

Seeding Possibilities with the Arts:

TE RITO TOI IN SCHOOLS DURING COVID-19





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Professor Peter O'Connor and Dr Marta Estellés
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Executive summary

Research context

In March 2020, all schools in Aotearoa New Zealand closed as the country went into seven weeks of lockdown. During this time, a group of academics, artists and educational practitioners came together to create Te Rito Toi, an online resource aimed at providing arts- and research-based classroom support for teachers in their return to school. Shortly after its launch, Te Rito Toi had over 250,000 visits and gained international recognition from UNESCO, the World Alliance of Arts Educators and the OECD. The webinars that introduced Te Rito Toi during the New Zealand Covid-19 lockdown were attended by over 30,000 teachers. This report examines the use of Te Rito Toi in New Zealand schools following the Covid-19 lockdown. It explores the ways in which educators adapted the resources to their own needs and the outcomes derived from its use. It also identifies the key factors that made the arts in schools possible. The implications of this study for future crises are considered at the end of the report.

Key findings

This research shows:

- Te Rito Toi offered the educators involved in the study the possibility to put student wellbeing at the centre of school life after lockdown, filling a gap in the New Zealand educational response to the Covid-19 pandemic.
- The social consensus around wellbeing through the arts gave teachers the necessary confidence to prioritise student wellbeing over other academic goals.
- Te Rito Toi provided ways for children to build relationships, explore emotions, have fun, make sense of the world and renew hope in the future.
- Teachers creatively adapted the resources to the interests of their students and, in many cases, students took the leading role in such adaptations.
- Teachers and principals had a very positive view of the pedagogical value of Te Rito Toi, but also identified some important limitations. In particular, they suggested including more culturally and socially diverse resources.
- The teachers that had, at least, some professional development in the arts and/or mental health education were able to make better use of Te Rito Toi following the Covid-19 lockdown.
- To a large extent, the participants were aware of Te Rito Toi thanks to the support of educational organisations such as the New Zealand Principals Federation, the New Zealand Educational Institute (the primary teachers union) and the New Zealand National Commission for UNESCO.

Key recommendations for schools and policy makers:

- To replace the 'going back to normal' approach with a focus on wellbeing for schools in post crisis recovery.
- To endorse initiatives like Te Rito Toi to guarantee that the arts and wellbeing become the focus of schools in future crises.
- To provide culturally and socially diverse resources for classroom teachers to help students cope with major events.
- To invest in professional development in arts education and wellbeing post crisis.
- To include education on the possibility of unexpected events in pre-service teacher programmes and to provide support on appropriate pedagogical responses.
- To actively involve teachers and principals in emergency planning and training.

Foreword

Good ideas take time to come to fruition. They might begin with someone noticing a problem and mulling over possible solutions. Or they might begin with someone identifying an issue that could arise in the future and asking, “what if?” *Te Rito Toi* is the response to a what-if question that took ten years to germinate. After the Canterbury earthquakes, Peter O’Connor and I, independently, found ourselves working with Christchurch schools to enable children to process the traumatic events they had faced. Peter asked himself, “What if I could find a way to assist teachers to help children make sense of the enormity of what has happened?” Through the *Teaspoon of Light programme* students supported a fictional character to repair her torn cloth of dreams. As they did so, they came to untangle their own anxieties. I asked, “What if schools could record their stories and we could be better prepared for future disasters?” Using my participatory research skills, I helped schools capture their experiences and detail the impact on principals, teachers, students and their families.

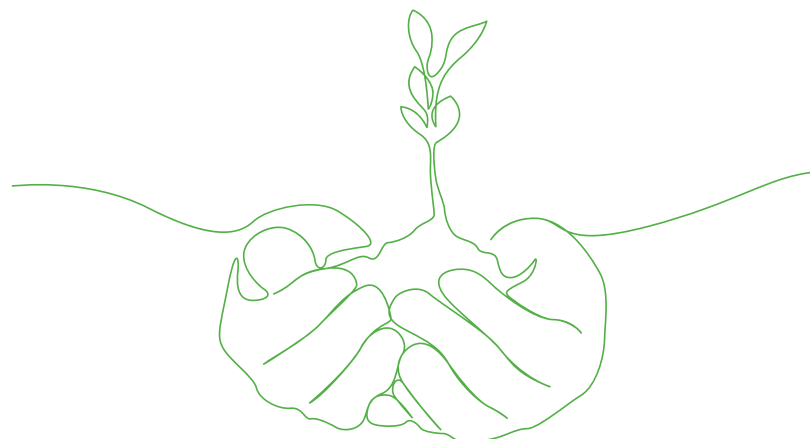
Fast forward to January 2020 and Peter and I were both invited to Sydney to use our earthquake experiences to advise Australian schools in the aftermath of that summer’s devastating bushfires. The subsequent *Banksia Initiative* drew on Peter’s creative activities to help children process their emotions and my advice for principals and teachers on what to do on their return to school. On the flight home, Peter said, “What if we could do the same for New Zealand schools?” Within a short space of time, Covid-19 arrived and the country was plunged into lockdown. Schools were closed and students began learning from home. When it was time for schools to reopen, the what-if became a reality. Peter worked tirelessly to pull together *Te Rito Toi*. However, it would not have been possible without the generosity of funders, supporters and contributors. Not only did grateful New Zealand principals and teachers find that there was evidence-based advice and ready-made resources to support their return to school but the website attracted interest from across the globe and the resources were downloaded hundreds of thousands of times.

This report shares some of the initial findings from a qualitative study that investigated how teachers used the resource, what worked well and what might be improved. It highlights the importance of the availability of quality support in the aftermath of a crisis – great or small – and the need for the support to be relevant, engaging and easily accessible. I can attest, first-hand, to the quality of the resources, knowing that they are underpinned by the latest research and trialled by experienced practitioners. I feel confident that *Te Rito Toi* provides a model for how other educational jurisdictions might support schools when the next disaster strikes. It gives me great pleasure to write this foreword, to celebrate what has been achieved, and to congratulate all those involved. This is a fine example of collaboration and innovation and our children and young people will only be the better for it.



Dr Carol Mutch,
Professor of Critical Studies in Education
Education Commissioner for the New Zealand National
Commission to UNESCO.

“ **TE RITO TOI IS THE
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Building a response to Covid-19: Te Rito Toi

In March 2020, all schools in Aotearoa New Zealand closed as the country went into seven weeks of lockdown where physical isolation applied to all aspects of life. Schooling went online. In the first week of lockdown, a team at the University of Auckland realised that schools would eventually reopen and that there would be a real need for teachers to have research-informed resources to shift their curriculum and pedagogy to meet the extraordinary times. A team of writers across Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia took the time during New Zealand’s extensive and strict seven-week lockdown to create unique arts-based resources designed specifically as a response to Covid-19. Central to this project was an understanding that arts-informed curricular approaches provide powerful methods for individual and community recovery during and after disaster and that participatory arts-based methods strengthen social support and help people to build critical hope (O’Connor, 2013).

CENTRAL TO THIS PROJECT WAS AN UNDERSTANDING THAT ARTS-INFORMED CURRICULAR APPROACHES PROVIDE POWERFUL METHODS FOR INDIVIDUAL AND COMMUNITY RECOVERY DURING AND AFTER DISASTER.

The writers were tasked to create lesson plans that provided creative and safe ways to explore the anxieties and issues children might return to school with. As arts educators, they knew the arts uniquely protect participants into, not from, emotion. Gavin Bolton argues that the purpose of providing spaces through the arts for dialogue is not so that emotional response is removed from the situation, rather the space allows an opportunity for people to feel in a safe manner (Bolton, 1986).

The team of writers created a series of lesson plans focusing on anxiety. A set of picture books created by Professor Carol Mutch about a toy bear in lockdown provided a narrative setting for children to affectively explore the lockdown experience through the fictional account of the bear. A series of lessons provided by The Poutokomanawa Project centred around the use of Māori art (nga toi) forms to re-engage children with the classroom. The Māori forms that blend music, dance, theatre and the visual arts together were designed to rebuild confidence in how classrooms might move together physically after months of isolation. Arts education experts, Professor Julie Dunn and Professor John O’Toole from Australia, adapted materials to provide rich sophisticated drama lessons. Ginnie Thorner who led the Teaspoon of Light Theatre in Education Company in Christchurch after the earthquakes provided dance and visual arts lessons that focused on making sense of social distancing. Poet Laureate, Associate Professor Selina Tusitala-Marsh, created a poetry lesson to celebrate the capacity to be an everyday hero. These resources were the first substantial curriculum resources in the arts and wellbeing for Primary schools in at least fifteen years. Professor Carol Mutch, based on extensive research in schools post-disaster, provided detailed advice for teachers and principals (see Mutch, 2014, 2015; Fletcher & Nicholas, 2016) and Briar O’Connor used her PhD studies to provide advice around family violence and child abuse post-Covid-19.





In naming our project, we turned to metaphors to be found in nature. The rito, is the seedling that sits at the centre of the harakeke bush, a plant endemic to New Zealand. If hurt, the seedling, and then the plant, dies. The rito is kept safe by the leaves that surround it. Te Rito Toi recognises how the seed of the arts that start when we are young needs to be protected and that the arts also protect and help nourish the young. At a time of crisis, Te Rito Toi reminds us of the power of metaphor, of the grace and beauty to be found in understandings that derive from the natural and Māori worlds. The project is indebted to Michael Steedman, Ngāti Whātua o Ōrākei, Ngāti Whātua, Te Uri o Hau, Kaiarataki at the University of Auckland for gifting this poetic and beautiful name that is now known around Aotearoa New Zealand and the world.

With endorsement from the New Zealand Principals Federation (NZPF; the organisation that represents all school principals across the country), New Zealand Educational Institute (NZEI; the Primary teachers union) and part funding from New Zealand National Commission for UNESCO, Te Rito Toi was launched alongside webinars that introduced the resource to over 30,000 teachers in Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia. Launched on April 24 2020 as schools prepared to reopen in the first month of it being online, over 37,000 teachers accessed the site with over 250,000 page views. As a result, the arts and wellbeing became the focus for many students as they returned to school in Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia. A global push for this approach was picked up by UNESCO and the World Alliance of Arts Educators so that by the end of 2020 the site had been viewed and used in 114 countries with over 320,000-page views.

Up to date, Te Rito Toi has also gained international recognition from the OECD (see van Lieshout, 2020) and inspired educational initiatives in several countries, including Hong Kong (Tam, 2020), Norway and Hungary (Cziboly & Bethlenfalvy, 2020).

AT A TIME OF CRISIS, TE RITO TOI REMINDS US OF THE POWER OF METAPHOR, OF THE GRACE AND BEAUTY TO BE FOUND IN UNDERSTANDINGS THAT DERIVE FROM THE NATURAL AND MĀORI WORLDS.



