

How does Te Reo Māori enhance the wellbeing of staff at AUT?

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Abstract

This study examines the impact of Te Reo Māori on the holistic wellbeing of Māori staff at Auckland University of Technology (AUT), using a Kaupapa Māori Research methodology approach and Te Whare Tapa Whā health model as guiding frameworks. Through semi-structured interviews with six Māori staff members, the research investigated how engagement with Te Reo Māori enhances cultural identity, emotional resilience, social belonging, and professional empowerment in the workplace.

Findings demonstrate that Te Reo Māori extends beyond a linguistic function, acting as a powerful mechanism for cultural reclamation and holistic wellbeing. Participants described enhanced self-confidence, enriched workplace relationships, and a reinforced sense of cultural identity through language engagement. However, whakamā (feelings of shame or embarrassment) and intergenerational language loss emerged as challenges to engagement. The study highlights the critical role of workplace Te Reo Māori initiatives in enhancing staff wellbeing and affirming cultural identity.

This research contributes to the broader discourse on language revitalisation and Indigenous wellbeing, emphasising the necessity for continued investment in Te Reo Māori to enhance staff wellbeing. This study advocates for expanded workplace language initiatives and deeper investigation into professional environments to further examine the intricate connections between language, identity, and wellbeing.

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Attestation Of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor used artificial intelligence tools or generative artificial intelligence tools (unless it is clearly stated, and referenced, along with the purpose of use), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Trent Dallas

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An obvious yet not overlooked aspect that I wanted particularly to acknowledge is that this thesis has primarily been presented in English, and the irony is not lost on me. However, this indicates the ongoing journey and struggles that Te Reo Māori revitalisation still is on and reflects me and the participants who navigate both English and Te Reo Māori personally and professionally.

Ethics Approval

Research ethics for *How does Te Reo Māori enhance the wellbeing of staff at AUT?* was Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 7 November 2022 AUTEK Reference number 22/254

Chapter One: Introduction

Ko tōku reo, tōku ohooho, tōku māpihi maurea, tōku whakakai marihi
My language is my awakening. My language is the window to my soul

In the footsteps of recent Māori research practices, this thesis embeds whakataukī (proverbs) throughout, reinforcing a Māori worldview and aligning with the Kaupapa Māori methodological approach adopted by the research. This particular whakataukī encapsulates the cultural and spiritual essence of Te Reo Māori (the Māori language), reflecting the respect, reverence, and intrinsic value with which it is held. The inclusion acknowledges personal language reclamation and its role as the foundation of Māori identity and self-determination.

Introduction

Over the last two decades, substantial investment and policy efforts have been directed toward revitalising Te Reo Māori across Aotearoa/New Zealand. These initiatives have increased the language's visibility in daily life while deepening its role in cultural identity and reconnection to whakapapa. However, despite extensive research into language revitalisation, a significant gap persists in examining how language engagement influences holistic wellbeing.

While studies have explored language policy, intergenerational transmission, and Māori-medium education, far less is known about how workplace language initiatives impact Māori staff—particularly regarding their role in strengthening staff wellbeing. This study addresses that gap by examining the lived experiences of Māori staff at Auckland University of Technology (AUT). It explores how engagement with Te Reo Māori enhances cultural identity, professional confidence, and holistic wellbeing in a workplace setting.

This research is guided by the central question:

"How does Te Reo Māori enhance the wellbeing of staff at AUT?"

Significance of the study

Wellbeing has become a focal point in the last ten years, with increasing recognition of the importance of holistic health in society. Coupled with an ongoing surge of interest and participation in Te Reo Māori programmes; this research offers a meaningful contribution to the conversation on two distinct, yet coalescent domains, language revitalisation and workplace wellbeing.

Harris et al. (2016) support the call to address the scarcity of research related to Māori employees' perceptions of workplace Māoritanga, and this also mirrors an international shortage of Indigenous people's workplace wellbeing perspectives. To address the gap in scholarship, this study focused on the lived experiences of six Māori staff members at AUT who had actively participated in Te Reo Māori learning initiatives in the previous two years.

Beyond fulfilling the academic requirements for a master's qualification, this thesis serves as a platform to amplify Māori voices through a Kaupapa Māori lens that prioritises participant experiences. By documenting their lived realities, the study contributes to the broader discourse on Māori language revitalisation and workplace wellbeing, shedding light on the opportunities and challenges associated with engaging in Te Reo Māori within professional settings. Moreover, this research provides practical insights for institutions seeking to foster an environment that supports Te Reo Māori engagement among their Māori staff.

AUT

AUT is one of eight universities in New Zealand and was established in 2000 following its transition from the Auckland Institute of Technology. The university has a student population of more than 26,000 and employs nearly 4,000 staff across its three Auckland campuses: City, North Shore, and South. Māori students account for approximately 12% of the student body (Auckland University of Technology, n.d.).

The university comprises five faculties and several research units, including Te Ara Poutama – The Faculty of Māori and Indigenous Development, which plays a crucial role in advancing Māori education and offers Te Reo Māori courses. Additionally, AUT is also home to Te Ipukarea – The National Māori Language Institute, which is at the forefront of Māori language research and digital innovation, producing educational resources, linguistic research, and community outreach programs (Te Ipukarea, n.d.). As part of its commitment to Te Tiriti o Waitangi, AUT instils an environment where students and staff engage meaningfully with Te Ao Māori and Mātauranga Māori.

AUT has been actively promoting Te Reo Māori through a range of classes and initiatives across its three Auckland campuses, and its engagement spanned across formal activities, such as course-based learning, and informal spaces, including karanga workshops and waiata gatherings. Such an environment provides a compelling test ground to examine the intersection of language revitalisation and wellbeing.

My Story

Ko wai au? Who am I?

Ko Ngāti Tūkorehe me Te Aitanga-a-Hauiti ōku iwi

Ko Trent Dallas tōku ingoa

I pay due respect to my iwi in the most traditional Māori fashion via my pepeha, perhaps to mirror my language skills; this is intentionally kept short and brief but inherently centred on my iwi. This reference also speaks of my journey with Te Reo Māori, which has been central to shaping this research. Like many Māori, I have grappled with language loss and cultural disconnection, often lamenting my limited fluency and incomplete understanding of the deeper intricacies of Te Reo Māori.

The foundation of this research and its primary question stems from my personal and professional journey with Te Reo Māori during my six years in Māori student support roles at AUT. Those experiences provided invaluable opportunities to engage with Te Reo as a learner and facilitator, strengthening my connection to my heritage and reinforcing an intrinsic relationship between language and culture. Throughout that tenure, I encountered widespread anecdotal accounts of the holistic benefits of Te Reo Māori, highlighting its significance and underlying importance to our wellbeing. Yet, despite widespread acceptance of the benefits of Te Reo Māori in Maoridom, formal research on its impact in workplace settings remained limited. This realisation ignited the drive to complete this study, driven by a sense of curiosity and a commitment to academic rigour. I sought to answer the central question: How does Te Reo Māori enhance the wellbeing of staff?

As an adult second-language learner and staff member who worked with hundreds of Māori students undertaking their cultural journeys at the university, I gained invaluable insights into the struggles and aspirations of Māori seeking to reclaim their linguistic heritage. The influence of my own AUT "whakapapa" on this research is significant and not overlooked, and I acknowledge that my perspective as an advocate for Te Reo Māori has shaped the direction and focus of this study. This research, however, is a koha in some sense, as it reflects my commitment to reconnection, empowerment, and wellbeing through language revitalisation, not only for myself but also for the wider Māori community at AUT. Through this process in this research, my understanding of the complexities of Māori language revitalisation within a university setting has only deepened and reinforced my support to sustain my Te Reo Māori engagement and contribute to an emerging research landscape.

While my experiences inform my passion for this topic, the significance of this study extends beyond my personal journey, contributing to a larger academic discourse on Te Reo Māori revitalisation and staff wellbeing in professional space.

Structure of the Thesis

Chapter Two: Literature Review critically examines research on Te Reo Māori, Indigenous language revitalisation, and workplace wellbeing, positioning this study within broader academic discourse. It explores historical and contemporary efforts to sustain Te Reo Māori, its role in cultural identity, and language engagement psychological, social, and professional benefits.

This chapter identifies gaps in the literature, particularly the limited empirical research on workplace language initiatives and their impact on staff wellbeing.

Chapter Three: Methodology outlines the theoretical framework and research methodologies underpinning this study, explaining the rationale for adopting a Kaupapa Māori approach. Rooted in Māori values, worldviews, and self-determination, this approach ensures that the research remains culturally responsive, ethical, and transformative. This chapter details the research design, participant recruitment process, data collection methods, and the application of Reflexive Thematic Analysis as the primary method for interpreting and organising findings.

Additionally, Te Whare Tapa Whā is introduced as a guiding model for understanding participant wellbeing, ensuring a holistic, Māori-centred framework that connects language, identity, and workplace wellbeing.

Chapter Four: Findings present the narratives from the semi-structured interviews, offering qualitative insights into participants' experiences. The chapter is framed by the Te Whare Tapa Whā health model, which explores how engagement with Te Reo Māori shapes personal, social, spiritual, and professional wellbeing.

Chapter Five: The discussions interpret the findings of the data analysis and examine the narratives and associated psychological and emotional dimensions of language use and reclamation. By linking participant experiences to established research, this chapter demonstrates how workplace-based language initiatives and experiences have impacted or strengthened cultural identity, professional confidence, and holistic wellbeing.

Chapter Six: Conclusion. The final chapter reflects on the study's contributions, summarising key findings and their significance for Māori language revitalisation and workplace wellbeing. This chapter also acknowledges the study's limitations, identifying areas for further research to deepen understanding of Te Reo Māori integration in professional environments. In response, it proposes recommendations for future research, advocating for sustained institutional commitment to Te Reo Māori initiatives.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

*Whaowhia te kete mātauranga
Fill the basket of knowledge*

This whakataukī encapsulates the central purpose of this chapter—to gather and synthesise knowledge as the foundation for validating this research. By critically examining existing literature on Te Reo Māori, Indigenous language revitalisation, and wellbeing frameworks, this chapter situates the study within broader linguistic, cultural, and health contexts. Rather than viewing language and wellbeing in isolation, it highlights their multifaceted nature across education, culture, and professional domains. It positions workplace wellbeing as a crucial yet often overlooked dimension of the Te Reo Māori revitalisation movement.

Approach to the Literature Review

This literature review adopts a chronological and thematic structure, ensuring a logical progression of research to contextualise Te Reo Māori revitalisation within historical, sociolinguistic, and wellbeing literature. This approach underscores how language, identity, and wellbeing are deeply intertwined, reinforcing Te Reo Māori's role across personal and professional settings.

The review establishes an academic foundation for understanding wellbeing and its relationship with language learning. It identifies gaps and key linkages in existing literature while reinforcing the rationale for the research question. Positioned at the intersection of language and health, it examines academic publications, research reports, and statistical data from research on wellbeing, Te Reo Māori, and health studies related to Māori and Indigenous communities, which are primarily focused on language acquisition and wellbeing.

The first section explores the historical decline of Te Reo Māori, analysing the long-term impacts of colonisation, language suppression, and intergenerational language loss on Māori identity, cultural resilience, and social cohesion. This section examines the socio-political mechanisms that contributed to language displacement, including the introduction of English-medium education policies, state interventions, and the effects of urbanisation on intergenerational transmission. These shifts, driven by English-medium education policies, state interventions, and urbanisation, significantly disrupted intergenerational language transmission. By situating the erosion of Te Reo Māori within broader Indigenous language loss trends, this section underscores the

revitalisation efforts that prioritised language as a fundamental aspect of Māori self-determination and wellbeing.

