranga Māori paramount in effective speech–language therapy for tamariki and whānau Māori

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WHATUA TŪ AKA
TLRI



Intro / Project description

This research explores culturally grounded speech–language therapy (SLT) services for tamariki Māori with speech, language, and communication needs (SLCN). It aims to address disparities in SLT services arising from their misalignment with kaupapa Māori education (KME) and te ao Māori. KME emphasises total immersion teaching and learning and prioritises Māori knowledge and philosophy. It is delivered outside mainstream English–medium education (EME). Kōhanga reo, kura kaupapa Māori and kura ā-iwi provide this education (Ministry of Education, 2024). In the past 2 years, a research team comprising members and non-members of Te Aitanga-a-Māhaki collaborated with Te Aitanga-a-Māhaki whānau, hapū, and iwi to address challenges and improve SLT cultural practices for tamariki Māori with SLCN in KME.

Aims

There research had two main aims:

1. Develop a framework for SLTs working with whānau and kaiako Māori who support tamariki with complex SLCN in Te Aitanga-a-Māhaki.
2. Design and create kete rauemi to support mild–moderate SLCN of tamariki at home with whānau, and in the classroom with kaiako.

Why is this research important?

The study arose from the overrepresentation of tamariki Māori in negative education and health statistics, including SLT-related challenges (NZSTA, 2024), and a lack of research guiding SLT service provision for Māori education. Current SLT services often neglect Māori cultural values and KME philosophies (Campbell, 2022), including kōhanga reo, kura kaupapa Māori, and kura ā-iwi (Ministry of Education, 2024). These gaps underline the need for a localised, culturally relevant SLT approach that upholds Te Tiriti o Waitangi and honours the aspirations of whānau and hapū of Te Aitanga-a-Māhaki.

This research informed a guiding framework for speech–language therapists (SLTs) and a kete rauemi to support tamariki with SLCN at home and school. The study advocates decolonising the SLT profession and indigenising SLT service provision. It highlights the need for culturally safe SLT services integrating te reo Māori, aligned with mātauranga Māori, to support tamariki Māori with SLCN and their whānau.

Key findings

1. Whānau and kaiako in Te Aitanga-a-Māhaki have a limited knowledge about SLT, its practice scope, and referral criteria for communication support.

2. The Ministry of Education's referral process for communication support is unclear.
3. Participants are frustrated by multidisciplinary teams.
4. Services that reflect Māori communities do not use accessible language.
5. Navigating SLT power dynamics in service provision is challenging.
6. Participants seek more Māori in SLT and dream of a kaupapa Māori SLT service pathway.
7. Te tino rangatiratanga—Māori want to be Māori.
8. Mihimihi and whakawhanaungatanga are vital for engaging with Māori communities.
9. The impact of colonisation on te reo Māori is prevalent.
10. Critical funding investment is required for education support staff.
11. Participants desire clear and effective information and resources.
12. Localised te reo Māori resources are vital for speech, language and communication development.

Implications for practice

1. **Māori resource development and educational alignment:** Developing Māori resources specifically for whānau and kaiako is essential. They need to be user-friendly, culturally relevant, and regularly updated for the evolving needs of tamariki Māori, their whānau, and for kaiako.
2. **Support and advocacy:** Whānau and kaiako are frustrated with navigating specialist services, and kaiako feel pressure from increased demand to support tamariki Māori with SLCN. Urgent increased funding is needed for kaiāwhina and teacher aides to enhance teacher capacity and implement SLT plans. Prioritise attracting Māori to SLT for representation and the provision of culturally relevant and responsive support.
3. **Streamline processes:** The Ministry of Education's referral process for publicly funded SLT services confuses whānau, causing frustration and risking disengagement. Create clear visuals and documents for (i) a simplified referral process, (ii) a specialist services directory; and (iii) communication services criteria.
4. **Engaging and working with Māori communities:** This is crucial for effective SLT practices and resource development to effectively meet the needs of tamariki Māori. Wānanga enhance community involvement and deepen understanding of SLT among whānau and kaiako, while regular hui create opportunities for nurturing relationships.
5. **Research, evaluation, and improvement:** More kaupapa Māori research (Kohere-Smiller et al., 2025) is needed to understand important tikanga and kawa of other iwi in Aotearoa. Research is needed to identify barriers whānau Māori face in accessing SLT services and to evaluate intervention effectiveness.

Advocating for policy changes to improve SLT services access for whānau Māori and those in rural areas experiencing isolation, promotes equity and leads to better outcomes for tamariki Māori.

6. **Te Tiriti o Waitangi, tino rangatiratanga, and cultural safety:** Decolonising SLT requires ongoing efforts from Māori and tangata Tiriti SLTs. SLT professionals must invest in Māori professional learning and development to build awareness and understanding of te reo Māori, tikanga Māori, and mātauranga Māori. Tangata Tiriti SLTs must promote and protect kaupapa Māori in their practice and the profession.

Our partners

The research team comprises researchers from Te Aitanga-a-Māhaki Trust and The University of Auckland. The research team collaborated with Te Aitanga-a-Māhaki iwi leaders and kaumātua for cultural quality assurance, advice and guidance. This project relied on the invaluable contribution of Te Aitanga-a-Māhaki whānau and kaiako. This research deeply values their mātauranga and has, to the best of its abilities, strived to highlight their lived experiences with SLT services, both as parents and grandparents, and as kaiako dedicated to supporting the educational success of Te Aitanga-a-Māhaki children. Mahi by Mahi Limited collaborated by permitting the use of their scope and sequence, advice and guidance on kupu used within sentences, and whakawhanaungatanga. Te Karaka Area School's principal, Renae Savage, art teacher, Henare Tahuri, and their art students created illustrations for the pilot decodable books in the kete rauemi.

References

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