The Study

The study presented in this report aims to explore the use of Te Rito Toi in New Zealand schools following the Covid-19 lockdowns. In particular, this study addresses the following questions:

1. Why did New Zealand schools use Te Rito Toi after the Covid-19 lockdowns?
2. What did the use of Te Rito Toi facilitate?
3. How did New Zealand schools use Te Rito Toi?
4. What made the use of Te Rito Toi at NZ schools possible?

The study used a participatory, qualitative case study design underpinned by a constructivist theoretical framework (Burr, 2015). The researchers and participants co-constructed a detailed case study (Stake, 1995) of each school's experience, prior to the cross-case analysis.

During the last term of the 2020 academic year, the research team immersed themselves in eight schools across Aotearoa New Zealand and conducted semi-structured interviews with principals, teachers and/or team leaders who were involved in the use or promotion of the Te Rito Toi resources. The eight schools that participated in the research project were diverse in terms of school type, location, number of pupils and socio-economic status (see Table 1). The schools were engaged in the participant selection, data gathering and sense-making processes. The participants were recruited for both being willing to participate in the study and having used or promoted the Te Rito Toi resources when returning to school after the Covid-19 lockdowns. A total of 15 principals, teachers and team leaders were actively involved in the study.

Table 1. Characteristics of the schools

SCHOOL CHARACTERISTICS							
School 1		School 2		School 3		School 4	
LOCATION							
Large city – North Island		Large city – North Island		Large city – North Island		Large city – North Island	
SCHOOL TYPE							
State integrated, catholic, co-ed		State co-ed		State co-ed		State co-ed	
DECILE							
1		9		1		10	
NUMBER OF PUPILS							
105		926		207		298	
Māori	4%	Māori	4%	Māori	10%	Māori	4%
Tongan	40%	Pākeha	68%	Samoan	40%	Pākehā	78%
Filipino	28%	Chinese	9%	Tongan	26%	Asian	16%
Samoan	22%	Indian	8%	Indian	10%	Pacific	2%
Other	6%	Samoan	4%	Other	14%		
		Tongan	4%				
		Other	3%				

Source: Own elaboration based on data from the Education Review Office website.

The methods for data collection included semi-structured interviews and artefact analysis of the products that resulted from the schools' work with Te Rito Toi. The interviews started with questions about the background of the participants and the school and then led into specific questions about their experience as educators during Covid-19 lockdowns and the use of Te Rito Toi when returning to school. The interviews lasted between 40 and 60 minutes. They were recorded and transcribed in full. Participants were asked for feedback on the transcriptions.

Data was open coded using thematic analysis of each case and across cases by the constant comparative method. This analysis began with initial coding (Charmaz, 2014), where the contributions of each participant were analysed line-by-line and given an initial code. The initial codes of each interview were

compared between interviews in an iterative process. Then, the constant comparative method was used across focused coding and developing categories (Charmaz, 2014). The data analysis was conducted with the help of NVivo software.

This research project obtained the ethical approval of the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee (Ref. 2816). Participation in the research was completely voluntary and informed. A Participant Information Sheet was provided, and participants signed a Consent form to participate in the study. To ensure anonymity, none of the participants or schools have been identified by name in the research report.

SCHOOL CHARACTERISTICS							
School 5		School 6		School 7		School 8	
LOCATION							
Regional city- South Island		Regional city -South Island		Large city - North Island		Small town - North Island	
SCHOOL TYPE							
State co-ed		State co-ed		State co-ed		State integrated, catholic, co-ed	
DECILE							
9		10		4		10	
NUMBER OF PUPILS							
470		171		401		184	
Māori	8%	Māori & Pacific	15%	Māori	23%	Māori	16%
Pākehā	64%	Pākehā	77%	Pākehā	18%	Pākehā	57%
Asian	17%	Asian	8%	Tongan	19%	Samoan	8%
Pacific	4%	Pacific	4%	Samoan	17%	Chinese	4%
Other	7%	Other	7%	Cook Island Māori	5%	Other	15%
				Other	18%		



Why did schools use Te Rito Toi?

Human response to lockdowns: arts and wellbeing

For most of the teachers and principals interviewed, the first Covid-19 lockdown was an extremely challenging period as educators. It was not only the unprecedented nature of the situation causing high levels of stress and anxiety. It was also knowing, or at least suspecting, that some students were experiencing truly difficult times. This reality was particularly acute in low-decile schools. As the following teacher from a decile 1 school explained to us:

“It [lockdown] was very hard because most of our job is just being there for children, in their learning and in their everyday lives. So that was difficult [...] I didn't feel I was getting a very good idea of exactly how things were going for all the children. Some children we didn't hear from until we were back in Level 2. And some children I heard from every day, I saw them on Zoom, I saw them on our online class; parents texted and called, but then for others, it wasn't the case. And those children who were on my mind, I was thinking: 'Are they okay?' 'Are their families okay?' And so that caused a lot of anxiety for me, about their wellbeing.”

“IT [LOCKDOWN] WAS VERY HARD BECAUSE MOST OF OUR JOB IS JUST BEING THERE FOR CHILDREN, IN THEIR LEARNING AND IN THEIR EVERYDAY LIVES. SO THAT WAS DIFFICULT.”

“ THE TEACHERS WERE USING THE RESOURCES FROM TE RITO TOI TO ACTUALLY BRING THE CHILDREN BACK AND TO GET THEM TO TALK ABOUT WHAT IT HAD BEEN LIKE [BEING IN LOCKDOWN], THEY WERE LISTENING TO THESE STORIES BECAUSE WE HAD SOME KIDS WHO WERE REALLY WORRIED THAT THEIR PARENTS WERE GOING TO DIE. [...] AND IT WAS REALLY, JUST WHEN PEOPLE CAME BACK AFTER THE FIRST LOCKDOWN, I JUST SEE IT, YOU KNOW, JUST HAVE FUN WITH OUR KIDS. AND, YOU KNOW, TAKE THE TIME AND TAKE THE TIME FOR THE CONVERSATION. SO TE RITO TOI WAS A GREAT SPRINGBOARD FOR THAT.”

Aware of the critical circumstances some children faced during lockdown, the educators involved in this study could not return to school as if nothing had happened. At this moment, creating a caring environment for students and building a sense of community became priorities over other academic goals related to literacy and numeracy. This was the main rationale behind resorting to Te Rito Toi. As the following teacher said:

“I think after that first lockdown, schools were really thinking about social emotional learning, the common phrase that I heard from teachers was that it was like starting the year again. So, at the beginning of every school year, we don't launch into maths on the first day. At the beginning of the school year, every teacher will take that time to build that classroom community. So what I heard, and what I saw was that teachers were basically rewinding the clock and treating it like the beginning of the year, which is why the lessons that were on Te Rito Toi, the ideas and the suggestions that were on Te Rito Toi were perfect for recreating, or creating that positive, safe, secure classroom environment. Because there were children coming back who were anxious.”

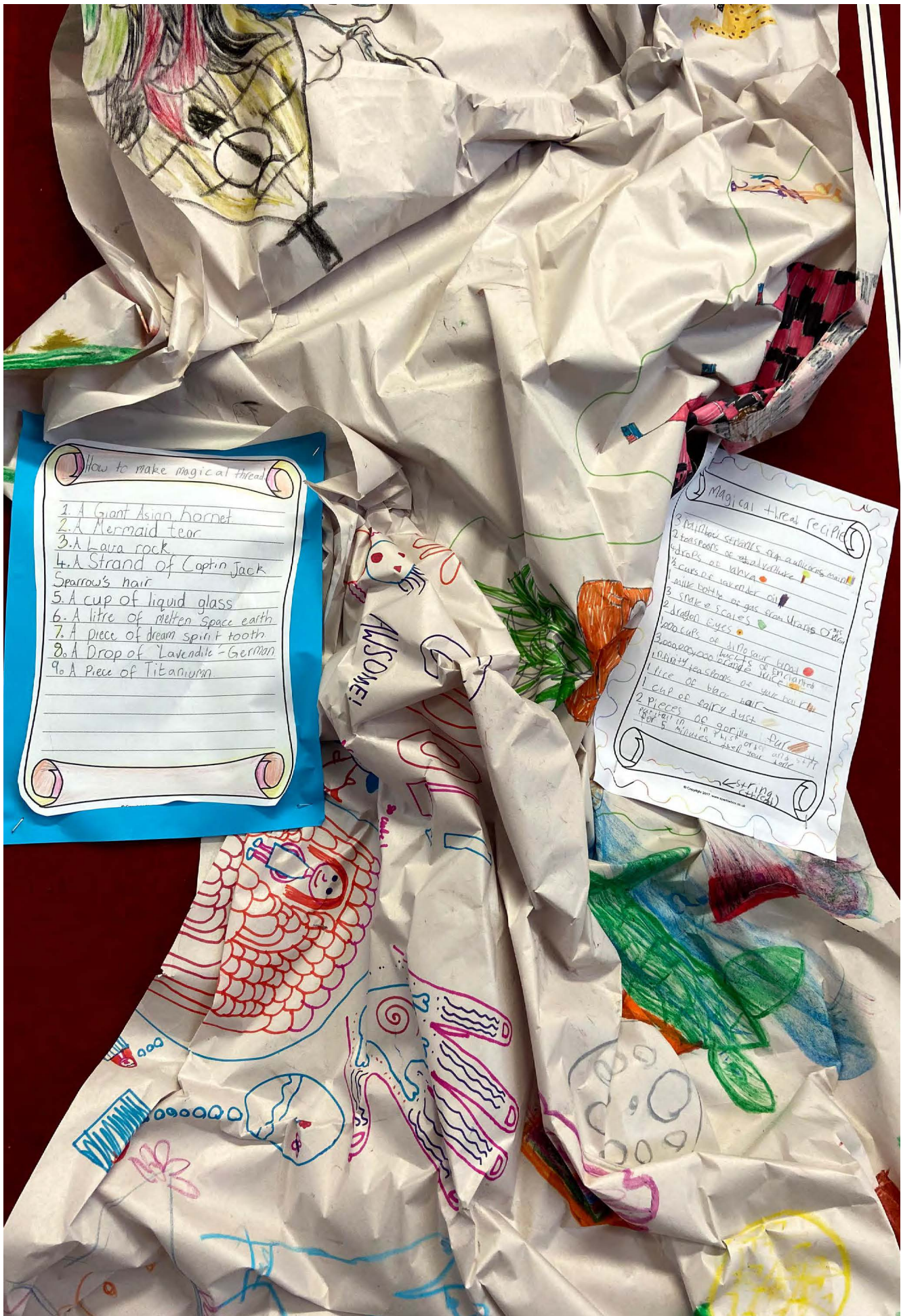
The idea of focusing on ‘bringing children back together’ recurred in interviews. The isolation circumstances created by lockdowns highlighted the importance of being together. The educators involved in this study understood that their professional and human response to the Covid-19 lockdowns needed to be based on social (re)connection. For them, the arts provided a privileged space to achieve this aim. They used Te Rito Toi because they were determined to put relationships and student wellbeing at the centre of school life. With this goal in mind, three of the principals interviewed encouraged the use of Te Rito Toi at the first staff meeting after lockdowns. See, for example, the following quote from one of these principals whose school was located close to one of the biggest Covid-19 outbreaks in Aotearoa New Zealand. As this principal explained, the educators of this school were receptive to the children's fears and anxieties regarding the pandemic and student wellbeing became their pedagogical priority:

“In one of our touch base sessions with all of the staff, we talked about it [Te Rito Toi] because the focus was on wellbeing and we were looking for things around wellbeing and creativity. So teachers just began to use it and [...] the teachers were using the resources from Te Rito Toi to actually bring the children back and to get them to talk about what it had been like [being in lockdown], they were listening to these stories because we had some kids who were really worried that their parents were going to die. [...] And it was really, just when people came back after the first lockdown, I just see it, you know, just have fun with our kids. And, you know, take the time and take the time for the conversation. So Te Rito Toi was a great springboard for that.”