The second section focuses on the revitalisation movement sustaining Te Reo Māori, analysing policy advancements, grassroots initiatives, and institutional commitments that have contributed to its renewed presence in contemporary Aotearoa. The final section transitions into the workplace as a critical site for language revitalisation, assessing how Te Reo Māori engagement fosters cultural identity, professional development, and holistic wellbeing. It evaluates language use and psychological, social, and professional benefits in workplace settings.

Context of Te Reo Māori

Language loss is a global phenomenon, often resulting from forced transformations in response to shifting social conditions. These changes may occur gradually or be rapid and forced, often due to oppression, colonisation, or cultural displacement (Haar et al., 2019). In the case of Te Reo Māori, its suppression was not incidental but rather a deliberate and systematic consequence of colonial policies aimed at assimilating Māori into a monocultural, English-dominant society.

It is necessary to set the scene which has led to the current state of Te Reo Māori and the motivations behind language reclamation efforts. Thus, it is essential to consider the historical mistreatment and devaluation of Māori language and culture. Post the Treaty of Waitangi of 1840, Government-led strategies systematically separated Māori from their language, resulting in profound consequences for identity, culture, and wellbeing (Hardman, 2018; Hokowhitu et al., 2020; Ka'ai-Mahuta, 2011). Similar patterns of language suppression and marginalisation have been observed in other Indigenous communities, such as First Nations in Canada (Moore, 2019) and Aboriginal Australians (Sivak et al., 2019). In Aotearoa, colonisation left an enduring imprint through assimilation policies, monocultural schooling, and urbanisation, drastically reducing a key language tool of intergenerational language transmission (Hardman, 2018; Lee-Morgan et al., 2019; Simmonds et al., 2018). Language survival was further exacerbated by socioeconomic disadvantages, including poverty, discrimination, and land dispossession, all of which created additional barriers to Māori language retention and wellbeing in a postcolonial landscape (Boulton et al., 2021; Thom & Grimes, 2022).

Colonial Policies and the Suppression of Te Reo Māori

Language loss must not be viewed as a purely linguistic issue, as it is deeply entangled with power, prejudice, and systemic discrimination. As May (2012) asserts: "It has much more to do with power, prejudice, (unequal) competition and, in many cases, overt discrimination and subordination" (p. 4). Formal education policies actively discouraged the use of Te Reo Māori, with Māori children often punished for speaking their language at school, thereby reinforcing assimilationist objectives (Belich, 2001). Legislation played a pivotal role in suppressing Te Reo Māori. The Education Ordinance Act of 1847 and the Native Schools Act of 1867 enforced English as the sole language of instruction, discouraging and punishing the use of Te Reo Māori in schools (Ka'ai-Mahuta, 2011; Waitangi Tribunal, 2011). These education policies were more than just language restrictions. They served to sever Māori communities from tikanga and traditional practices, limiting cultural narratives and disrupting the intergenerational transmission of knowledge (Durie, 2003; Matika et al., 2021).

This period of history reflects a period of suppression that was systematically engineered as part of the broader colonial project. The decline of Te Reo Māori was not merely a byproduct of colonisation, but a calculated outcome of assimilationist policies designed to devalue Māori identity and culture (Harris et al., 2016; Lee-Morgan et al., 2019). These policies reinforced an assimilationist belief embedded within education systems and government legislation. However, the most effective mechanism of language loss was not legislation alone but the socioeconomic realities that followed.

Urbanisation became the next driver of language decline as Māori families migrated to urban centres from their traditional rural and regional outposts, and English was increasingly being perceived as necessary, compelling many Māori families to prioritise English for economic and social mobility (Haar et al., 2019; Hardman, 2018; Ka'ai-Mahuta, 2011). Many Māori leaders and elders, recognising the barriers to success imposed by colonial structures, began prioritising English over Te Reo Māori, believing it would enhance educational and employment opportunities for future generations. This shift reinforced a pattern of language displacement within whānau and community settings, further diminishing the transmission of Te Reo Māori across generations.

At the beginning of the 20th century, approximately 95% of Māori were fluent in Te Reo Māori. However, by 1960, this had fallen to 25%, with only 5% of Māori schoolchildren speaking the language by 1975 (Te Ara – The Encyclopedia of New Zealand, n.d.). This drastic decline was not incidental but reflective of the drastic shift in Aotearoa, and the

consequences of language loss would extend beyond communication, affecting cultural identity, resilience, and wellbeing.

Language and Wellbeing: A Growing Area of Inquiry

As Indigenous communities have embarked on the long road to reclaim their languages, various new research avenues have emerged, examining the psychological and social wellbeing benefits of language revitalisation. This study bridges two complementary paradigms: language revitalisation and wellbeing research. While previous studies have extensively demonstrated the negative impacts of Indigenous language loss on mental health, fewer have sought to explore the psychological and social benefits of language reclamation (Sivak et al., 2019). Addressing this gap is critical for understanding the transformative role of Te Reo Māori in supporting the wellbeing of Māori individuals and communities.

Revitalisation of Te Reo Māori

As an orally based culture, Te Reo Māori was transmitted intergenerationally within hapu and iwi for centuries. This knowledge transfer would not only form the building blocks of Māori identity but also play a crucial role in the cultural continuity. This severance is well supported by a clear link between Indigenous language suppression and adverse health outcomes (Hokowhitu et al., 2020). This is highly relevant to Māori given the intrinsic value element of Māori identity. Te Reo Māori embodies intergenerational knowledge, tikanga (customs), and whakapapa (ancestry), making its revitalisation more than a linguistic effort; it becomes an assertion of self-determination and culture (Hutchings et al., 2017; Statistics New Zealand, 2014).

In response to this linguistic crisis that was becoming apparent, Māori communities spearheaded a language revitalisation movement demanding institutional support and policy recognition. The Māori Language Petition (1972) served as a catalyst, leading to the establishment of various Māori-led and language-based schooling programmes, Te Kōhanga Reo (1982), Kura Kaupapa Māori (1985), and Wharekura (1993)—initiatives that restored intergenerational language transmission and normalised Te Reo Māori in educational settings. Legislative pushes would lead to the Māori Language Act (1987) and Te Ture mō Te Reo Māori (Māori Language Act) (2016), further engraining government commitments to the Māori language regeneration, culminating in iwi-led strategies such as Te Mātāwai (Te Puni Kōkiri, 2019).

While these efforts have been instrumental in stabilising language decline, the role of workplaces in sustaining Te Reo Māori remains a largely underexplored area (Ratima &

May, 2011). Government policies have predominantly targeted education, yet language revitalisation must extend beyond formal schooling into professional and institutional settings to achieve long-term sustainability. Given that most Māori adults spend a significant portion of their time in workplaces, embedding Te Reo Māori within organisational culture is critical for its long-term survival and essential in enhancing Māori staff wellbeing (Haar et al., 2019).

Language and Wellbeing

The relationship between language and wellbeing is particularly significant in the context of Te Reo Māori, as it is widely recognised as a cornerstone of Māori identity and a critical component of cultural and social wellbeing (Albury, 2018; McLachlan et al., 2021; Statistics New Zealand, 2014). Te Reo Māori is more than a means of communication - it serves as a carrier of whakapapa (genealogy), tikanga (customs), and mātauranga (knowledge), shaping Māori ways of knowing and being (Durie, 2003). However, while research has explored the macro-level impacts of language revitalisation efforts (Hunia et al., 2018; Hutchings et al., 2017; Te Puni Kōkiri, 2018), there remains a critical gap in understanding the wellbeing benefits of Te Reo Māori engagement, particularly for Māori adults (Harris et al., 2016; Matika et al., 2021; Rameka & Stagg Peterson, 2021).

Despite its acknowledged significance, existing research has historically prioritised language use over the wellbeing of language users (De Bres, 2010; Simmonds et al., 2020; Trinick et al., 2020). Te Puni Kōkiri (2018) highlights that academic attention has predominantly focused on language acquisition among children, with limited exploration of adult language proficiency and the lived experiences of Māori adult learners. Additionally, research has often concentrated on attitudes toward language use rather than examining its psychological, social, and emotional impacts (De Bres, 2010; Nelson, 2018; Te Huia, 2020), or workplace research has focused on non-Māori users of the language (Berardi-Wiltshire & Bortolotto, 2022; Myhre, 2015). This research gap underscores the need for deeper inquiry into the intersections between language, identity, and holistic wellbeing for Māori in the workplace.

Language is a fundamental gateway to cultural identity. The inability to speak Te Reo Māori has been linked to a diminished sense of belonging and cultural affirmation (Rameka & Stagg Peterson, 2021). Heritage language learning plays a key role in strengthening identity and psychological wellbeing. Research indicates that Māori bilinguals report higher life satisfaction than monolinguals (Nelson, 2018), while Houkamau et al. (2021) assert that heritage language engagement enhances self-

esteem and ethnic identity. Macro-level data from Te Kupenga (Statistics New Zealand, 2014) supports these findings, confirming a strong correlation between adult proficiency in Te Reo Māori and overall wellbeing. However, while research acknowledges the psychological benefits of language learning, the emotional challenges Māori adults face, particularly in professional and social spaces, remain underexplored (Moore, 2019; Te Huia, 2013).

Māori Language, Identity and Wellbeing

A substantial body of research exists on Māori identity, reflecting the scholarly interest and the broader human need to define and articulate cultural belonging. It is widely asserted that to live 'as Māori' means having access to Te Ao Māori, which includes language, culture, tikanga, and resources. Te Reo Māori holds a central position within this discourse, with its revitalisation carrying profound implications for culture and self-determination (Derby & Macfarlane, 2018).

The loss of Indigenous languages has been closely linked to cultural disconnection, with research demonstrating that language suppression contributes to diminished wellbeing, struggles with identity, and intergenerational trauma. Conversely, language reclamation has been shown to enhance self-esteem, resilience, and social cohesion (Hinton et al., 2018; May, 2012). Beyond its cognitive and linguistic benefits, bilingualism has also been associated with emotional resilience and a stronger sense of personal and cultural identity (Matika et al., 2021).

For many Māori, language engagement is a deeply personal journey, reflecting a worldview centred on transformation and cultural preservation (King, 2009). Kingi et al. (2017) support this perspective, arguing that language is integral to all wellbeing aspects, reinforcing whakapapa, belonging, and cultural identity. Nelson (2018) found that learning and using Te Reo Māori is strongly associated with personal and spiritual growth, developing stronger connections to culture and community. However, Nelson also cautions that while Māori language engagement enhances wellbeing, further research is needed to assess its long-term impacts. Matika et al. (2021) reinforce this point, highlighting the limited number of studies directly examining the relationship between language use, ethnic identity, and wellbeing among Māori adults.

Workplace Language Initiatives

The revitalisation of Te Reo Māori within professional environments has emerged as an increasingly significant dimension of language planning and revitalisation efforts. The workplace has increasingly been recognised as a research locality for exploring Māori

language revitalisation. Universities, in particular, have served as key sites for examining Te Reo Māori engagement (Albury, 2018; van der Meer et al., 2010). Workplace language initiatives are considered as contributing to improved fluency, fostering social cohesion, and strengthening bicultural commitments. Research confirms that both Māori and non-Māori are increasingly recognising Te Reo Māori as a central element of the country's national identity, viewing it as a symbol of cultural belonging, citizenship, and shared responsibility for an inclusive society (Berardi-Wiltshire & Bortolotto, 2022).

