Toi ora, reo ora, whatuora!

Developing toi Māori pedagogy to support Māori whānau aspirations for reo and tikanga

WHATUA TŪ AKA TLRI

TEACHING & LEARNING RESEARCH INITIATIVE TLRI
Nāu i Whatu te Kākahu, He Tāniko Taku

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Project description

Toi Ora, Reo Ora, Whatuora! forwards whatu as a "new" toi Māori pedagogy within rumaki reo (Māori-medium education) to support intergenerational language revitalisation, cultural identity, and relationality. Over one year, whatu wānanga as a method supported qualitative data weaving as whānau from three connected rumaki reo settings in Tāmaki Makaurau, Auckland, learnt to weave whatu kākahu for their whānau.

Two intertwined data sets revealed a nuanced picture of the ways that rumaki reo communities enact language and cultural regeneration with, and for, their tamariki mokopuna. Six interrelated themes emerged: intergenerational learning, ancestral connection, wellbeing, creating community, creativity, and language through practice. When bound together, this research evidences the critical role of toi Māori pedagogies, not as peripheral enrichment activities, but as powerful pedagogical, linguistic, and cultural vehicles for intergenerational learning.

Aims

Whānau Māori aspirations for their tamariki mokopuna are shaped by histories, influences, and contemporary experiences of education. If aspirations are understood as taonga tuku iho—values, beliefs, and ideas transmitted intergenerationally—then weaving these aspirations into the educational fabric becomes a critical act, and one that is important for education stakeholders to hear, see, feel, and understand. The research is guided by the following question:

> How does whatuora, a kaupapa Māori arts-based pedagogy, support and story the intergenerational flourishing of Māori language, culture, and whānau aspirations across three Māori-medium educational settings?

Why is this research important?

The project makes several contributions to learning and teaching in rumaki reo settings and, more broadly, in Aotearoa New Zealand. It provides clear evidence that toi Māori, such as whatu, raranga, and haka, are not simply cultural activities but are also pedagogical frameworks that support language, identity, and wellbeing. The findings demonstrate the strength of intergenerational and community engagement. By centring whānau experiences and aspirations, and creating spaces for grandparents, parents, children, and mokopuna to learn alongside one another, toi Māori pedagogy attracted and sustained whānau engagement.

Key findings

Key findings are drawn from thematic analysis of 10 intergenerational whānau interviews, one year of wānanga, and twelve "love letters to my mokopuna" written by whānau participants that were read during a fashion show and exhibited in a curated gallery exhibition (June 2025).

1. Intergenerational threads	Whatu wānanga fostered transgenerational transmission of language, culture, and practice. Families unpicked inherited silences and rewove knowledge together.
2. Aho to the ancestors	Aho connect past and future; whatu became a tangible act of reclamation, fostering whanaungatanga and bringing us "closer to our ancestors".
3. Weaving wellbeing	Whatu supported a sense of holistic and relational wellbeing through reflective, safe language-learning environments.
4. Weaving in community	Wānanga built strong communities of practice across the three rumaki reo, generating shared histories, language, and creativity.
5. Creativity as cultural expression	Weaving was both art and pedagogy, weaving kaupapa Māori research innovation to encourage intragenerational storytelling.
6. Language through practice	Te reo Māori was organically woven through the learning—learning through te reo Māori, supported by toi Māori pedagogy.

Implications for practice

Theorising and practising toi Māori pedagogy move creative practices from activities on a timetable to rich language generation zones. This research encourages Māori educators to consider deeply the regenerative nature of toi Māori pedagogy, focusing not only on *what* we teach but *how* and *why*.

- Strengthening intergenerational learning is crucial for language and cultural practice sustainability.
- Toi Māori is a powerful vehicle both for ancestral connection and for community cohesion.
- Theorising and embedding toi Māori pedagogy, as well as practice, contributes to effective pedagogy to support all-round better student outcomes.
- Toi Māori encourage whānau participation and sustain collective cultural practice beyond formal education settings.
- Embedding language learning within toi Māori practice and pedagogy normalises reo Māori use, builds confidence, and supports whānau-led language revitalisation.

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