Some teachers also recognised using Te Rito Toi provided creative and humane ways to deal with the physical distancing measures in place at the moment of returning to school. For instance, the following teacher used the dance work ‘Hello again!’ in Te Rito Toi to build social bonds, while remaining physically distant and safe in health terms:

“I chose the ‘Hello’ one because I thought it was quite a good way for them [children] to still be socially distanced, because we still had to be socially distant. But it got them out of the chairs and off the screen –because it was a full digital classroom. And so it was a great chance for them to close their computer screens and move around and say hello to people that weren't really in their friend group. And that's why I chose that one. And just because I thought it was a great way to kind of relate it back to the fact that people wearing masks and things like that, so they can't see you smile or can't see you say hello and things like that. So I thought that was a great chance to get them thinking about different ways to say ‘hi’.”

As the above quotes show, the main driving force to use Te Rito Toi was the need for schools to provide a more human and caring response to the Covid-19 lockdowns.



What did Te Rito Toi facilitate?

In this section, we focus on the exchanges, connections, identifications, understandings and feelings that Te Rito Toi helped facilitate for the educators involved in the study. The tendency in most interviews was to praise the pedagogical virtues of Te Rito Toi. We should clarify, however, that this section does not aim to idealise Te Rito Toi, but to explore its small contributions towards engaging students as learners, citizens and human beings. These contributions are explored through the perspective of the educators directly or indirectly involved in the use of Te Rito Toi. The complexity of pedagogical practice cannot be captured only through the perspective of the teachers, yet this perspective is indispensable to understanding what occurs in the classroom.

Building relationships

As explained in the previous section, building relationships was one of the main reasons why the educators that participated in this study used Te Rito Toi. In many cases, a desire to praise the pedagogical virtues of Te Rito Toi seemed to take precedence in the conversation over providing concrete examples. In some cases, however, the teachers shared with us rich examples of how the arts and Te Rito Toi helped them to work towards this purpose.

The following teacher used the 'Teaspoon of Light' lesson plan, which is an arts project that starts with the first two lines of a spoken story: "A young girl wakes up to get ready to visit her grandmother. As she gets up, she trips and tears her cloth of dreams...". The exercise of sharing feelings and experiences that the resource facilitated helped her students to relate and sympathise with each other:

"I just know that the whole group appreciated having the opportunity to share how they were feeling and, in particular, using their emotions and putting them into body actions [with the drama]. Yeah, they could relate. And I think as well that, even though the drawing does help them to kind of regroup as such, it was great to share it with their friends and the conversations that they had with each other were really valuable [...] they've all gone through a similar experience, they relate, you know, even though their experience was slightly differently because of their own families."

" I JUST KNOW THAT THE WHOLE GROUP APPRECIATED HAVING THE OPPORTUNITY TO SHARE HOW THEY WERE FEELING AND, IN PARTICULAR, USING THEIR EMOTIONS AND PUTTING THEM INTO BODY ACTIONS [WITH THE DRAMA]"

" WOW, THIS IS A REALLY GOOD, YOU KNOW, GOOD THING THAT WE'VE DONE JUST TO GET BACK, BUILD RELATIONSHIPS, TALK WITH EACH OTHER, YOU KNOW, GET BACK INTO SOCIETY A LITTLE BIT MORE"

For the following teacher, a sign that Te Rito Toi facilitated relationships was children's reluctance to use their electronic devices afterwards. In the dialogue with the students that this teacher reproduces in the following quote, it can be observed how students appreciated the time given by the resource to spend time together:

"It was just interesting when they didn't want to go back to their computers [...] And I think I said to the children: 'Why do you think we are not using our computers?' And some of the responses were really intriguing [...] because we're talking with each other, we're having fun, you know, we're talking in groups and we're discussing. And they had it all. And I said: 'That is why we've dropped the computers. [...] It was to build your relationships'. And so, they actually realised: 'Wow, this is a really good, you know, good thing what we've done just to get back, build relationships, talk with each other, you know, get back into society a little bit more.'"



For some participants, the use of Te Rito Toi also helped to create a sense of community beyond differences. The following teacher explained to us that, in her class, ‘Teaspoon of light’ promoted the development of caring relationships between boys and girls, which were initially very divided. As she said in her interview:

“It [Teaspoon of light] did help to build relationships. We are intermediate so you’ve got puberty kicking in, and very much an awareness of boys and girls and, you know, sort of being a little bit shy amongst each other or being a little bit silly. And they got to the stage where they actually all really cared about each other and they were very happy to support each other, even if it was in a sort of a roundabout way. Yeah, it definitely helped with relationships and they did have a sense of identity as a team.”

For this teacher, Te Rito Toi and the arts not only facilitate building relationships, but also show that other relationships are possible. As she says in the following quote, the drama process triggered by ‘Teaspoon of light’ helped to change the roles and dynamics of some of the students in the class:

“Just one interesting thing though. We’ve sort of got 12- and 13-year-old boys where it’s not cool to do anything that’s not with a soccer ball or something. One boy who was particularly interested in doing drama, and he wanted to try and the rest of the group was all girls. He joined a little bit later than the girls started. He got two of his mates, and he made them come along with him and so we had three boys. This just added a different dynamic because he was the leader with those boys, the other boys came along and because he was very cool, they took part. So, it was really interesting, and he was awesome to work with because he wanted to be there. I took a photograph once when they were decorating the dream cloth and putting all the dreams on the dream cloth, all three of these boys had their arms intertwined, like one person’s drawing here and the other arms here and they’re completely intertwined, working together and it was just gorgeous.”

“ ... ALL THREE OF THESE BOYS HAD THEIR ARMS INTERTWINED, LIKE ONE PERSON’S DRAWING HERE AND THE OTHER ARMS HERE AND THEY’RE COMPLETELY INTERTWINED, WORKING TOGETHER AND IT WAS JUST GORGEOUS.”



Sense-making and connecting with real world

One of the possibilities of Te Rito Toi highlighted by the educators that participated in this study was its ability to help children make sense of the world. None of the resources explicitly mention the words 'Covid-19' or 'pandemic', nor any other current affair, but the fictions these resources create appeal to the power of metaphor to relate back to both individual and collective experiences. Ultimately, however, it is the teacher who decides whether to keep this connection with the real world alive. While for some teachers the connections with current affairs were almost anecdotal, for others these connections were at the core of their Te Rito Toi experiences.

One of the principals of a school that used the 'Regulating robot' explained to us that this drama sparked discussions and social dilemmas around the management of the pandemic and other social issues. This resource is a drama that revolves around the design and programming of a robot, with the aim of providing possibilities to reflect on the consequences of both making and breaking the rules. The quote shown below exemplifies how the resource helped the teachers and students of this school to reflect upon a controversial issue and problematise the present:

"With the 'Regulating robot', it became less about the robot and just this place where the kids could actually talk about questions and issues around Covid, before they went into making their dramas. So, in the end, one group of children did a play, made up a drama, made up a kind of series of dramas, and eventually turned it into a performance around child labour in the 19th century in Otago, and the kind of oppression and rules that the children are forced to live under. And can you see how that indirectly goes back to the 'Regulating robot'? [...] the children started a discussion about: 'here we are in this constrained situation, where there are all these rules that operate under Level 4 and Level 3'. Then, you think: 'Well, if children are working in a factory, you know, they are not free, they're not like us, they can't do what they want with their normal lives, there are all these rules and conditions that the boss says, and they're basically not like children, they don't have school'. So, you see, it's a kind of an extension of their experience already into a fictional world, which of course, is what process drama is all about."

"... IT BECAME LESS ABOUT THE ROBOT AND JUST THIS PLACE WHERE THE KIDS COULD ACTUALLY TALK ABOUT QUESTIONS AND ISSUES AROUND COVID"

For some of the teachers that used the 'Green children' drama, this lesson plan elicited discussions about the Covid-19 pandemic and racism by using an old tale about two green children who turn up unexpectedly and mysteriously in a small town. As the following principal enthusiastically explained to us, the students were the ones connecting the situation of the green children with the Black Lives Matters protests that were occurring at that moment. As shown in section 3.3.2, the teachers of this school fostered the further exploration of this connection by introducing new variants to the drama such as making Green Lives Matter protests.

"That was just so exciting, really! That was just fascinating to watch. The green children, particularly [...] I don't think they expected that it would take off quite how it did, really [...] in one of the classes, they ended up making scale models of the town. And, because they were so invested in actually: 'What does this place look like?' And then because the other thing that happened was the Black Lives Matter protests [...] It was a child in both classes, when they had to write the letter saying why the children should be allowed to stay or shouldn't be allowed to stay. In both classes separately, a child said: 'Actually, hang on, this is like this'. So, they were able, they were reading news reports and, obviously, they're 11 and 12, they were watching lots about what was going on. So, they were having philosophical discussions around things like racism and protests and reading all this stuff about Black Lives Matter [...] They just switched green to black. But, yeah, it came from children, both times, which is really interesting."

Issues of exclusion and racism were also raised with the Mophead poem contained in the 'Superpower poetry fun' lesson plan. This poem tells the story of a Pasifika woman who, despite being called 'mophead', decides to let her hair out and embrace her difference. For the following teacher, this poem not only helped Pasifika students to relate with the author's experience, but also to identify social injustice and connect it with current and past phenomena (Black Lives Matter and Nazism, respectively):

"We did 'Mophead' and that was really good. I think that was good because they were able to relate because they're mainly Pasifika, they were able to really relate to how she was feeling and to her hair. [...] Yeah, and then there were a few comments flying around about racism, about how racist it was. And then other comments that were made, and the children were pulling up other children about racism as well. So it actually opened up a whole conversation about racism, and it was just around the time when Black Lives Matter came up. So they were able to relate that whole issue back and forth to each other [...] They made the connection with the racism of Mophead and the green children and the Black Lives Matter. So it all came together really nicely here. And then we were doing a session linked back to racism in Nazi Germany, so they're able to actually link it back. They could link it back to the racism within Nazi Germany with the Jewish and the Polish. And it was just really interesting how they transferred all of that knowledge, that understanding and realised how it just wasn't right [...] It was very good. And the thing is, it was just from a poem."