This growing recognition of Te Reo Māori's cultural significance is not confined to Māori communities but reflects a broader societal shift towards biculturalism. Te Puni Kōkiri (2019), supported by Te Taura Whiri i Te Reo Māori (Māori Language Commission), developed a monitoring and evaluation framework to assess the effectiveness of language revitalisation efforts. This framework included "Audacious Goals", such as the benchmark that by 2040, 85% of New Zealanders will value Te Reo Māori as a key part of their national identity. Similarly, Hutchings et al. (2017) draw on data from Te Kupenga and found a strong correlation between adult Te Reo Māori engagement and a strengthened sense of identity. While mainstream acceptance of Te Reo Māori has grown, its progress remains vulnerable to political influence. The recent government's stance on Te Reo Māori demonstrates how policy shifts can rapidly erode revitalisation efforts, underscoring the urgent need for sustained institutional and community-driven commitment to language sustainability. This aligns with Albury's (2018) caution against conflating symbolic gestures with genuine language engagement, as they question whether Te Reo Māori proficiency or its symbolic representation in cultural contexts meaningfully shapes New Zealand's national identity. Their findings reinforce the need for revitalisation efforts that go beyond tokenistic acknowledgement, ensuring that Te Reo Māori remains a lived and thriving language across all facets of society.

The Role of Language and Workplace Wellbeing

The resurgence of Te Reo Māori in educational, professional, and institutional settings has significantly broadened opportunities for language engagement. Universities are considered unique spokes in the wider New Zealand workplace hub and can influence professional services and academic roles in the education ecosystem. This general shift of Te Reo Māori becoming increasingly visible in many New Zealand workplaces has led to more Te Reo Māori and Mātauranga Māori becoming embedded in publications, policies, websites, and employee training (Lucas et al., 2022). Haar et al. (2019) support the notion that workplaces and non-traditional sectors must play an

active role in language regeneration, and through workplace language engagement with Te Reo Māori, better cultural identity and enhanced wellbeing can be cultivated.

The Benefits of Language Engagement

Language reclamation is recognised as a protective factor against the psychological and social impacts of colonisation and assimilation. Studies indicate that engagement with one's Indigenous language fosters higher self-esteem, cultural confidence, and psychological resilience (Hutchings et al., 2017; Matika et al., 2021). Māori who actively participate in culturally aligned activities such as haka, waiata groups, and marae-based wānanga also report stronger workplace relationships, greater confidence, and an enhanced sense of belonging (Severinsen & Reweti, 2021).

The connection between language and wellbeing has become a critical area of inquiry in sociolinguistics, psychology, and health sciences. Language engagement strengthens cultural ties, nurtures resilience, and improves mental health outcomes (Fox et al., 2018; Severinsen & Reweti, 2021). Additionally, second-language learners of Te Reo Māori describe their language journey as transformative, reinforcing self-perception, cultural pride, and personal empowerment (King, 2009). Research further suggests that speaking one's ancestral language can mitigate experiences of discrimination and enhance psychological resilience (Cram, 2014; Fox et al., 2018). Despite these positive indicators, research on the psychological benefits of language reclamation remains limited. Sivak et al. (2019) emphasise the need for further systematic investigation into how language revival influences mental health and wellbeing.

International Comparisons

The loss of land, culture, and language is a shared experience among many Indigenous groups globally, and the link between language loss and poor mental health has also been highlighted. Research on other Indigenous groups demonstrates a strong correlation between Indigenous language knowledge and improved health and wellbeing, reinforcing the widespread desire among Indigenous communities to reclaim traditional languages to foster cultural renewal, identity, and social cohesion (Sivak et al., 2019). The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007) affirms that "all peoples contribute to the diversity and richness of civilisations and cultures, which constitute the common heritage of humankind" (p. 2).

Research supports the profound impact of language revitalisation on identity, wellbeing, and community resilience (Olko et al., 2022; Rameka & Stagg Peterson, 2021). Studies

across Canada, the United States, and Australia suggest that language engagement is not merely a linguistic process but also a psychological and social tool for healing intergenerational trauma. For many Indigenous communities, language revitalisation efforts restore cultural confidence, strengthen whakapapa connections, and reinforce intergenerational bonds. The revitalisation of Te Reo Māori aligns with global Indigenous efforts to sustain ancestral languages as vital expressions of cultural survival and self-determination. Traditional language and cultural practices provide a foundation for collective identity and can enhance health outcomes at an individual and communal level (Oster et al., 2014).

Wellbeing: A Holistic Concept

Wellbeing is a multifaceted concept that encompasses physical, mental, cultural, and social health. While Western frameworks often prioritise individual psychological health, Indigenous perspectives emphasise relational, environmental, and cultural dimensions (Dawes et al., 2022). Despite its frequent use in policy and research, wellbeing lacks a universal definition and often overlaps with health, quality of life, and happiness (Olko et al., 2022). Within a Te Reo Māori context, wellbeing extends beyond individuals and encapsulates the language and its people.

For Māori, the state of wellbeing aligns with the concept of hauora and is inherently holistic, integrating whānau (family), whenua (land), wairua (spirituality), and tikanga (cultural values). The Mental Health Foundation (n.d.) aligns with this view, framing wellbeing as more than the absence of mental illness and more than feeling happy. Positive mental health and high wellbeing result in satisfaction and strong relationships. Research on Māori kaumātua wellbeing reinforces that health extends beyond the absence of disease and incorporates culture, environment, and intergenerational relationships (Dawes et al., 2022).

Measuring Wellbeing: Indigenous and Western Approaches

Western psychological models have been critiqued for their narrow scope, universalist assumptions, and individualistic bias, often misrepresenting Indigenous wellbeing. Mainstream wellbeing measures frequently overlook Māori understandings of health, identity, and social cohesion (Cram, 2014). In response, Durie (2006) proposed Māori-specific wellbeing indicators, shifting the focus from individual experience to collective identity, cultural resilience, and intergenerational wellbeing. These frameworks would represent Māori self-determination and holistic health perspectives meaningfully.

Western health models have historically framed Māori wellbeing through deficit-based narratives, prioritising socioeconomic indicators over cultural and spiritual dimensions (McCarty et al., 2021; Rameka et al., 2021). While Te Whare Tapa Whā (Durie, 1994) provides a holistic model for Māori wellbeing, its application in workplace settings remains underexplored, particularly in relation to language engagement. Research suggests that culturally inclusive workplaces enhance Māori employee satisfaction and reduce stress (Haar et al., 2019). However, the role of Te Reo Māori in cultivating professional resilience, self-determination, and cultural affirmation is not well-documented through this framework. Cram (2014) highlighted the need for culturally responsive measures of Māori wellbeing, as much of the existing research on language revitalisation has focused on education and community-based initiatives, overlooking how Māori professionals engage with Te Reo Māori in workplace environments.

Workplace Language Engagement

The emergence of wāhi Māori (Māori spaces) supporting Te Reo Māori in non-traditional settings reflects a growing shift towards linguistic and cultural normalisation (Hutchings, 2017). For Te Reo Māori to thrive, it must be visible, accessible, and actively used in everyday workplace interactions. Tertiary institutions are pivotal in bridging the gap between education and professional language application (Lee-Morgan et al., 2019). Embedding tikanga and Te Reo Māori across all aspects of daily life, including the workplace, has a role in preserving Te Reo Māori and normalising and actively embedding its use (Harris et al., 2016).

While the language is supported by various bilingual policies and cultural competency programs, research on Māori staff workplace attitudes toward Te Reo Māori remains scarce (Myhre, 2015). Despite this, literature has emerged that demonstrates the positive impact of Te Reo Māori engagement on workplace wellbeing. Haar et al. (2019) found that "the incorporation of Māori language, terminology, and tikanga Māori significantly enhances workplace mindfulness and job satisfaction—two wellbeing benefits not entirely realised by New Zealand organisations" (p. 4).

Gaps in the Literature and Future Research Directions

The expanding body of research on Māori language revitalisation has primarily centred on educational frameworks, community-driven initiatives, and governmental policy interventions. While these studies offer valuable insights into language transmission and preservation, they have yet to thoroughly examine the relationship between Te Reo Māori engagement and workplace wellbeing. This remains a critical yet underexplored aspect of institutional and cultural transformation. Existing scholarship has largely

prioritised Te Reo Māori's wellbeing rather than its speakers' wellbeing (Trinick et al., 2020). While extensive research has explored macro-level language planning, policy development, and revitalisation efforts, there remains a significant gap in understanding the psychosocial, emotional, and professional impact of Te Reo Māori engagement on Māori professionals.

Research suggests that workplaces integrating Te Reo Māori into daily operations report higher employee satisfaction and stronger professional relationships (Haar et al., 2019). However, much of the existing literature skews toward non-Māori perspectives, with limited studies centring Māori employees' experiences of workplace Māoritanga (Berardi-Wiltshire & Bortolotto, 2022). This research addresses these gaps by exploring the psychological benefits of language reclamation in professional settings, examining the relationship between workplace language learning and personal empowerment, and providing empirical evidence to support workplace language policies prioritising Māori wellbeing. By foregrounding Māori perspectives and experiences, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how Te Reo Māori engagement can enhance professional and personal wellbeing, reinforcing its role as a source of resilience, identity, and empowerment.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Nāu te rourou, nāku te rourou, ka ora ai te iwi
With your food basket and my food basket, the people will thrive

Introduction

By adopting a Kaupapa Māori Research approach as the guiding methodology, this research embodies the ethos of uplifting and empowering Māori communities through knowledge production. Kaupapa Māori Research served as both the philosophical and practical foundation of this study, serving as its philosophical and practical guide. It provided the most suitable framework for transformation, empowerment, and meaningful contribution to Māori knowledge development. The research approach and participant led engagement aligns with core values and beliefs of Kaupapa Māori Research, upholding ethical, respectful research practices that centre Māori ways of knowing (Martel et al., 2021; Walker et al., 2006). A critical and irrevocable consideration of the adoption of Kaupapa Māori Research was my positionality as a researcher, which meant approaching through a Māori lens to ensure that data was analysed and interpreted with cultural sensitivity and depth (Mikahere-Hall et al., 2021).

Beyond methodology, Kaupapa Māori Research embodies a decolonial stance, resisting Western epistemologies while reinforcing Māori knowledge systems. This approach ensures that research is conducted by Māori, for Māori, and with Māori, safeguarding the integrity of Māori ways of knowing and being (Smith, 2021; Wilson, et al., 2021). As Hiha (2015) asserts, "Kaupapa Māori Research methodology can be a framework, guide, and support for research within a Māori context" (p. 129). It is both a methodological and political framework, challenging deficit-based narratives that have historically marginalised Indigenous perspectives. Instead, it affirms Māori agency, self-determination (tino rangatiratanga), and knowledge sovereignty (Curtis et al., 2012; Smith, 2021), ensuring that research outcomes are mana-enhancing and culturally grounded.