Dialogue

The idea of Te Rito Toi as an opportunity to dialogue was a recurring theme in most interviews. In the words of a previously cited principal, ‘Te Rito Toi was a springboard for conversation’. Most participants reported that Te Rito Toi provided a space where students could talk and express their feelings. For the teachers and Principal of a Pasifika majority school involved in the study, for example, this space was provided by the ‘Superpower Poetry Fun’ lesson plan. This resource is a set of poetry exercises aimed at helping students to creatively explore their own ‘why’. The school selected this lesson plan because the students could more easily relate to the feelings and experiences of the Pasifika author of the resource. For the students of the following teacher, the ‘My-Why poem’ in this resource provided a space for self-exploration and expression, which allowed lockdown-related feelings to arise. As the teacher explained to us:

“The big thing with ‘Mophead’, with ‘My-Why poem’, was that they didn’t realise but they were talking about themselves, and they were bringing in their feelings and anxieties during lockdown. When I looked back at it, you can see how they’re feeling during lockdown, you know, the feelings and thoughts during lockdown.”

When asked for specific conversations that arose from the use of Te Rito Toi, many educators could not remember any in particular. This response was meaningful itself because it reveals the level of intimacy of the conversations. This does not imply that less intimate conversations are not valuable; they are essential to know the students better and develop trusting relationships. As one of the participants of this study said:

“I think the power of it [Te Rito Toi] is the conversation that you have while you’re utilising the resources, really. It’s, I guess, spending time with the kids and [...] just actually having fun with the kids, sitting with the kids, whether it be the cloak of dreams or the ‘Teaspoon of light’, you chose what you work with. And then you spend time being part of it too and that’s when you get the richness of conversation coming through, that’s when you can actually feed in stuff or just hear stuff and tuck it away for a future time when you want to sort of expand on it a bit further. So I think it’s giving the teachers the opportunity to actually enjoy being with the kids and observing the kids. And having those conversations with them are not high stakes conversations. They’re conversations around Life, really.”

“ AND THEN YOU SPEND TIME BEING PART OF IT TOO AND THAT’S WHEN YOU GET THE RICHNESS OF CONVERSATION COMING THROUGH, THAT’S WHEN YOU CAN ACTUALLY FEED IN STUFF OR JUST HEAR STUFF AND TUCK IT AWAY FOR A FUTURE TIME WHEN YOU WANT TO SORT OF EXPAND ON IT A BIT FURTHER.”





One of the teachers who was able to remember some of the children's conversations that resulted from Te Rito Toi said the following:

"I started with the 'Teaspoon of light' exercise [...] a little story about Sarah, who tore her cloth of dreams. And they all started talking about their own bad dreams and their own good dreams and what it meant to dream. And what it might mean if you have bad dreams, and that kind of thing and open this discussion up that was very, very, um, I think the kids took risks by being vulnerable, by talking about some of their bad dreams. [...] There were some children who were anxious about Covid, but for many of them, it was lots of different things, things that I wouldn't have predicted like 'my best friend moves school and I don't have my best friend anymore' and things like that, not necessarily something really, really big, like a pandemic. But there were some who would say things like, 'I don't want my mom to get sick' or 'I'm worried about getting sick'. But then we say getting sick, they didn't necessarily mean with Covid, some kids mentioned cancer, some kids mentioned other illnesses. So I don't know if perhaps, pandemic and all the pandemic talk, maybe exacerbated some of those worries. But it also shows that just because we're in a pandemic doesn't mean that other worries aren't here. And also, that these kids did have very real concerns and worries prior and so we should be addressing them, and we should be giving them space to talk about them."

For this teacher, 'Teaspoon of light' prompted conversations about students' worries that, although exacerbated by the pandemic, moved beyond Covid-19. As she explained to us, this resource not only provided an opportunity for the children to talk about themselves, but also to be vulnerable and take the risk of talking about their inner fears. However, she also recognised its limitation to deal with ongoing systemic difficulties. Her students, who were mostly from low-income communities, had fears directly related to poverty. As she suggested in the interview:

"It'd be really cool to have some things in there [Te Rito Toi] that deal with how children cope with poverty, because that is an everyday trauma that a lot of children are going through unfortunately. And, as a country, we all want that to not be the case. But it is the case. And it would be, I think, incredible to have resources that reflect that. Because those are a lot of children's experiences of trauma."

" I THINK THE POWER OF IT [TE RITO TOI] IS THE CONVERSATION THAT YOU HAVE WHILE YOU'RE UTILISING THE RESOURCES, REALLY."

Hope in the future

Another possibility of using Te Rito Toi reported by some of the participants was its ability to instil hope. According to these participants, the dramatic circumstances generated by the pandemic triggered feelings of worthlessness and a lack of hope in the future, particularly among the most vulnerable students. The following principal from a low-decile school explained to us the importance of restoring hope to recover from this pandemic:

“I think there’s going to be a growing number of people who were not in that situation before COVID-19, who may be in that situation moving forward. And whilst the government, I think, is trying to do all that they can around it, the reality is that there will be some people that are facing economic circumstances that they never thought they were going to face. And so what does that look like, as far as the children are concerned, what you want is you want the kids to know hope, and to know that there is a way forward and that the adults will have a way forward, you know, and it’s sort of that, and I guess that’s why, the message that I wanted parents to have around, being conscious of their anxieties actually impacting on their children, was really, I wanted to put that at the front and centre.”

“ ... WHAT YOU WANT IS YOU WANT THE KIDS TO KNOW HOPE, AND TO KNOW THAT THERE IS A WAY FORWARD AND THAT THE ADULTS WILL HAVE A WAY FORWARD, YOU KNOW”

Other educators interviewed also took the opportunity of coming back together after lockdowns to restore hope in the world by devoting time to think about their students’ dreams. They reported that ‘Teaspoon of light’ provided students with a space to reimagine the future and keep their dreams alive.

“In particular I used ‘Teaspoon of light’ and my colleague next door did it as well. And they [students] just loved it, it was the therapeutic nature of just being able to draw on canvas and we had it, it’s not there now, but it was hanging in our classrooms, they are very visible, these are our dreams and hopes for the future. [...] We used it to talk about COVID-19, knowing that it was a time very new to us, a time in our lives that is very different for all of us and that we can have hope and that there is potential for the future.”

“ WE USED IT TO TALK ABOUT COVID-19, KNOWING THAT IT WAS A TIME VERY NEW TO US, A TIME IN OUR LIVES THAT IS VERY DIFFERENT FOR ALL OF US AND THAT WE CAN HAVE HOPE AND THAT THERE IS POTENTIAL FOR THE FUTURE.”

‘Teaspoon of light’ was also used by the following teacher who shared with us the educational experience that this resource ignited. As she says below, from the drama about the broken dreams, the students decided to take a series of actions to offer hope to the community:

“The students understood working between two worlds, one being that they were students at our school participating in a drama class and then as us as dream weavers working in the dream weaver’s company. And so... what they decided they wanted to do, in the end, was advertise their company because they wanted more students to come join drama and be dream weavers. But they said to me there’s another level, we want people in our community to understand that there is hope. I hadn’t said any of this to them deliberately, they came to these conclusions themselves. One, that they’d like more drama students working with them and two, that they’d like to offer some sort of hope to the community. So, in order to achieve both their aims simultaneously, they thought what they could do was create an advert, create a video advert, for their dream weaver’s company.”



Safety

Te Rito Toi as a safe place provider was also a recurring theme in interviews. The word ‘safe’, however, was used with different meanings. For some, the term ‘safe place’ referred to a space where students could be distracted from the anxious times lived outside of the school. Not surprisingly, the teachers who referred to Te Rito Toi as a safe place provider in this sense were the ones who reported few connections with real-world issues or controversies. These teachers, instead, usually highlighted the playful character of this resource. As can be observed in the quote below, the arts provided a path for the children to enjoy, have fun and feel safe in their return to school:

“I was very, very excited to get back into the classroom and for things to look different. I felt like it was an opportunity to hit the reset button on the year and kind of start fresh. So I knew that the days when we came back weren’t going to look exactly like how they looked when we first started the year. And I wanted that to be a good thing. So I wanted school to be fun. I didn’t want it to be overly regulated, overly scheduled. So I changed my planning completely, for example, for those first few weeks back in Level 2, a lot of my planning looked like art, dance... Like, I would add something for dance, and then leave space for whatever we needed to, whatever the kids felt like doing. I found that, yes, reading, writing, maths, those core curriculum subjects that we’re always, always thinking about, they occurred. But my priority was making sure the kids were safe and happy and enjoying and expressing themselves.”

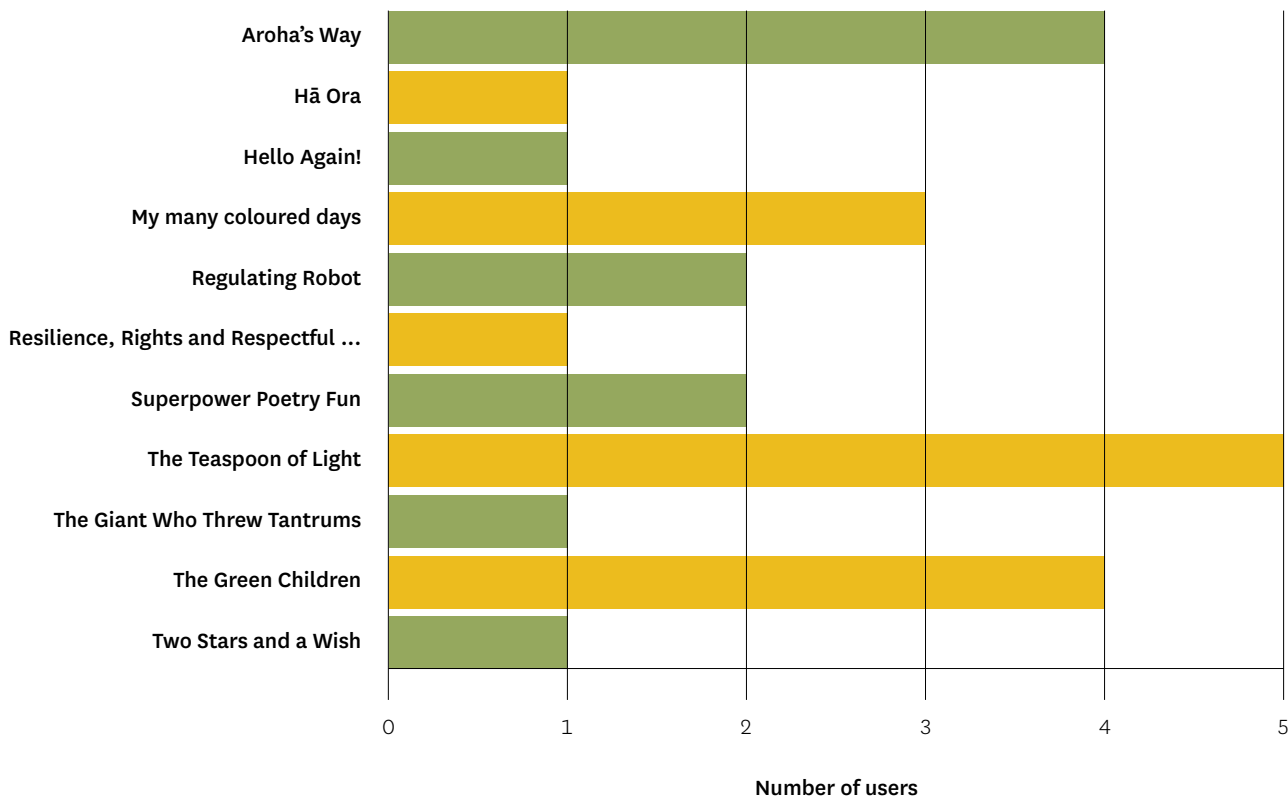
“ I WAS VERY, VERY EXCITED TO GET BACK INTO THE CLASSROOM AND FOR THINGS TO LOOK DIFFERENT. I FELT LIKE IT WAS AN OPPORTUNITY TO HIT THE RESET BUTTON ON THE YEAR AND KIND OF START FRESH.”

How did schools use Te Rito Toi?

Resources used

As can be seen in Figure 1, most of the resources used by the educators interviewed were lesson plans, being ‘The Teaspoon of light’ and ‘The Green children’ the most popular, utilised by 5 and 4 participants respectively. ‘Aroha’s way’ was the only picture book used by the participants. One resource included in the Bigger Context section of the website, ‘Resilience, Rights and Respectful Relationships’ (RRRR), was also used by a teacher.

Figure 1. Te Rito Toi resources used



Adaptations

Te Rito Toi is a resource that has no life of its own. It needs teachers and students that resignify and alter its contents. Most of the teachers that used Te Rito Toi did not strictly follow the script of the resources. While Te Rito Toi provided them with pedagogical strategies to bring the lesson plans into practice, the teachers made their own contributions to adapt the resources to their professional experience, student needs and school context. This section is focused on these adaptations.

As shown in Figure 1, ‘Teaspoon of light’ was the most highly used resource by the teachers that participated in the study. According to these teachers, the activities included in ‘Teaspoon of light’ were able to engage the students so enthusiastically that they took on a life of their own. All the teachers started with the drama about a girl who tears her cloth of dreams and the making of the dream cloth (see Image 1), but in most cases these activities were just the beginning of something else. For the teacher below, the writing of the recipe of how to make dreams took them a whole week:

“I got them to do some writing up of the recipe and just thought that will be a very quick, you know, five-minute activity, but they put so much effort into it and wrote such amazing recipes, that ended up being a whole week’s worth of writing. And they just loved sharing this, here and there. [...] it was only supposed to be a one-day activity, all the activities there on the website are all amazing, but they lend itself to so much more. Yeah, you can’t do just a small snippet.”

“ ... ALL THE ACTIVITIES THERE ON THE WEBSITE ARE ALL AMAZING, BUT THEY LEND ITSELF TO SO MUCH MORE.”

For the following teacher, the drama about the girl who tore her cloth of dreams and the subsequent discussions about possible ways to help her led the students to start a dream weaver's company that transcended the classroom walls:

"We took that initial story, where the little girl is going to visit her grandmother, and she wakes up in the morning, and she trips and tears her cloth of dreams. And so we went into role and played out that scene. Then, we handed over to the students and said: 'Well, what do you think?'. So, from what they said we took it further, and we developed the story as we progressed [...] we let the students direct our pathways more than us directing them. And it was their suggestion to help the little girl whose cloth of dreams had been ripped. Then we asked: 'Well, how would you do this?' I think I suggested: 'Let's have a dream company'. [...] The students became the dream weavers and so they were the experts. And they had their company called 'The dream weavers'. [...] what they decided they wanted to do, in the end, was advertise their company because they wanted more students to come join drama and be dream weavers."

As this teacher also explained to us, the second lockdown in Auckland happened when 'Teaspoon of light' started to take off in her class. At some point, she did not know how to bring the drama into the new online environment and, for this reason, decided to directly contact the author of the lesson plan, Prof. Peter O'Connor. The drama went on virtually with Prof. O'Connor acting as a liaison person for the dream weaver's company:

"It was after the first lockdown that I started [with 'Teaspoon of light'] and then being in Auckland, we had the second

lockdown. So it was to support the students after the first lockdown was why I started 'Teaspoon of light'. And then when we got into the second lockdown, we got to a stage where we had got so far that I did not want to leave the drama students without any contact, especially because the work was related to the impacts of Covid and lockdown. Although we had not specifically stated this. We were dealing with the issue of broken dreams. So I cheekily emailed Peter O'Connor and said to him: 'This is where I'm at, what do I do now?' I didn't even expect him to answer me. I gave him a few of the questions the students had asked, they were really quite in depth questions. [...] Peter answered saying the work I was doing was amazing and he was happy to work with us. I had a Zoom conversation with Peter and we planned where we'd go next. Then I had my drama students on Zoom, I went into the role of the grandmother to give them a bit more information about Sarah, the little girl whose dream cloth had torn. This also gave the students an opportunity to work online with somebody who was in role. This Zoom allowed the students to have that experience and also, I wanted them to have a bit more information about their character and themselves as Dream Weavers. Peter joined us for our next Zoom and he went into role as the liaison person for our dream weaver's company. He said he had been liaising with Sarah, the child whose dream cloth had been torn. This situation was really interesting because the students have obviously never met Peter and here he was as the liaison for their company. The more confident students actually asked questions, and we were very comfortable with Peter being in role [...] This allowed us to take the story that much further."



Image 1. Dream cloths and recipes (Teaspoon of light)



Image 2: Dream boxes (Teaspoon of light)

Another variant of 'Teaspoon of light' was introduced by the following teacher. This variant consisted of making little boxes to keep the students' dreams alive (see Image 2). As this teacher explained to us:

"We did the drama and the collaborative sort of making the cloak and the drawing and actually the cloak, I kept it in my classroom, I made it and I got shower curtain rings. I made it into a curtain and it closed off an area of the classroom. And the kids really liked it because it was still up there and things like that. The boxes, it was more like, you know, the treasures, the things that are important to you. And it was just again, it was an arty, crafty thing, sort of a spin off based loosely on that."

With 'The Green children' drama, students also took the leading role and changed the course of the lesson plan. Connections with social issues such as the Covid-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement played a key role in the implementation of this drama. As the following teacher described, the connection established with the Black Lives Matter movement led the students to deviate from the given path on several occasions.

They made 'Green Lives Matter' demonstrations as part of the drama process and blackout poems out of the words used to describe the green children (see Image 3):

"I think we used it quite similarly, but I didn't follow it as a script, per se. Or maybe the first couple of lessons I did. But in the end because the message was very much just take things slowly, take your time with it, we kind of got to a point with it after the first couple of lessons that I knew that, like, for example, once they'd made their families that they really wanted to map out their town so we had a big map along the back of the wall. They wanted to develop the character more, so we did. We did pieces of writing and stuff that wasn't necessarily in the plan. We did art and construction, and we had a Green Lives Matter protest out on the deck [...] towards the end, they did a piece of blackout poetry based on all of the... different words to describe the green children and a lot of them were not very nice. So we typed all those up on a doc and did some blackout poetry. And it was so cool. Some of the poems that came out of that about it [showed] how it wasn't easy being green."

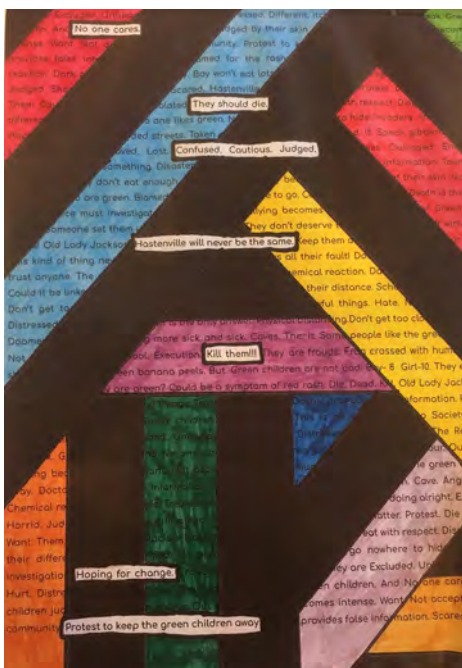


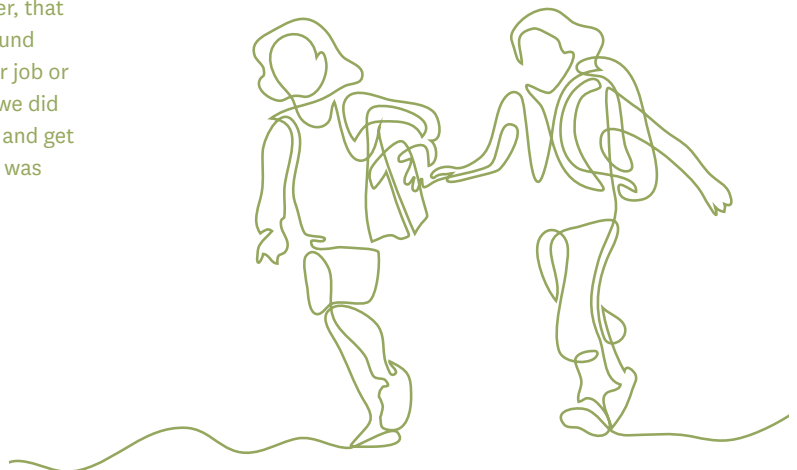
Image 3: Blackout poems (The Green children)



Image 4a: 2D town maps (The Green children)

Another teacher explained to us that his class focused on the map building part of the 'Green children' lesson plan. They developed a scale model of the town that they called 'Normalton' (see Images 4a and 4b), in which students had to rethink normality in urban design terms.

"I think that my classes really connected to the map building of the town, we call it 'Normalton'. And then the businesses that each family owned or operated, like this family is in charge of this, these families are in charge of that. So we ended up building the whole town to scale. So they built the buildings that they were, the police station or whatever, that they were in charge of. And I did like other writing around that I can't remember, like why they're so good at their job or something like that. I can't quite remember. [...] And we did some, like, close up photography of the models to try and get them back into scale, like real life scale. So yeah, that was really cool."