About Kaupapa Māori Research

The evolution of Kaupapa Māori Research as a methodological approach has centred on research as a transformative process, actively supporting Māori knowledge while challenging hegemonic structures that have historically marginalised Indigenous perspectives. At its core, it provides a counter-narrative to dominant research paradigms by affirming and validating Māori epistemologies, methodologies, and ontologies (Pihama, 2010; Smith, 2021). Unlike conventional research approaches,

which often extract, objectify, and commodify Indigenous knowledge, Kaupapa Māori Research is rooted in relationality, reciprocity, and collective empowerment. It prioritises strengthening relationships between researchers and participants, ensuring that trust, mutual benefit, and shared aspirations remain central to the research process.

Smith's groundbreaking work of *Decolonizing Methodologies* (2021) critiqued traditional Western research methods. It argued that Indigenous methodologies must be relational, transformative, and actively involve participants rather than treating them as passive subjects. By aligning this study within such a culturally responsive framework, this research challenges conventional approaches to language revitalisation, which often confine and compartmentalise Indigenous language efforts. Instead, it asserts that workplace language revitalisation is not only an isolated initiative but also a catalyst for collective, systemic, and transformative change. Kaupapa Māori Research can play a critical part in legitimising Te Reo Māori by reinforcing the assertion that Māori language, knowledge, and customs are valid (Pihama, 2010).

While Kaupapa Māori Research has been widely applied in educational and health contexts, its role in workplace-based research remains an emerging area of inquiry. This study contributes to expanding the scope of Kaupapa Māori methodologies into professional spaces, reinforcing the applicability of Indigenous research approaches beyond traditional academic settings.

Kaupapa Māori Principles

While no universal template for Kaupapa Māori Research exists, Linda Smith (2021) identifies seven key Kaupapa Māori principles that provide practical guidance for this research:

- Aroha ki te tangata – Respect for people
- Kanohi kitea – The seen face; engaging with people in person
- Titiro, whakarongo, kōrero – Observe, listen, and speak
- Manaaki ki te tangata – Show generosity and hospitality
- Kia tūpato – Exercise caution
- Kaua e takahia te mana o te tangata – Uphold and respect the mana of others
- Kia māhaki – Remain humble in your approach; do not flaunt knowledge

These principles served as key elements of this study, ensuring that cultural integrity, respect, and ethical engagement were maintained throughout the research process. More than just practical reminders, these principles are deeply embedded values that shaped the study's methodology, participant interactions, and analytical approach, reinforcing the commitment to Māori ways of knowing and being within research.

A Multilayered Approach

While deeply rooted in a Kaupapa Māori Research framework, this study also integrates Te Whare Tapa Whā as a measurement tool to recognise the intrinsic relationship between language and wellbeing. Reflexive Thematic Analysis was employed to analyse and present thematic findings, ensuring a culturally responsive yet methodologically rigorous approach. Each element complements the fluid and multifaceted nature of language, identity, and wellbeing. Together, they provide a holistic research framework that acknowledges the relational, cultural, and structural dimensions of Te Reo Māori.

Wellbeing

Wellbeing is a complex and multidimensional concept that is often difficult to define and measure. Many existing assessment frameworks have been grounded in Western psychological paradigms, prioritising individualism and universality while failing to account for Indigenous worldviews (Cram, 2014). Indigenous scholars critique these models as narrow and exclusionary, arguing that they overlook relational and collective dimensions of wellbeing, which are fundamental to Indigenous communities.

Western definitions of wellbeing typically emphasise personal comfort, health, and happiness, framing it as an individual state of being (Rameka et al., 2021). In contrast, Māori conceptualisations of wellbeing extend beyond personal health, incorporating cultural, spiritual, and social dimensions that are deeply embedded in whānau, whenua, and tikanga Māori.

The concept of hauora provides a holistic Māori understanding of wellbeing, recognising the interdependence of physical, mental, spiritual, and social health. Unlike Western medical frameworks, which compartmentalise health into distinct categories, hauora is relational and interconnected, acknowledging the interconnected influence of whakapapa (genealogy), wairuatanga (spirituality), and whanaungatanga (social relationships) on an individual's overall wellbeing (Severinsen & Reweti, 2021). Existing workplace wellbeing models predominantly reflect Western psychological constructs, often failing to capture Māori worldviews in workplace wellbeing discourse (Cram, 2014). Furthermore, mainstream workplace wellbeing frameworks rarely incorporate culturally grounded indicators, making it difficult to measure the effects of Te Reo Māori engagement on hauora in professional settings (Matika et al., 2021). In contrast, Te Whare Tapa Whā offers a holistic alternative, ensuring that Māori staff experiences at AUT are interpreted through a culturally grounded, strengths-based framework.

This model integrates four interdependent pillars of hauora:

- Taha Wairua (Spiritual Wellbeing) – The foundation of Māori health, recognising the role of spirituality, identity, and connection to ancestors.
- Taha Hinengaro (Mental and Emotional Wellbeing) – Acknowledging the interplay between thoughts, emotions, and overall health.
- Taha Tinana (Physical Wellbeing) – Recognising the body as an integral part of holistic health.
- Taha Whānau (Social Wellbeing) – Emphasising relational bonds, collective identity, and intergenerational connections.

By embedding Te Whare Tapa Whā into workplace wellbeing research, this study acknowledges language revitalisation as a transformative force, reinforcing the intersections between Te Reo Māori, identity, and holistic wellbeing.

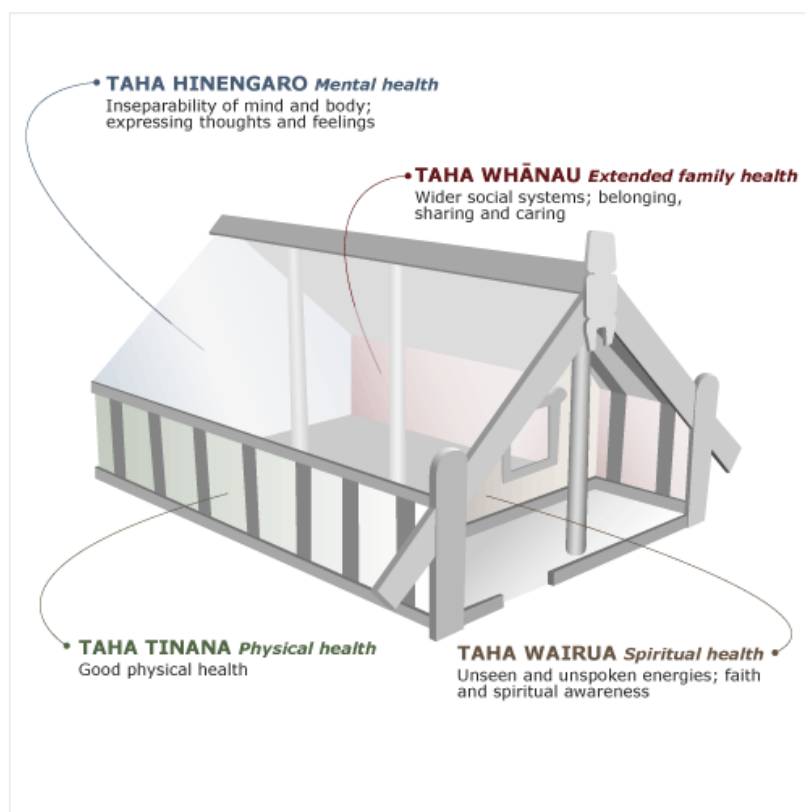


Figure 1

The Te Whare Tapa Whā model represents the four dimensions of Māori wellbeing (Pollock, 2011).

Research Design

This study employed semi-structured interviews, a qualitative research method that privileges storytelling, co-constructs knowledge, and fosters reciprocity. This method allowed participants to candidly share their thoughts, emotions, and reflections. The flexibility of conversations were considered a rapport builder to enhance the overall quality of the data collected.

The interview approach was selected to bolster relational engagement while ensuring participants retained full agency over their narratives. The interviews were designed to examine how engagement with Te Reo Māori influenced staff wellbeing at AUT, exploring participants' experiences with language engagement, the perceived effects of access to Te Reo Māori, and the motivations and significance of Te Reo Māori in their lives. This method aligns with Indigenous research methodologies, prioritising relational engagement and rejecting extractive research practices (Sivak et al., 2019).

Rather than following a rigid question and answer format, the open-ended questions facilitated participant-led conversations, allowing interviews to unfold organically and allowing participants to freely share their experiences, perspectives, and insights on language engagement, identity, and wellbeing. Interview prompts encouraged participants to reflect on what Te Reo Māori meant to them and how it shaped their experiences at AUT. This flexible, conversational approach facilitated in-depth storytelling, enabling participants to express their cultural backgrounds, whakapapa, and personal narratives in mana-enhancing and authentic ways.

Given that Te Whare Tapa Whā was used as a measurement indicator for wellbeing, participants reflected on their motivations, challenges, and successes within its four dimensions. Participants were all comfortable and overtly familiar with Te Whare Tapa Whā as a social and health model construct, allowing them to articulate their experiences comfortably through its lens. As it resonated comfortably with all, it provided a structured yet flexible model for recognising and expressing the impact of language engagement on holistic wellbeing.

Participant Recruitment

The selection of Māori staff members as participants aligns with a strengths-based approach, recognising them as knowledge holders whose lived experiences contribute to a richer understanding of workplace Te Reo Māori engagement. Their insights reflect both personal and professional perspectives, reinforcing the dual impact of language revitalisation on identity and wellbeing.

Recruitment was undertaken via purposeful sampling to recruit six Māori AUT staff members who had engaged in Te Reo Māori learning within the past two years. To ensure cultural relevance, participants had to identify as Māori, be full-time AUT staff, and have actively participated in Te Reo Māori learning activities during this timeframe. Recruitment was facilitated through Ngā Whānau Māori (AUT Māori Staff Network) and AUT's internal communication channels, ensuring that participants were engaged through familiar and culturally appropriate networks to increase trust and ensure that their participation was meaningful.

A purposive sampling strategy was chosen to ensure a diverse, information-rich sample capable of providing deep insights into the impact of Te Reo Māori engagement on staff wellbeing. This approach aligns with qualitative research principles, where participants are selected based on relevance to the study's objectives rather than through random selection.

Efforts were made to ensure diversity among participants, including representation across various staffing areas, fluency levels in Te Reo Māori, and gender balance. Staff recruitment was conducted via email invitations distributed through the Māori staff network, reaching academic and professional staff. Participants who responded ranged in age from their early 20s to over 60, with affiliations primarily to the upper North Island iwi and had an even gender split. Their language skills ranged from strong conversational to beginner-level learners. Their employment at AUT spanned two to over 20 years, and they occupied faculty, student services, and administrative roles, bringing varied perspectives on Te Reo Māori engagement in professional settings. Given AUT's relatively small Māori staff population, to ensure anonymity, participants were assigned numerical identifiers and gender-neutral pseudonyms.

The diversity of participants in terms of professional roles, iwi affiliations, and language proficiency ensured that a broad spectrum of experiences was captured. This approach facilitated a nuanced exploration of Te Reo Māori engagement and its impact on workplace wellbeing. McDonald et al. (2021) affirms that purposeful sampling is essential in Kaupapa Māori Research, as it ensures that participants possess deep knowledge of the research topic and provide culturally rich insights. Although qualitative research does not require large sample sizes, studies confirm that data saturation can be achieved with smaller participant pools when the focus is on depth rather than breadth (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). Given AUT's Māori staff cohort size, the selected sample was proportionally substantial.