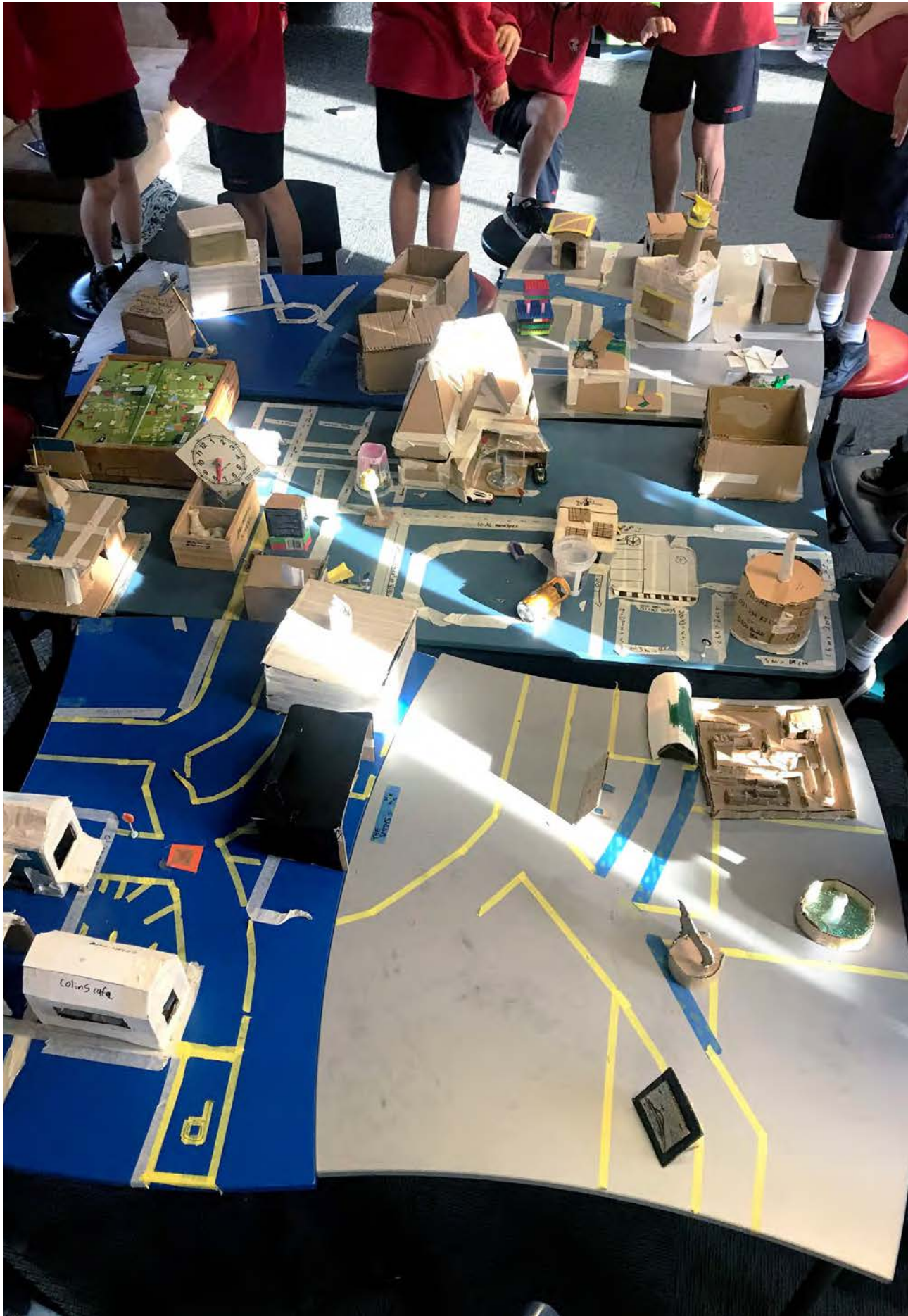


Image 4b: 3D town maps (The Green children)



Image 5. News report (The Green Children)

The following teacher initially followed the script of the 'Green children' lesson plan, making newspaper articles with the arrival of the green children (e.g., Image 5), maps, etc. Yet, at some point, the students make a clear connection with the Covid-19 pandemic creating their own isolation bubbles in the town and reimagining them (see Image 6):

"I broke it [The 'Green children' lesson plan] down exactly how pretty much was in Te Rito Toi, and every day it was a different part on a slide presentation of what we're actually going to look at and focus on. I think that actually took us two weeks, it took a long time, but it was broken down into newspaper articles, maps, town meetings, everything was

broken down into little tiny pieces on a daily basis. [At some point...] I had dough and I said I want you to build what how you would think it looked when the children were discovered by the farmer's wife. And so they did these amazing caves of palm trees and rocks and things. And then I went around and I don't know who started or why it started. But all of a sudden, they started creating bubbles. Okay, it was a really strange transition. So they went around, and then any playdough they had left over, they started creating their bubble [...] And then one of them was an isolation bubble, that it wasn't really a bubble, she pulled it down. So it was a heart. And so it was the children's family inside of this bubble that was actually a heart shape."



Image 6. Heart shape isolation bubble (The Green Children)

Aroha's True Feelings

*As fear and depression run down through my body,
 Sins I created I want to say sorry,
 I try my best to be happy and perfect,
 Now that I realise it all wasn't worth it, I'm so badly
 sorry for all of my sin,
 Such a cruel world we all have lived in
 Memories stay and memories go,
 My fear and my nightmares they started to flow,
 My anxiety and feelings continued to grow,
 Sometimes and mostly, I stay up at night,
 Do nothing exactly but stare at the sky,
 Wishing I'd die,
 Feeling so useless it's stuck on my mind,
 The love and the joy that I'm trying to find,
 Feeling so happy you're out of my sight,
 All that is left is dark with no light,
 Thought of my future it's stuck in my head,
 I start overthinking bout life and the dead,
 I always get bullied, was it something I said,
 Sometimes I wish I was normal as them,
 Always been treated like I'm an item,
 Scared to be present I feel really frightened,
 Thinking and wishing my heart could be lightened.*

Image 7. Aroha's true feelings poem (Aroha's Way)

The teachers who used the 'Aroha's way' and the 'My many coloured days' resources, which are both based on picture books about emotions, reported finding the questions provided by Te Rito Toi very helpful to orientate the reading of the books and following discussions. Beyond this, however, each class took their own path. In the case of 'Aroha's way', some teachers derived the discussion about the main character's feelings into a poem (see Image 7), while others created a poster and a roleplay (see Image 8). See the following quotes respectively:

"I was like: 'How do you think Aroha was feeling?' 'What emotions was she feeling?' And then we pretty much went straight to brainstorming on the whiteboard. And I was like: 'Okay, I want you to talk to your partner and think about different emotions that you've felt or Aroha felt'. [...] we kind of brainstormed emotions like anger, sadness, happy, confused, and things like that on the whiteboard and colours that kind of link to it and types of weather that reminded them of it. And so they picked five emotions and wrote five different poems about that emotion

We just read it very slowly went through it, pretty much a page a day, we just slowly went through it, and just broke down the language and kind of like the culmination of it was we had a big muslin sheet and I laid one of the children down and we went around with pastel, the body. And then we did a role on the wall of her feelings and the external feelings on the outside and how she was feeling on the inside. And then we did a little bit of roleplay of different ways you're feeling."



Image 8. Aroha's inner feelings and external circumstances (Aroha's Way)

“ AND WHEN I PUT DANCE ON THE BOARD FOR THE WHOLE DAY, THAT WAS LIKE THE BEST DAY EVER FOR ALL OF THEM”



'My many coloured days' is a dance work that explores the relationship between colours and feelings, using a picture book as a starting place. After reading and discussing the content of the book, some of the teachers encouraged students to do some visual arts (see Image 9), while the other followed the dance work described in the lesson plan. See the following quote from the latter:

“We did talk about some vocabulary and the colours of the different feelings. But my children, some of them had different colours and it felt like different emotions for them. Ones that you wouldn't exactly expect, like, for some kids, blue was happy. So we kind of just went with that, went with what they wanted to do. [...] I did lots of walking around, like, you're this colour or dancing like you're this colour. They love moving and they love music, so my class was very primed for a dance lesson. And when I put dance on the board for the whole day, that was like the best day ever for all of them.”



Image 9. Emotion explosions (*My many coloured days*)

In relation to the 'Regulating Robot' lesson plan, the two teachers who used it reported that the resource ended up being much more than a drama unit about programming some robots. For the following teacher, this lesson plan led into a very holistic, creative process that involved character development, writing, structure and advertisement production, etc.:

“I pretty much followed them straight through. But what came in... they're almost like tasters for bigger things. So what the robot thing ended up being was a whole writing unit around robots and an art unit around structures. And then, oral language around producing advertisements for the robots, like all of them leads to bigger things. [...] it was great. They [students] got so into it. Actually, I will tell you what, this was probably their favourite part of the whole thing was creating the name tags and creating their own names. And, actually, the names really reflected the personalities. I do remember them and half of them didn't want to take their name tags off, they wanted to stay in that role. They really got right into the different robots, which is why they ended up making them and writing ads for them and selling those ads, but they just love that whole concept about it.”

For the other school that used the 'Regulating robot', the initial idea of programming a robot triggered a series of drama about different social issues such as Covid-19 and child labour (see quote in section 3.2.2) and dystopian futuristic scenarios. As the principal explained to us:

“When we saw the 'Regulating robot' kicking in, the children were all talking a lot, and there was a lot going on, but then that process carried enthusiastically onto: 'Okay, Let's just imagine we can't live on the Earth anymore. And now we're living under the sea in these little pods. And then, at the end, when the children did these four different dramas, and my class did one as well, which was kind of really futuristic and dystopian. But what the children said and wrote about those things, it's just so brilliant, and amazing.”

The set of poetry exercises contained in the ‘Superpower Poetry Fun’ lesson plan developed by the Pasifika writer Associate Professor Selina Tusitala-Marsh were used by two schools. As explained in section 3.2.3, this resource was used by teachers with majority Pasifika students who resonated with the experiences and feelings of the author and found in the my-why poem a space for self-exploration (see Image 10). As the following teacher said to us, she took one of the lines of this poem to make a video about the students’ feelings during lockdown:

“[In the my-why poem] they [students] were bringing in their feelings and anxieties during lockdown. And they actually were just thinking it was about themselves. But when they actually looked back at it, when I looked back at it, you can see it was how they’re feeling during lockdown, you know, the feelings and thoughts during lockdown. So that was the 20-line, my-why poem about themselves. And that was very, very rich. And then I took one line from their My-Why poem to create the movie about the feelings during lockdown; it was meant to be a COVID movie. So I did that to express their feelings during the lockdown here. So that was actually, probably what moved them the most, developing that My-Why poem.”



My Why Life Poem

- Wanting a dog, my personal blog*
- My messy bed, my sleepy head*
- My crazy housemate, my up too late*
- My basketball game, my CS:Go play*
- My time with the boys, my soccer plays*
- My mango I eat, my Halloween treats*
- My Mom that I love, my lord above*
- My time with my cousins, my God that I summon*
- My family I love, my white clouds above*

Image 10. Poems (Superpower Poetry Fun)



Inside Aleenah’s Life

- My adventuring self. My height is an elf.*
- My shelves of books. My weird looks.*
- My many teachers. My sad HP character Kreacher.*
- My unique language. My egg sandwich.*
- My mom’s selfies. My I am unhealthy.*
- My St. Patrick’s school. My house-free rules.*
- My vinegar chips. My strawberry chocolate dips.*
- My OK maths. My fun at camps.*
- My family nights. My many sibling fights.*
- My family farm. My annoying alarm.*
- My classroom 8. My small weight.*
- My stealing dad’s jacket. My fruit burst packets.*
- My caramel tim tams. My dad’s good lamb.*
- My eating rice. My one device.*
- My silly friend Giselle. My Admired singer Giselle.*
- My confusion for fractions. My kinetic sand satisfactions.*
- My household of 5. My sour cream and chives.*
- My laughs so loud. My friends I found.*



Image 11. Map of town (The Giant who threw tantrums)

The Māori Resources in the Hā ora units were also used by one of the schools involved in the study. In particular, this school used the waiata (song) about the harakeke (flax), which became part of the school routine as a way to start the day at peace. The following teacher and principal reported finding the explanatory videos of the unit very helpful to correctly pronounce the waiata:

“From Te Rito Toi, there was that waiata about the harakeke. You know, if you pluck out the heart of the flax from the Hā Ora section, I used that with one of my classes, for example. And, first of all, we learned it. And Rawiri Hindle [...] came online and gave the children some tips on the pronunciation. And then it just became this thing that sometimes you don’t necessarily need to study it, right? [...] And then, you know, there were several occasions when I’d say: ‘Let’s start off with the poem’. And the children would all say it together, it was a really nice little ritual, almost like a karakia, to start the day with. [...] It was just one of the ways that helped children be nice and calm and relaxed.”

The ‘Giant who threw tantrums’ is a drama about a giant who throws tantrums, making the people of the town of Thistle Mountain fearful. This lesson plan used by one of the schools that participated in the study provided the students with creative paths to express their feelings and perceptions about Covid-19. Interestingly, as the principal of this school explained to us, the map of the town that the students created revolved around the hospital (see Image 11):

“In the ‘Giant who threw tantrums’ their map was fascinating because they had the mountain, just beautiful. The hospital is the biggest thing on that map, you know, we’d come up with, it’s Covid-19. So the hospital is enormous on the map. And everything else sort of pales in comparison. It’s really interesting to watch.”



Limitations and difficulties

Participants also mentioned some limitations regarding the Te Rito Toi resources. These limitations refer to both the form and content of Te Rito Toi. In relation to the former, some of the less experienced teachers interviewed recognised that they would have appreciated having some visual demonstrations of some of the resources. See, for example, the following quote from one of these teachers:

“if you see something, you’re probably more likely to do it. Like well, for me, I see it, then I go back and read it rather than read something and then go and see it. So, I think, that’s catering for another avenue having those pictures on things and photos for people to look at.”

Teachers who used resources that were supported by video demonstrations reported finding them very helpful. A teacher who used the ‘Many coloured days’ unit said the following with regards to the video of a dancer showing the dance work step-by-step:

“I found it really useful to see what she was doing. [...] it definitely made it more understandable. And I could break it down a bit more. Because it’s really hard to see and visualise things on paper. I kind of need a visual guide. So yeah, it was really helpful.”

Other teachers also suggested having brief summaries of the lesson plans to help them with the selection process. As the following teacher explained to us, such detailed lesson plans were helpful for the implementation phase, but discouraged them from selecting some resources:

“I’ve got one thing [to say]. When talking about how we chose ‘The Green children’, I did go on and read a couple of other resources, but... a one-page synopsis of what the unit is about, so when you are choosing, you don’t need to read, cos it’s really great. It’s great detail. Love it. But just when you’re picking, a little bit more information about what it is about without having to read pages and pages and pages of information, I think would have been helpful.”

The participants also found some limitations regarding the content of Te Rito Toi. For instance, five participants suggested including more culturally diverse perspectives in the lesson plans. As the following teacher clearly stated:

“I was thinking about being more culturally diverse in the resources. That they could be adapted to perhaps... Like maybe something from ‘Teaspoon of light’ could be interesting, through incorporating some myths from other cultures or about sleep. Yeah, I have a very large Samoan and Tongan population in my class, and it would be really cool if there were some reflection of that in the arts resources. Yeah, perhaps just thinking more about some of the performing arts traditions in those cultures. Not necessarily just for ‘Teaspoon of light’ or ‘Many coloured days’, but that, for Level 1 and 2, there were some more of those cultures represented.”

Another content limitation perceived was that there were no resources related to visual arts. In particular, three participants explicitly mentioned a lack of visual arts in the lesson plans. As one of them said:

[To the question: what do you think is missing in Te Rito Toi?]

“I think the visual art thing, there’s some in there, but [...] I think some visual art stuff would be good in there.”

Two participants working in a low-decile school also suggested Te Rito Toi should have some resources that more directly address poverty issues. As one of these participants explained to us, poverty is a daily reality for several children in their school:

[To the question: Can you think of any other improvements that we can make?]

“I know that our children struggle, living in homes where, you know, it’s really hard to get food. And yeah, it’s just hard. And people have lost their jobs, we’ve got a number of people who are living in motels and that they’re homeless, basically. And so thinking about that, and that context, I guess... And the kids themselves are really resilient, but it’s hard and it’s hard on their families. And, you know, when things get tough, often adults get stressed. And there’s arguments in and things like that happen. So thinking about: What does that look like? What does it look like when we’re a child? And we’ve got adults that we love arguing and, you know, what is that like? And how do we actually support kids in that space?”

“ ... IT’S JUST ONE OF THOSE THINGS THAT WOULD BE LOVELY TO GO AND GRAB, YOU KNOW, GRAB A RESOURCE AND JUST FLY WITH IT A COUPLE OF TIMES A WEEK OR WHATEVER. SO YEAH, YOU JUST NEED TO PUT MORE STUFF IN THERE”

Despite the above-mentioned limitations and difficulties, however, the teachers, principals and team leaders that participated in this study highly esteemed Te Rito Toi and encouraged us to expand the selection of resources. See, for instance, the following quote from one of the teachers:

“I would just add more stuff to it, resources, just keep adding to it. Because, as a teacher, it’s the best thing to know that you can have a focus on it over a term or every few terms. But it’s one of those things that’s actually really lovely to go to in the afternoon, when everyone’s a bit tired and it’s just one of those lovely things because it relaxes people, it gets them talking and learning without them knowing that they are learning. And sharing and discussing it, it’s just one of those things that would be lovely to go and grab, you know, grab a resource and just fly with it a couple of times a week or whatever. So yeah, you just need to put more stuff in there.”



What made the use of Te Rito Toi possible?

Social consensus on wellbeing

One element that made possible the inclusion of the arts in NZ schools after the Covid-19 lockdowns was the social consensus on wellbeing. One principal involved in the study said, "I think that the whole focus on wellbeing was absolutely where we were at and it was front and centre of mind for everyone." All the teachers that participated in this study reported feeling supported by their management teams and school community to focus on student wellbeing over other academic goals. The following beginner teacher expressed it like this:

"It [lockdown] was very hard because most of our job is just being there for children, in their learning and in their everyday lives. So that was difficult. I felt it was also a great opportunity to adapt. And I felt like my school was very supportive. And we put wellbeing first. So that felt very good. I felt like we were headed in the right direction."

" BECAUSE, AS A PRINCIPAL, IT WAS WONDERFUL FOR ME, WHEN WE CAME BACK AFTER THAT FIRST LOCKDOWN, TO BE ABLE TO SAY: 'LOOK, YOU KNOW, HAVE THE CONVERSATIONS AROUND WHAT HAD HAPPENED AND THE USE OF THE RESOURCES AND ALL OF THAT'. AND THEN TO SAY: 'RIGHT, LET'S JUST GO FOR IT, I WANT YOU TO REALLY BE THINKING ABOUT IT, YOU KNOW, CREATIVELY AROUND OUR NEXT LOT OF PLANNING'"

" AND SO IT ACTUALLY REALLY LIBERATED PEOPLE INTO THINKING A LITTLE DIFFERENTLY."

The disruption created by the pandemic made many participants reflect on the importance of rebalancing the school curriculum towards the arts and wellbeing and interpret lockdowns as an opportunity for change. As the following principal said to us:

"We have had a time where literacy and numeracy have overtaken the creativity of the curriculum. So there's sort of a couple of things going on here. One is the wellbeing focus and the emotional focus and all of that [...] And the other part of it, though, is actually reinvigorating both children and teachers back into that creative curriculum space. So I think there's a two pronged benefit [of lockdowns] going on here. Do you get what I mean by that? Because, as a principal, it was wonderful for me, when we came back after that first lockdown, to be able to say: 'Look, you know, have the conversations around what had happened and the use of the resources and all of that'. And then to say: 'Right, let's just go for it, I want you to really be thinking about it, you know, creatively around our next lot of planning' [...] And we just got big sheets of paper, and they just brainstormed what they were going to do for Term Three, I think it was on these big sheets of paper. And I said: 'Take photographs of those, and that's your planning'. And so it actually really liberated people into thinking a little differently."



Support from NZEI, NZPF and UNESCO

As several participants recognised, support from organisations like NZEI and NZPF in the promotion of Te Rito Toi was decisive in reaching their ears. These organisations distributed the resource via email but, more importantly, organised online seminars in which Professor Carol Mutch and Professor Peter O'Connor had the opportunity to provide research-based advice on reopening schools post disaster and introduce the website and resources. For various teachers, these seminars were really inspiring. See, for example, the following quote from one of these teachers:

“We were invited to a Zoom meeting with Professor Peter O'Connor. And that was probably the biggest eye opener and the best thing that happened at that stage of thinking about going to school. That had quite an effect on me, because I hadn't really heard anyone talk like that before. I'd seen him on TV after the Christchurch earthquakes and what he did with children, [...] but listening to his Zoom and going into the Te Rito Toi website and listening to him and listening to the reasoning behind why you should use the arts was quite powerful for me. And because there were three of us that were invited to that meeting because of our roles in the school, we've put together like a wee summary of it and links to things and links to the websites. And it will give us justification to go back and do things differently. And I think, personally, I needed that. I needed somebody to say to me: 'Actually, schools are going back, but school needs to be just a little bit different'.”