Data Collection

Interviews were conducted in locations convenient for participants, including AUT meeting rooms and other neutral spaces at AUT and the adjacent University of Auckland campus, ensuring accessibility for both the interviewer and participants. This was a more feasible option for two interviewees. In another case, a face-to-face interview was not possible, and online video conferencing (Microsoft Teams) was used instead. This flexibility ensured all participants were accommodated for the time and location that worked for their schedules and work-life balance, allowing appropriate depth of engagement while factoring in the practical constraints of conducting qualitative research. All interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis, with confidentiality measures in place to protect the participants' personal information.

Each interview was recorded, transcribed, and analysed, ensuring accuracy and depth in data interpretation. The interview sessions varied from 45 minutes to 60 minutes, with 16 to 30 minutes of recorded interviews, reflecting the richness of participant narratives. Each interview opened and closed with lengthy whakawhanaungatanga to reconnect and establish relationships and purpose while maintaining a culturally responsive and ethically sound approach. Participants were all offered the opportunity to review and provide feedback on their interviews to ensure accuracy and authenticity.

Reflexive Thematic Analysis

This study utilised Reflexive Thematic Analysis due to its ability to capture complex, nuanced participant experiences, aligning with Te Whare Tapa Whā. Reflexive Thematic Analysis also recognises the active role of the researcher in knowledge production and ensures that Māori staff's experiences are interpreted holistically, honouring their cultural and linguistic realities. Thematic Analysis is a widely recognised qualitative research method used across various epistemologies and research questions (Nowell et al., 2017). It allows researchers to identify similarities and differences within qualitative data, generate unanticipated insights, explore lived experiences, and interpret participants' perspectives on key phenomena (Braun et al., 2019).

Reflexive Thematic Analysis acknowledges the active role of the researcher in the interpretative process to identify, analyse, organise, describe, and report themes found within the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2012; Nowell et al., 2017). Jamieson et al. (2023) state, "Reflexivity is the act of examining one's assumptions, beliefs, and judgement systems, and thinking carefully and critically about how this influences the research process" (p. 1). Given the pre-existing relationships between the researcher and participants, rapport was quickly established, creating an open and safe dialogue;

however, to safeguard anonymity, participants were referred to by their participation numbers rather than by their names throughout the data analysis and reporting process.

The analysis was conducted using Braun & Clarke's (2012) six-phase Thematic Analysis model, ensuring an iterative and participant-centred approach. Data was coded inductively, meaning themes emerged organically from participant narratives rather than being predetermined by existing theoretical frameworks (Braun et al., 2017).

1. Familiarisation with Data – Interviews were transcribed, allowing for deep engagement with participant narratives.
2. Initial Coding – Transcripts were reviewed, and data-driven (inductive) codes were systematically developed.
3. Theme Development – Codes were grouped into meaningful categories, aligning with participant experiences.
4. Reviewing & Refining Themes – Emerging themes were assessed for coherence, clarity, and conceptual robustness.
5. Defining Themes – Themes were further refined to ensure alignment with Te Whare Tapa Whā and Kaupapa Māori principles.
6. Reporting & Interpretation – Findings were synthesised into structured thematic narratives, ensuring participant agency and cultural validity.

Findings were synthesised into structured thematic narratives aligned with Te Whare Tapa Whā to ensure the data remained culturally valid and participant-centred. Braun et al.'s (2017) 15-point checklist provided a guiding framework for maintaining analytical rigour.

Several reflexivity practices were integrated into the research process to uphold methodological rigour, including reflexive journaling, which involved documenting evolving insights, researcher biases, and cultural reflections, and collaborative peer debriefing, which entailed engaging in critical dialogue with supervisors and colleagues to validate data interpretations and refine findings. Olmos-Vega et al. (2022) emphasise that reflexivity is an ongoing practice in which researchers self-consciously critique, appraise, and evaluate how their subject and context influence the research process.

Summary of Data Analysis and Methodological Approach

As a Māori researcher, my engagement with data analysis was conducted through an Indigenous lens, ensuring a more profound sensitivity and cultural understanding of the

research environment (Wilson et al., 2021). I act as a storyteller, actively interpreting data by connecting to Māori culture, social positioning, theoretical assumptions, and ideological frameworks (Braun et al., 2019). This positionality ensured that the study remained grounded in Māori perspectives, preventing external theoretical impositions that might dilute the authenticity of participant narratives. By adopting Reflexive Thematic Analysis within a Kaupapa Māori framework, this study ensures that Te Reo Māori engagement is understood holistically, reinforcing its role in identity, wellbeing, and cultural empowerment. While I acknowledge my dual role as a Māori researcher and former staff member at AUT, I remained critically reflexive throughout the research process, ensuring that participant voices remained central to the interpretation of findings.

By integrating Reflexive Thematic Analysis within a Kaupapa Māori framework, this study ensures that Māori perspectives remain central to the research process. Rather than viewing Te Reo Māori engagement as an isolated experience, this methodology captures its broader role in identity affirmation, workplace wellbeing, and intergenerational knowledge-sharing. In doing so, this research contributes to both Māori knowledge systems and wider academic discourse on Indigenous methodologies in professional settings.

Chapter Four: Findings

Ehara taku toa, he takitahi, he toa takitini
My success is not mine alone, but it is the strength of many

Introduction

People are at the heart of these stories and the foundation of this research. Without the words, narratives, and time generously shared by the participants, this research would remain a mere premise. It is only fitting to reinforce the human-centric nature of this study. This research is about people, their experiences, voices, and how their engagement with Te Reo Māori has shaped their identity, wellbeing, and professional lives. These findings stem directly from the kōrero of six willing participants, whose lived experiences reveal the transformative power of language in the workplace.

The key themes that emerged from the semi-structured interviews with staff members offered critical insights into the holistic impact of Te Reo Māori within the workplace. The findings, having been codified through their Reflexive Thematic Analysis, are now presented in alignment with the quadrants of the Te Whare Tapa Whā framework. Each of the four themes provides a qualitative method to categorise and integrate statements and experiences to illustrate the impact on wellbeing. The analysis posits the personal, social, spiritual, and professional dimensions that surfaced via the analysis process, ensuring that participant voices remain at the forefront and are central to interpreting the findings.

Reflexive Thematic Analysis

The Reflexive Thematic Analysis process identified several patterns within participant narratives. Participants consistently reflected on the power of Te Reo Māori in enhancing their wellbeing, emphasising its role in fostering identity, connection, and resilience. Key themes illustrate how Te Reo Māori contributed to their sense of cultural identity and whakapapa, social belonging, and workplace inclusion, and how it enacted emotional resilience, mental wellbeing, professional empowerment and language revitalisation.

Organising the findings within the four pillars of Te Whare Tapa Whā ensures that participant voices are thematically contextualised within this hauora framework, aligning narratives with the foundational structure of Te Whare Tapa Whā. In accordance with the original themes of Durie's (1994) work, the themes have been structured according to the following:

- Taha Wairua (Spiritual Wellbeing): How Te Reo Māori fosters cultural connection, belonging, and spiritual identity.
- Taha Hinengaro (Mental and Emotional Wellbeing): The psychological impact of language engagement, including self-confidence, whakamā, and emotional resilience.
- Taha Tinana (Physical Wellbeing): The tangible effects of language immersion and learning on physical health, workplace environments, and embodied practice.
- Taha Whānau (Social Wellbeing): How Te Reo Māori advances workplace relationships, whānau engagement, and community belonging, reinforcing its role as a social and cultural asset.

Reflection on Wellbeing

For many participants, Te Reo Māori was a pathway to transformative personal and cultural growth. Across the interviews, participants universally acknowledged the impact of Te Reo Māori on their wellbeing, though each reflected on different dimensions of health, identity, and connection. Even when participants did not explicitly link their experiences to Te Whare Tapa Whā, they consistently highlighted the deep interconnection between wellbeing, language, and culture.

Some participants used a number of background stories and personal anecdotes to showcase examples and reflect on the development of confidence and cultural grounding through their language journey. While others chose to reflect on the broader emotional and psychological dimensions of language engagement, themes of community, belonging, and relational support would all emerge strongly. Likewise, the ongoing navigation of emotions, particularly concerning language anxiety and self-assurance is important. For many, wellbeing and Te Reo Māori were intertwined, and they understood how the language was more than just a means of communication, as it served for personal transformation, healing, and wellbeing. Although participants' experiences varied across the four Tapa of Te Whare Tapa Whā, their narratives collectively reinforced the special connection between language, culture, and holistic health.

Taha Wairua

The spiritual dimension of Te Reo Māori engagement emerged from the analysis as the most prominent theme in participant narratives, illustrating how language fosters a deep sense of cultural identity, belonging, and spiritual connection. Taha Wairua, within the framework of Te Whare Tapa Whā, represents the spiritual self—a domain shaped

by whakapapa (genealogy), wairua (spirit), and mātauranga Māori (Māori knowledge systems). Participants described language revitalisation as inherently spiritual, reconnecting them with ancestral knowledge, cultural identity, and intergenerational ties. For many participants, learning Te Reo Māori was deeply personal and transformative, strengthening their connection to identity, culture, and ancestral knowledge. For instance, Participant Four highlighted the positive influence of Te Reo on their wellbeing, emphasising its transformative power. They reflected on witnessing how Te Reo can profoundly affect individuals, including those who were initially hesitant to embrace it. This transformative journey speaks to personal growth and reflects broader cultural and spiritual enrichment aligned with Te Reo Māori.

Participant Four - Just for me, Reo it was such a positive influence in terms of now like wellbeing, and I have seen the contribution that it provides for people.

And so, I've also seen where people like their journey of not wanting to embrace it and. So yeah, I've seen how it can be, kind of transformation.

This sentiment captures both the hesitancy and eventual transformation that many participants experienced. The impact of Te Reo Māori on identity and self-worth was repeatedly emphasised, with participants describing a sense of growth, confidence, and cultural empowerment once learning. When asked if their expectations had been met in learning, Participant Six reflects.

Participant Six - Have they been met? I'll say overall yes, I think, cause the main reason is I've been educated in this pakeha system all my life. As always, favourable, it's like I've been yearning for it all my life.

So yeah, there's probably those the odd time when I've come out, and I thought, yeah, whatever, ho hum. And but I think the ones that I really engage with, it's mainly around kōrero. You know when you're sharing it? While wānanga, let's put it that way. When we wānanga and that's the learning I want.

Like ever since I've come here to AU, I've done all this postgrads stuff, and yeah, that gives me a certificate and whatnot, but it doesn't mean anything to me. And so now I'm looking for things that I want to do like this research thing. So yeah, I'm drawn to that learning. And you know, the fact that I wanted to be able to understand the Reo. You know, speak it understand it, I mean, I have an idea, but I'm it's not fluent and that's what I want.

Participant Five spoke of the joy and spiritual uplift they experienced when hearing Te Reo, mainly through waiata and karanga. They described it as a profound connection to their identity and culture when hearing the voices of their elders or young wāhine calling in ceremonial contexts. Several participants emphasised that hearing or speaking Te Reo Māori heightened their spiritual wellbeing, often evoking strong emotional reactions, nostalgia, and pride. This was particularly evident in spaces where Te Reo Māori was embraced, such as karanga and formal settings.