Professional development in arts education

In terms of experience with arts education, the profile of the participants was varied. While some had long professional records in arts education, others were just initiating their journey. All of them, however, had done at least some professional development in the field of arts education or wellbeing. Indeed, some of the less experienced teachers recognised that having previously attended workshops, seminars and/or sessions –frequently promoted by their management teams– was determinant in their decision of using Te Rito Toi.

“So we've also been receiving, as teachers, professional development on becoming more trauma-informed. And so I've become a lot more, I was always very passionate about teaching children about managing anxiety and helping them cope. [...] But I feel even more empowered to do so. Especially with a school that's very supportive of us trying these things and responding to children's needs, and not necessarily just going with what we think we need to be doing, you know, to meet our Ministry goals, but actually look at what the children need. So I have felt like very empowered to take what I've learned from that professional development.”

“ I WAS ALWAYS VERY PASSIONATE ABOUT TEACHING CHILDREN ABOUT MANAGING ANXIETY AND HELPING THEM COPE. [...] BUT I FEEL EVEN MORE EMPOWERED TO DO SO. ESPECIALLY WITH A SCHOOL THAT'S VERY SUPPORTIVE OF US TRYING THESE THINGS AND RESPONDING TO CHILDREN'S NEEDS, AND NOT NECESSARILY JUST GOING WITH WHAT WE THINK WE NEED TO BE DOING, YOU KNOW, TO MEET OUR MINISTRY GOALS, BUT ACTUALLY LOOK AT WHAT THE CHILDREN NEED.”

Step-by-step proposals

All of the teachers who felt less confident with arts education recognised finding very useful the high level of detail of the proposals. For the following teacher, for example, including not only teacher guidelines but also orientations about the children's responses was very important:

“What was most useful was the step-by-step process [...] For example, it gives you teachers guidelines, and, on the other side, it tells you exactly what the children should be doing [...] Sometimes lesson plans are very vague. And for a teacher who is not used to teaching drama or not used to teaching in this way, that would be quite daunting. But this felt like: 'OK, I've got this guide, this is what I should be doing. This is what the children should be doing. If I don't see that it's working, I can adapt it'. But it did. So that was what was very useful.”



Having such detailed proposals also gave the participants the necessary confidence to be flexible and adapt the resource to the students' interests. In the words of one of the teachers:

"I think we used it quite similarly, but I didn't follow it as a script, per se. Or maybe the first couple of lessons I did. But in the end because the message was very much just take things slowly, take your time with it, we kind of got to a point with it after the first couple of lessons that I knew that, like, for example, once they'd made their families that they really wanted to map out their town so we had a big map along the back of the wall. They wanted to develop the character more, so we did. [...] So yeah, heaps of things that came out of it that weren't in the plan, per se. But what I loved was just having that. I wouldn't have been able to do it, pull something off like that by myself. And I think just having a plan that I knew I could come back to and I did come back to. It was really nice just having it, using it as a sort of loose guide, a loose plan."

Research-based resources

For some of the principals and team leaders involved in the study, that Te Rito Toi was a research-based resource launched by renowned scholars that provided them with the confidence to promote its use among teachers in their schools. As the following principal explained to us, the research-based approach of Te Rito Toi gave them a stronger argument to encourage the use of the arts after lockdowns:

"Because, you know, some people might feel inclined to say: 'Oh, you just need to let the children play or do the basics or whatever, cut everything down and reduce it'. We said: 'No, you got a rich programme here. Look what Te Rito Toi says, and Peter O'Connor, this is what it says'. And it sort of just gives you confidence that you're doing the right thing. You know? And the researchers say: 'Actually, this is the right way to cope, after something like that. It's a unique event that the children will actually benefit and thrive'. Flourish is the word we like to use. They will flourish by having this arts rich approach that, of course, Te Rito Toi exemplifies."

Some teachers with few experiences in arts education also valued very highly the research-based approach of Te Rito Toi. See, for instance, the following quote from one of these teachers:

"I watched the webinar that Peter did with the guy from NZEI [...] And just the way that he talked about the research, that it was research-based, really appealed for me [...] I would say that I felt comfort in using something that I knew was based on research."

After Covid-19, what comes next?

Te Rito Toi was developed specifically to help teachers respond to the extraordinary circumstances of Covid-19. However, what we also understand is that Covid-19 occurs in a time of increasing crisis, uncertainty and disruption. Children carry the fears, anxieties and concerns of multiple events in their short lives. The work principals and teachers do post crisis or more accurately during the ongoing crises that many children face must centre around well researched pedagogical approaches that recognise and validate the emotions and fears of children rather than a return to normal approach supported by trauma teams that only assist the most vulnerable of children. For this reason, the question we address below is: What can we learn from the use of Te Rito Toi during Covid-19 to support schools in future crises?

An important finding of this study is that the social consensus around student wellbeing was a determinant for providing a human response to Covid-19 and using the arts and Te Rito Toi. The support from principals, team leaders and education organisations such as the NZEI and NZPF gave teachers the necessary confidence to prioritise student wellbeing through the arts over other academic goals. This consensus contrasts with the approaches adopted by the Ministry of Education in previous disasters that focused on helping students catch up with academic work and getting back to normal as quickly as possible (O'Connor, 2013). Fortunately, in previous disasters such as the Canterbury earthquake experience, most principals largely ignored this advice and actively worked towards student wellbeing (see Mutch, 2014; Fletcher & Nicholas, 2015). As the ERO report into schools' response to the Canterbury earthquakes suggested, "Pastoral care and wellbeing were the most important focus at the time of the immediate crisis and in the aftermath" (ERO, 2013, p.1).

The Ministry of Education's focus, and rightly so, during the reopening of schools after lockdowns in 2020 was more nuanced. Significant resources and energy were spent in ensuring the physical safety of children and there were attempts to ensure schools were aware of the mental health and wellbeing of children post-Covid. This was undertaken through a series of webinars, and reference online to mental health resources.

However, the consensus around wellbeing and the arts should not be limited to the extraordinary times caused by Covid-19. The socio-emotional abilities and feelings of belonging and connectedness promoted by Te Rito Toi have been proved to be key to young people's wellbeing (Cushman et al., 2011; Franze & Paulus, 2009). Abundant research has also shown the close relationship between academic success and youth wellbeing (see Durlak et al., 2011). However, as the recent report about the state of creativity in New Zealand schools concluded (O'Connor & Anderson, 2020), "the arts, well-being and education remain unconnected in any meaningful way within New Zealand schooling" (p.17).

“ CHILDREN CARRY THE FEARS, ANXIETIES AND CONCERNS OF MULTIPLE EVENTS IN THEIR SHORT LIVES. THE WORK PRINCIPALS AND TEACHERS DO POST CRISIS OR MORE ACCURATELY DURING THE ONGOING CRISES THAT MANY CHILDREN FACE MUST CENTRE AROUND WELL RESEARCHED PEDAGOGICAL APPROACHES THAT RECOGNISE AND VALIDATE THE EMOTIONS AND FEARS OF CHILDREN RATHER THAN A RETURN TO NORMAL APPROACH SUPPORTED BY TRAUMA TEAMS THAT ONLY ASSIST THE MOST VULNERABLE OF CHILDREN.”

The stories of the teachers and principals interviewed hinted at the impact of Covid-19 on children’s trust in the world and showed the role of the arts in meaning making and the renewing of hope. The lesson plans took different mediums of expression (dance, drama, conversation, etc.) that provided ways for children to build relationships, explore and describe emotions, engage with possibility and reimagine the world. We understand that these outcomes should not be reserved for the extraordinary circumstances generated by Covid-19. Yet, this requires that the Ministry of Education more seriously commits to uplift the value of the arts in the New Zealand curriculum.

The significant uptake of the online resource and numbers of teachers engaging with the webinars suggest there is an extraordinary demand for meaningful classroom support for teachers post crises. The positive response from the educators who used the Te Rito Toi lesson plans confirms this need. Having a research-informed resource publicly supported by the teachers’ union and principals’ federation was critical to take it as a serious alternative to the “back to normal” approach. Teachers and principals were aware of Te Rito Toi thanks, to a large extent, to the networks provided by these organisations via mail, website and webinars. This study suggests that collaboration and partnerships are essential to help schools in post disaster recovery. For future crises, the knowledge of and interest in Te Rito Toi would be further fostered with the endorsement of the Ministry of Education.

The study also suggests that the use of Te Rito Toi after the Covid-19 lockdowns was highly dependent on the educators’ dispositions towards the arts and mental health education and their professional development in these areas. As the interviews indicate, the teachers who used Te Rito Toi had at least some training in arts education and/or student wellbeing. Offering teacher education courses that bring together arts and wellbeing seems to be a necessary step to support schools in future crises (Mutch & Latai, 2019). We support Carol Mutch’s research into Canterbury schools response to the ongoing crises of the earthquakes and her recommendations that:

“Pre-service or in-service programmes could consider alerting teachers to the possibilities of unexpected events, how they might respond and where to go for assistance. Another recommendation is that disaster response and recovery agencies need to actively involve teachers and principals in emergency planning and training, given that at any one time during a school day, thousands of students could be in the care of teachers when a major emergency event occurs (2014, p. 86).”

Finally, the teachers and principals that participated in this study were effusive about the pedagogical value of Te Rito Toi, but also pointed out some content limitations that should be taken into account. They suggested including more culturally diverse resources, visual arts projects and units connected with poverty to face the diversity of realities that New Zealand children face. Other minor changes to the website, such as including visual demonstrations and brief summaries, were also highlighted to make the resources more accessible to those teachers less confident with the arts.

“ HOWEVER, THE CONSENSUS AROUND WELLBEING AND THE ARTS SHOULD NOT BE LIMITED TO THE EXTRAORDINARY TIMES CAUSED BY COVID-19. THE SOCIO-EMOTIONAL ABILITIES AND FEELINGS OF BELONGING AND CONNECTEDNESS PROMOTED BY TE RITO TOI HAVE BEEN PROVED TO BE KEY TO YOUNG PEOPLE’S WELLBEING”





Conclusion

During New Zealand Covid-19 lockdown, Te Rito Toi brought together academics, artists and educational practitioners to create an online resource aimed at providing arts- and research-based classroom support for teachers in their return to school. Shortly after its launch, Te Rito Toi had over 250,000 visits and its webinars were attended by over 30,000 teachers. The support from UNESCO and the World Alliance of Arts Educators gave Te Rito Toi a global push.

In this report, we have examined the use of Te Rito Toi in New Zealand schools following the Covid-19 lockdown. This study revealed that Te Rito Toi offered educators caring pedagogical pathways to help children deal with the lockdowns, filling an important gap in the New Zealand educational response to the pandemic. The international recognition gained from the OECD (van Lieshout, 2020) suggests that this gap has not been unique to Aotearoa New Zealand. Hopefully, this global need for a human response in schools post-disaster will keep inspiring initiatives like Te Rito Toi.

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