Participant Five - When I hear the karanga, you know, at any given ceremony, the lift in all of my oranga tanga, my wellbeing is truly is truly enhanced. It's just like. Oh yeah, it's like a shot of happiness. Ah, uplifting. Yeah. Yeah, to hear a karanga, especially by our karani you know those karani or you know those younger Wāhine, engari Wāhine Toa. Yeah, I love it.

Several other participants reflected on how their connection to Te Reo Māori impacted their wairua. Participant Six, in particular, strongly reflected on their overall wellbeing being driven by wairua and how Te Reo influenced this. They described how their spiritual health, or wairuatanga, was central to their identity and how it was enacted while learning Te Reo.

Participant Six - I don't know about the tinana, not very much, but definitely in regards to wairuatanga. Definitely, yeah, when I look at Te Whare Tapa Whā, my taha wairua, that's the guiding light. If that's intact, the rest sort of takes care of itself. Yeah, mentally, I'm definitely in a better position, stronger, and more stable, but that comes back to my wairua being nurtured and cared for. I think that like Te Reo Māori like I've been thinking. Is it about learning the reo. Is it about understanding that reo. Is it just being around the reo. You know what is it that makes me Māori. Like, I feel Māori. I know I'm Māori. I like to believe I act in the best interests of Māori. I definitely know without a shadow of a doubt when I'm, you know, like if I'm provided, if I'm irked in some way and I need to defend my honour or defend something, you know that the Māori comes out, the Māori definitely comes out.

For Participant Six, engaging with Te Reo Māori affirmed their Māori identity and contributed to a sense of balance across all areas of life, demonstrating the holistic nature of wellbeing. They reflected on the depth of connection they felt with their culture. This strong connection to language, identity, and spirituality manifested through their contact with the language and greatly affected their overall wellbeing. For many participants, engaging with Te Reo Māori significantly nurtured their wairua. It was a cornerstone of their overall wellbeing, and, attributed this to the cultural and emotional depth of the language.

For participants, learning the language was not merely about skill acquisition but about reclaiming and affirming their place within Te Ao Māori. This sentiment was echoed across participants, demonstrating that Te Reo Māori serves as a personal and collective anchor. Through language, participants could reconnect with their whakapapa, cultural heritage, and spiritual wellbeing. Participants consistently mentioned how their engagement with Te Reo Māori fostered a strong sense of identity.

Language supported personal growth and created a foundation for building connections within the Māori community and the wider society. As Participant Four emphasised, their participation in Te Reo Māori courses and cultural practices was intrinsically linked to their sense of identity.

Participant Four - I think for me it gives me a sense of who I am and an understanding of Te Ao Māori and, I guess the motivation and the interest for me is it's about identity. It's about. I guess that also gives me that confidence as well because it is connected to your identity to be able to stand in those spaces and contribute cause I think for me it's really important, like reciprocity, so to be then in those spaces to be able to give back as much.

Learning Te Reo Māori was consistently tied to participants' sense of identity. Participant Four underscores how the language provides a deep sense of connection to Māori culture and identity, which, in turn, strengthens participants' sense of belonging within the broader community. Each participant navigated their identity in various ways, blending traditional practices with their professional roles, demonstrating the dynamic relationship between language and self-perception.

Participant Four - For me, it gives me a sense of who I am and an understanding of Te Ao Māori. The motivation and the interest for me is about identity.

Participants often viewed their journey with Te Reo Māori as fulfilling a greater purpose or destiny. This journey was a combination of self-actualisation and empowerment. For some participants, learning Te Reo Māori was part of a more profound personal journey and fulfilling a greater purpose, a way to reclaim their cultural destiny. Participant Six described their experience.

Participant Six - Has it [Te Reo] enhanced all of those elements [Te Whare Tapa Whā]? I'd say so. It was part of the plan. It was. It's part of fulfilling a journey of becoming. I don't know if it's fulfilling destiny or just be coming whole. Yeah. I guess that's what it feels like for me. I'm fulfilling something within myself that I was destined for, but due to colonisation etcetera, it wasn't to be. So now I have that control to be able to well provide guidance or control that destiny.

This theme of self-actualisation and empowerment was closely tied to engagement with Te Reo Māori and the broader journey of cultural reclamation. The sense of fulfilling a personal and collective destiny is a significant theme, suggesting that engaging with Te Reo Māori has offered a platform to meet these desires and enabled participants to reclaim agency over their cultural identity.

Taha Hinengaro

Engagement with Te Reo Māori was consistently linked to enhanced emotional wellbeing and resilience. Participants reported feelings of joy, satisfaction, and emotional fulfilment as they navigated their language-learning journeys. Regarding learning Te Reo Māori, Participant Four expressed.

Participant Four - For me, I think it has opened doors to be authentic and who I am and to, yeah, to feel like I've got, I belong somewhere, and I have a place here and this is a vehicle that I can use to be able to give back yeah.

For others, Te Reo Māori offered transformative personal and cultural growth opportunities. The participants universally discussed the impact of Te Reo Māori on their wellbeing, each reflecting on different dimensions of health and identity. Despite not all participants clearly connecting their wellbeing with each of the four pillars of Te Whare Tapa Whā, they all spoke about the interconnectedness of wellbeing, language, and culture. Others were able to articulate whether they found any change to their wellbeing through Te Reo Māori aligned to the Te Whare Tapa Whā model.

Participant Five - Well, for the wairua. My wairua is infused with happiness to hear it, to see it, especially in our younger generation, that that is one. But for my hinengaro, once again, when you hear Reo spoken, you know and for me it's who speaks it as well. So, if I, you know if I know the ahuatanga of the speaker. That sort of also you know, because that can change the way I feel it's the person, you know, it's the person that tika, that pono. Yeah, those value the yeah. Those values actually of the speaker.

However, the journey was not without challenges as many participants identified both barriers and motivators in their language learning journey. Some participants acknowledged feelings of whakamā (self-consciousness) and anxiety when using Te Reo in certain settings. Despite these potential challenges, Te Reo engagement was considered building resilience and influencing participants' mental and emotional wellbeing, contributing to increased confidence, reduced stress, and greater self-awareness.

The language learning process, despite its challenges, was often described as empowering and transformative, developing a sense of perseverance and resilience. This internal struggle often spurred them to push past discomfort, reflecting the complexity and emotional depth of engaging with Te Reo Māori. Participant Three reflected openly on their personal experience with this in the Te Reo Māori classes at AUT as part of the ongoing learning experience.

Participant Three - Yeah, I suppose there's always a bit of whakamā and that sort of thing. So, you're not sure you know. So, there's kōrero aspect to it, I suppose that you get a bit like, Oh! And I don't know what's being said. Some people even today, even now like they'll just start full on going to me, try thinking that I already. The reo. But I don't, you know. And so, I can pick up parts of it, but then people will ask me like a little question and I'm, I won't know. And so, yeah. So, I suppose from that aspect you do feel it.

Trauma from past negative experiences with learning Te Reo was also shared.

Participant One recalled a high school class that felt intimidating. They would describe

the weight of cultural expectations as a barrier to learning. Participant One discussed how early struggles with learning and performing Māori songs and customs influenced their journey. They described feelings of inadequacy and the pressure to excel in Māori traditions. Over time, they learned to appreciate and participate in Te Ao Māori without feeling the need to be perfect and have learnt to enjoy it without feeling pressure to be the best.

Participant One - so like while I was brought up around all Māori everything. Yeah, I wasn't very good at it. Yeah, so like, you know, remembering lyrics or can't sing. I can't remember actions very well.

Interviewer - Stand at the back?

Participant One - Yeah, a bit uncoordinated when it came to the poi

Participant One - So, I'd like to be a part of it not very good at. umm. So, some of the successes I think has been like being comfortable and not being very like performative about it. I can still enjoy it without feeling that pressure to be. Like the best or anything like that, I can still be a part of it can still take part of it and yeah, so.

Interviewer - We don't have to be so whakamā with our abilities?

Participant One – Yeah, and I think. Because most of the spaces are very like introductory. Yeah, it leaves room for people who aren't necessarily good at the good at the stuff to be able to just like connects them

Overcoming feelings of whakamā was also a marker of success in participants' journeys with Te Reo. Participant Six shared a poignant memory of feeling intimidated in school but highlighted their journey of resilience in moving beyond their initial fears and childhood feelings.

Participant Six - When I've pushed beyond the whakamā. Yeah, that's my gauge, bro. You know, like I think in Te Ao Māori there is so much to learn, and I'll probably never learn it all, but I don't want to be afraid. Um of learning. Yeah. Yep. You know, cause I've had this deep fear for a long time. From when I was a young boy at intermediate, and when the teachers knew, I was going to a Māori School, they started to kōrero with to me, and I had no idea what they were saying, and you know, I'd be in their class in front of their students, and I don't know how to responding, and it's stuck with me ever since. Since I was 12, say it's that. I'm trying to overcome that 12-year-old boy.

These reflections demonstrate the emotional complexities of engaging with Te Reo Māori and how overcoming and pushing beyond the whakamā is integral to their personal and cultural growth. For many participants, learning and using Te Reo Māori was a spiritual journey, but also one of cultural reclamation. Engaging with Te Reo Māori was not just linguistic, but also an emotional and spiritual process that addressed intergenerational trauma caused by colonisation. For participants who had distanced themselves from Te Reo Māori due to whakamā, family dynamics, or societal pressures, re-engaging with the language was empowering and challenging. Some

described moments of doubt and insecurity yet ultimately found resilience and fulfilment in reconnecting with their cultural identity.

Participant Two - You become hyper-aware of some of the traumas you carry that you may not have been aware of once upon a time.

Engaging in Te Reo Māori through karakia or waiata offered balance and emotional stability within an overtly western environment like AUT. For some, learning Te Reo Māori was also cognitive to ensure they could understand the context and content of the situation. Participants all reflected on the power and Impact of Te Reo Māori to enhance their wellbeing. Participant Three reflected how, via learning and engagement, they were empowered and improved their knowledge and awareness. Participant Three acknowledged Te Reo Māori's profound impact on their sense of wellbeing, personally and communally. They shared how learning the language enhanced their knowledge and awareness.

Interviewer - And does that empower you? You having that awareness (of karakia)?

Participant Three - Yeah. And I think I'm, I'm knowing more about what I'm actually saying, like say you're. You know, and I even like acknowledging the living and the dead and all of that. Now, people say oh there needs to be a karakia then why you know and so. Then you think about it well. What are they actually saying, you know?

Engagement with Te Reo Māori significantly affected participants' emotional wellbeing and resilience significantly. Many participants reported that learning and using Te Reo Māori brought a sense of joy, satisfaction, and emotional fulfilment. This emotional uplift was often linked to the sense of accomplishment and personal growth experienced through language learning. For many participants, engaging with Te Reo Māori was a profound act of cultural reclamation. It represented an opportunity to reconnect with their heritage and address the historical trauma of losing the language. When asked about their reasons for studying, learning Te Reo Māori was a way of reclaiming their culture and reconnecting to their Māori identity. Participant Two spoke of this connection - when asked what their original reasons for studying Te Reo Māori were.

Participant Two - Reclamation, first of all, reconnection and when I think about my role models, typically, it includes them having the ability to speak Te Reo Māori and something that I'm aspiring to be as well

This recognition of the healing and challenging aspects of engaging with Te Reo Māori underscores the multifaceted nature of the reclamation process. Intergenerational trauma was a deeply felt experience among some participants. They shared how the environments they grew up in influenced their connection to Te Reo Māori and the cultural journey they undertook as adults. Many described how reconnecting with the

language allowed them to bridge back to their roots and cultural heritage. Participant One recalled

Participant One - You know, we, my parents were the secretary and treasury of my Marae, so we were always every weekend, we were down at the Marae having meetings, doing, trying to revitalise. The language as well, because most of everyone from our Marae couldn't speak or understand it at all. Everyone that was still alive from back then, they were still experiencing all that trauma from not being able to speak or being punished for speaking it or yeah. Not being able to teach their family and get the customs or anything like that unless it was on the Marae. So yeah, we were, yeah, that was when I was in high school. Yeah, it was a big, big shift to try and bring everything back. Yeah, and I'm proud to say we've succeeded.

For some participants, isolation was difficult in their language journey. Participant Five shared their struggle to find a supportive community to practice with, despite enrolling in Te Reo Māori programs multiple times: They expressed the need for a supportive figure, such as a Pou Awhina or Pou Tautoko, to help them grow their language skills, especially since they found it difficult to learn without consistent practice partners.

This participant highlighted the importance of having support people to practice with consistently, noting that without it, their learning journey felt incomplete. When probing further to explore if they found any challenges when participating in Te Reo Māori kaupapa, they added.

I do. I have tried like I have enrolled so many times into our Te Reo Māori programs, and the challenge I find is that you're doing it on your own. Yeah. So, if you don't have anybody at home or that is in close proximity, you that the three hours of your class. It is the totality of your learning. Yes. Yeah. And so, I know it's, a lot of it needs to be self-directed, but to find somebody that is. It's just the level above that can help you and support you in the in the use of your Reo every day, that's the challenge for me. To help you grow your Reo. yeah, because. you know when you're learning, and you know you're trying to formulate. And for me, because I'm older, it's something that I need to understand. I have to stop doing the translation, so I'm always translating in my mind English first. This English first in our minds, and then trying to Māori, yeah, whakamāoritia. You know what's in my head. I just need to let go and just learn Te Reo that I understand that, like my heart understands that but my head.

Taha Whānau

Possibly the most prominent aspect that emerged was the profound enhancement of cultural identity and connection to whānau. Participants described how engaging with Te Reo Māori deepened their understanding of their whakapapa and heritage and provided a sense of belonging that was previously fragmented. For many, learning the language was an act of reclamation and reconnection, a way to heal intergenerational trauma and affirm their place within Te Ao Māori. This reclamation enhanced pride in their work location and a renewed sense of purpose, contributing to their wellbeing.

The practice of whakawhanaungatanga—building relationships—was frequently highlighted as a key benefit of language engagement. Language serves as a gateway

to culture and provides a platform for metaphorical and physical spaces where individuals can connect with others. For participants, environments encouraging using Te Reo Māori created opportunities to meet like-minded individuals and deepen their sense of belonging. A key theme in the interviews was how Te Reo Māori acts as a pathway for building community and fostering whanaungatanga through staff, students or broader social networks at AUT. As Participant Three noted, the practice of whakawhanaungatanga allowed them to connect more easily with others and discover surprising personal connections through the language.

Yeah, be able to pick up things and relate to things a bit easier, so you usually started off with doing things like pepeha and whakapapa and you know. So, you know, you're always surprised when you do whanaungatanga how you're either related to someone or someone's like far out story being related or being from all these other cultures. So yeah, I think that was my biggest take away is how you don't realise how diverse people really are

This reflection highlighted how Te Reo Māori can serve as a bridge to personal connections and promote a deeper understanding of cultural diversity within the community. Many participants expressed how their sense of wellbeing was closely tied to the whānau dimension, which Participant One illustrated when looking at the impact on their wellbeing. For Participant One, being in such spaces made them feel valued and respected and helped them feel more secure and empowered in the workplace.

Participant One - From personal experience, being able to connect with my Māori cultures, being able to see it, being able to see you know fellow Māori and non-Māori even take part in in the culture is always really rewarding. It makes me feel safer, more valued as a person. Respected, yeah, which I think makes me a better worker.

This connection to whānau was comforting and grounding, creating a safe space to express and experience Te Ao Māori. It was a prevalent theme across all participants as they reflected on how their engagement with Te Reo strengthened these areas of their lives. They also reflected on how being surrounded by Māori and non-Māori who embraced the culture made them feel valued and respected in the workplace.

Many participants described their language journey as a spiritual endeavour that provided a more profound sense of purpose and alignment with their cultural values. Participants emphasised the crucial role of Te Reo Māori in nurturing social connections and a sense of whānau within AUT. Learning Te Reo provided opportunities to form supportive networks, strengthen interpersonal relationships and enhance social cohesion in the workplace.

Interviewer - You're saying like, whānau, and reo that kind of goes hand in hand and that space for you, there does it.

Participant One - Yep, yeah, it was definitely one of the main things, like when I started off finding, I don't know if it was, but I was finding the specific people that umm. like. That like used Te Ao Māori and stuff, even if it was just using the language. It was just like, oh, yeah, so you're... you're the one you. so, you're... you're the one you. I'll hang out with you.

All participants emphasised the role of Te Reo in navigating personal and collective identities within a professional setting. Participants shared and described multiple meaningful ways to connect with Te Reo and, by extension, Te Ao Māori. These activities were avenues for expressing and embodying their cultural identity, bridging traditional practices with modern work environments and reinforcing their values through community and shared experiences.

Participants also described language revitalisation as an act of resistance and healing, affirming that Te Reo Māori was more than just communication—it was a taonga carrying ancestral knowledge. Through waiata, karakia, and ceremonial practices, participants felt a strengthened sense of community and cultural grounding. However, given the trauma and complexity that many Māori have experienced with language loss, it is not surprising that some participants shared some negative reflections. Participant Two expressed ambivalence about the role of whānau in their wellbeing, considering the challenges their family faced regarding language preservation and how it had manifested into a negative concept. They explained

Participant Two - Whānau is the pillar that I'm undecided on and I say that because. I've got grandparents who are fluent and active and a very much capable of speaking Te Reo Māori and sharing culture, but then on the other side they have raised children that don't value that, and so, I think I've found my own desire, yes to continue this path and reclaim everything. But I imagine that my koro is proud in a sense and then is thinking to himself. I've should have done more and then I think for my parents' perspective looking and thinking about and reflecting about the decisions they made that may have limited my access to Te Reo Māori post kohanga reo. But I think Te Taha Hinengaro absolutely, with these are iwi wānanga. Where I go and do the Te Reo Māori. I leave feeling connected. You know, so in terms of that, how whānau. Yeah, absolutely

Participant Two gave reflected on why they did not view whānau as a sense of wellbeing, given that they understood some of the challenges their family had encountered with language loss. Despite the initial scepticism, they unpacked some of the intergenerational layers at play and ultimately saw whānau benefit for themselves.

Participant Two - When I heard the question [about Whānau], you know, I flipped it to a degree and thought to myself, how does a lack of Te Reo Māori decrease the wellbeing of someone you know, oh and I think about that and back to that language trauma. You know, if you are someone who is Māori and hasn't been in a Māori environment and you pick up the courage to enter. Learning settings for Te Reo Māori. You can read the physical language, you know. you can read the body language. We wear it on our sleeves as Māori. And so, I guess I just want to pose that.

Taha Tinana

Although physical wellbeing was less explicitly discussed, many participants linked language engagement with culturally embedded physical practices such as kapa haka, pōwhiri, and marae-based activities or even work activities. The direct relationship between Te Reo Māori and taha tinana is exemplified by physically exertive exercises such as karanga and waiata, which are considered important aspects of wellbeing. These embodied expressions of Te Reo Māori contributed to participants' vitality, energy, and overall health

Learning activities at AUT were diverse and varied, with classroom learning being the most recognisable in-person form. These formal classroom-based initiatives served as a gateway for many staff members to begin their journeys with Te Reo Māori in the most physical environment possible. These conversational language papers were frequently cited as entry points for staff to gain foundational knowledge and confidence in using the language. Many staff members used these opportunities to build up their baseline language understanding. The conversational paper offered at AUT, in particular, provided a gateway to the language. As Participant Three shared:

Participant Three - I think for that conversational paper, it allowed me to be more confident, I think, in doing things while in, in how I use the reo as well, and so yeah, it just allowed me to see that other people were all on a different journey and different stage, but I think having the reo helps you

This insight underscores how language learning built practical confidence and fostered a sense of camaraderie among learners. Participants found shared purpose and support through these structured learning environments, enriching their engagement with Te Reo Māori. For Participant One, the work environment not only provided space for cultural expression but also a sense of community, allowing them to connect with others who were also on their journey of rediscovering their Māori heritage and whakapapa.

Participant One - You get to know more people. I feel like there's lots of, like, opportunity to, to, to meet likeminded people. Yeah, and familiar, even reconnecting with people that are like, on their journey to getting, like, figuring out their Māori heritage and their whakapapa and all that kind of stuff. So, it was pretty cool being a part of that journey, even if you're just kind of watching or like witnessing it or whatever.

These findings suggest that ongoing institutional support, structured learning pathways, and peer mentorship are essential to sustaining long-term workplace engagement with Te Reo Māori at AUT.

A surprising feature appearing in some conversations was the multitude of different ways in which learning Te Reo Māori was incorporated into participants' lives outside the conventional classroom. Participant Three highlighted how being part of the AUT staff choir helped deepen their understanding of Te Reo Māori.

Participant Three – well, I've never really thought about what I'm singing, you know, and that's probably because I don't have reo. But then at the same time, you know, learning the stories and so even learning the stories of an AUT I've never heard all these words, but I've never actually thought about what they mean.

Interviewer - Know what you mean. So, you're getting some deeper understanding.

Participant Three - Yeah, so whānau choir helped me do.

Participant One elaborated on their tinana experience in the work environment, particularly in interactions with students, which also allowed them to witness how language contributed to a stronger sense of wellbeing – which was equally rewarding for their wellbeing.

Participant One - Yeah, yeah and it happens all the time, not just in the Hub (AUT student space) or anything, but like even just working with students because we work on the floor and all that stuff. Just saying like kia ora to some students and you can sometimes see the reaction on their faces

Participant One shared how, despite moving away from the familiar environment of their childhood, anything related to physically being in a Māori culture-focused space provided a comforting and grounding connection in urban settings. Te Reo Māori, especially in communal and professional spaces, serves as an anchor, cultivating familiarity and a deep-seated sense of cultural and spiritual comfort amid the otherwise isolating experiences of city life.

Participant One - Because I was brought up on the East Coast and has been very 50% pakeha, 50% Māori. So Māori was like anything related to Māori was always there, raised around there, always at the Marae, that kind of thing, coming up to Auckland. It was just kind of like you got lost in the big city and didn't know, didn't really know how to operate and stuff. So as soon as there was anything Māori related, it was very familiar and like comfortable

Unexpected Finding: Koha

The concept of koha emerged as a crucial dimension of language engagement, reflecting the reciprocal nature of learning Te Reo Māori. Participants described their knowledge acquisition as more than an individual pursuit; it was a means of giving back to their communities. This aligns with kaupapa Māori principles, where knowledge is collectively held and shared rather than being possessed in isolation. Learning Te Reo

Māori has been impactful for some because the language forms part of koha, which is used to reciprocate. Through learning activities and programmes, participants experienced a growing sense of comfort and confidence, which they could later offer to others in their community. Participant Four expressed how their confidence in cultural practices, such as karakia and pōwhiri, grew as they became more fluent in the language.

I think the successes are around having those opportunities to learn, karakia to be confident, to learn the history around, you know, things like being the karanga and the pōwhiri process to me are, yeah, I enjoy that in it that it helps me to feel like not so much a fish out of water when we put in a position where we might be asked to do something. Yeah, and then a little bit of preparing, yeah, yeah

This sense of reciprocity emphasised the importance of Te Reo not only as a tool for personal growth but also as a means of contributing meaningfully to the broader community. Participants underlined the importance of giving back as a driver for learning karanga. Participant Four expressed this by speaking of their reasons for attending karanga workshops, as they felt the time invested in immersing themselves in these environments could be relied upon one day.

Participant Four [Karanga] gives me that confidence as well because it is connected to your identity to be able to stand in those spaces and contribute. Cause I think for me it is really important, like reciprocity, so to be then in those spaces to be able to give back as much

Aspirations

When sharing their thoughts on wellbeing, participants expressed that their experiences with Te Reo Māori were not limited to just the language. Participants expressed aspirations for Te Reo to become a unifying and healing tool across Aotearoa. Participant Five highlighted its potential to restore cultural identity and bridge gaps between Māori and non-Māori, intertwining cultural identity and aspirations for the wider community.

I just think that. I would love if Te Reo Māori was compulsory in kura, that our people, all of our people of Aotearoa have the opportunity. To learn and participate in our Te Reo Māori, it is one of the most beautiful languages. I think in the world its poetry is just, you know, to hear. To hear our whaikōrero, is and the poetry that is, that they you know, that they share in their whaikōrero or it's just it's such a privilege. And I think that if Aotearoa understood that about our Reo, all others of our, you know tauiwi, I think, they then, they will be more understanding of us, of our culture. So, our Reo could be the gateway to our culture. That's what I, that's for Tauiwi and for Māori and I think how reo can be really healing to, to whānau, to iwi Māori that have become dislodged from ahua Māori, it can be such a, so cathartic, so healing, you know, because it's a way to reinter.

For Participant Five, gaining experience and understanding Te Reo Māori is about restoring and preserving cultural identity. They see the language as a powerful tool for

healing, not just for the individuals but for Māori families and iwi that have become disconnected from their cultural roots and the nation.

Summary

Findings suggest that Te Reo Māori engagement in the workplace extends beyond individual wellbeing to fostering a collective culture of inclusivity and belonging. This underscores the need for workplaces to prioritise structured language initiatives, mentorship programs, and spaces where Māori staff can engage in cultural practices without fear of whakamā

These findings collectively reinforce the transformative power of Te Reo Māori, not just as a linguistic tool but as a vehicle for identity affirmation, resilience, and intergenerational healing. Across all four pillars of Te Whare Tapa Whā, participants' experiences highlight the critical role of language in shaping personal wellbeing, professional confidence, and social belonging. Moreover, the unexpected emergence of koha as a theme underscores the reciprocal and communal nature of language revitalisation. This chapter's insights reaffirm that Te Reo Māori engagement is not only beneficial for Māori staff at AUT but also carries broader implications for institutional policies, workplace inclusivity, and national language revitalisation efforts.

Chapter Five: Discussion

*Whāia te mātauranga hei oranga mō koutou
Seek after learning for the sake of your wellbeing*

Introduction

The previous chapter revealed that participants' experiences with Te Reo Māori had redefined their sense of self, deepened their connection to whakapapa, and reshaped their place within both the Māori world and the professional space they occupy. Their narratives also revealed that heritage language engagement is not simply a cognitive process but a lived and felt experience. It provided a means of reconnecting with what was perceived as a missing piece from their lives. For many, acquiring Te Reo Māori was transformative, enabling them to stand confidently in their own space despite underlying psychological obstacles.

The lived experiences of these Māori participants provide compelling evidence that Te Reo Māori actively enhances wellbeing. Participants overwhelmingly affirmed that their engagement with the language revitalised their hauora and fostered personal growth, resilience, and a renewed sense of self. The emergence of themes strongly underscored that identity, and the perception of wellbeing were deeply intertwined with language, with Te Reo Māori serving as both a bridge to self-determination and a psychological safeguard against whakamā and entrenched language-related anxieties.

Nelson (2018) highlights the profound sense of health and wellbeing derived from learning Te Reo Māori, citing the strengthening of physical, mental, and spiritual wellbeing through engagement with the language; their research further affirms that personal and spiritual growth, along with a deep sense of fulfilment, are recognised as key outcomes of learning Te Reo Māori. However, while the data indicated that Te Reo Māori was a significant source of pride for participants, it also evoked feelings of language loss and historical trauma. While participants predominantly expressed joy in reconnecting with the language, their narratives also illuminated the enduring presence of whakamā, surfacing as self-doubt, linguistic anxiety, and the pressures of cultural expectations. This duality of the triumph of language reclamation alongside the struggle to navigate its complexities is a recurring thread throughout the findings.

Te Reo Māori as a Pathway

This study has provided a compelling case and evidence that regardless of the nature of engagement, Te Reo Māori is far more than a communication tool; it is a vessel of identity and a bridge to whakapapa. Research supports this assertion as it has been

identified that adult learners' most common motivation for learning Te Reo Māori was its deep connection to identity (Hutchings et al., 2017).

Te Reo Māori functions as both a cultural vessel and a repository of ancestral knowledge, reinforcing identity and serving as a key determinant of social and emotional wellbeing (Moore, 2019). Participants described their learning journey as part of a more significant movement that restored their sense of identity and reinforced their obligation to pass the language down to future generations. Widely acknowledged in international literature, connecting with one's heritage language serves as a bridge to the past, allowing individuals to be linked to their ancestors and traditional ways of life (King, 2009), and is likely to validate their social identity and acceptance into a Māori space (Te Huia, 2017).

Te Reo Māori is widely regarded as a fundamental element of Māori identity and is interconnected with the concept of mana (Te Huia, 2015), and for many in the research, learning and using Te Reo Māori was a way of honouring tūpuna and reclaiming the knowledge suppressed through colonisation. Participants recognised that their language journey was not just personal; it was about reversing historical damage and ensuring that future generations would not experience the same disconnection.

For these six participants, learning and engaging with Te Reo Māori was not merely about partaking in a Western education pedagogy to achieve a level of language competency; it was more about reclaiming a sense of self, restoring intergenerational ties and reasserting cultural presence in a system where it had long been marginalised. Participants consistently described their journeys as personal growth and spiritual reconnection. Several practices, such as karanga, waiata, and karakia, were cited repeatedly as integral to entering into this Reo pathway, reinforcing that Te Reo Māori must be understood as an interconnected entity, 'Te Reo me ōna tikanga' (the language and its customs), where linguistic knowledge is inseparable from cultural practice. It is not merely a system of words but a dynamic medium through which identity, relationships, and values are enacted. The language was not merely the key to unlocking deeper engagement with customs and creating pathways for connection, belonging, and resilience.

Reclaiming Te Reo Māori was empowering and challenging, and Participant Five powerfully expressed that learning Te Reo Māori was about fulfilling a destiny despite the best efforts of colonisation to take it away. This perspective was supported by Matika et al. (2021), who promote that language revitalisation is not merely a linguistic exercise but a catalyst for cultural empowerment and holistic healing. For many participants, language was a direct link to their past and their ancestors, and it served

as a mechanism for reclaiming intergenerational knowledge that had been fragmented or lost. Speaking Te Reo Māori was not just about communication; it was about honouring ancestors, strengthening whakapapa, and restoring mana.

The power of Te Reo Māori in nurturing wairua was an undeniable premise in participant narratives. The ability to stand in cultural spaces confidently, lead karakia, or participate in waiata was described as a moment of mana enhancement and self-actualisation. They repeatedly framed the language as a spiritual anchor, offering grounding, stability, and strength. As one participant indicated, wairua was the guiding light, enabling everything else to take care of itself. Te Reo Māori was seen to nurture and stabilise wairua. Their data supports the idea that spiritual wellbeing and language revitalisation are inseparable. Speaking Te Reo Māori was an act of healing and restoration, an opportunity to re-establish ties severed by colonisation.

Engagement in person with tikanga and Māori-focused spaces was equally considered more than physical participation or taha tinana; it was deemed to be spiritual nourishment. The ability to stand confidently in these spaces or contribute was highly transformative. However, despite the empowered experiences, participants also grappled with the weight of language loss, intergenerational language transmission, and the persistent shadow of whakamā. However, when there was an anxiety reduction, it correlated to increased confidence in speaking and engagement with cultural practices, which suggests that language revitalisation has multiple physiological dimensions. Workplace research by Haar et al. (2019) found that creating a culturally affirming workplace can contribute to lower stress levels, improved emotional regulation, and increased sense of belonging for Māori employees.

As discussed at length, the loss of Te Reo Māori was not accidental. It was the result of systematic suppression, leaving many Māori disconnected from their linguistic and cultural heritage. Reclaiming the language was both a restorative and challenging process, where moments of pride and self-actualisation often sat alongside feelings of whakamā and grief for what had been lost. For some participants, the absence of Te Reo Māori in their upbringings created a profound void that they could only begin to fill through active engagement with the language. One participant reflected on the emotional relief of participating and entering into Te Reo Māori spaces, which is endorsed by Houkamau & Sibley's (2011) findings that suggest increases in Māori cultural efficacy and actively engaging in identity can be key factors that increase wellbeing and build resilience.

Navigating Whakamā

The reoccurring findings of this study reveal that whakamā is one of the most significant, yet paradoxical, barriers to Te Reo Māori engagement. It is a double-edged sword, both an obstacle and a catalyst in the journey toward language revitalisation. Participants frequently described experiencing whakamā in professional and social spaces, particularly when expected to speak in formal settings or alongside fluent speakers. The pressure to demonstrate fluency and the fear of making mistakes contributed to self-doubt, language anxiety, and withdrawal from active participation.

However, rather than serving solely as a barrier, whakamā emerged as a transformative force, challenging participants to engage more deeply with their linguistic and cultural identity. As Te Huia (2013) proposed, whakamā is not solely an opposing force, and it signals an emotional shift in cultural awareness and an active engagement with one's identity. For many participants, the discomfort of whakamā was part of a more profound process of cultural reintegration, pushing them to confront the internal and external challenges of language reclamation.

Despite various emotional barriers, participants repeatedly expressed that overcoming whakamā was necessary for empowerment. The shift from self-doubt to self-assurance was a defining part of their language journey. Adult second language learners are seen to maintain their commitment to learning Te Reo Māori through the profound connection it offers to their ancestors and Māori cultural heritage (King, 2009).

Feelings of self-doubt, performance anxiety, and fear of judgment often hindered their willingness to use the language, particularly in more formal settings. This is potentially exacerbated by the individual nature of some of the tasks and activities, with one participant highlighting the need for individual learning and time commitments involved. However, the data also showed that overcoming whakamā was a crucial marker of personal growth and resilience. With ongoing support and structured opportunities to engage with Te Reo Māori in a safe, encouraging environment, participants were able to push past their initial anxieties and embrace the learning process.

Given that learning and engagement brought mixed emotions of intergenerational language loss and cultural dislocation to the surface. The challenge for participants was not only overcoming their own shame or embarrassment but also navigating external pressures that reinforced language anxiety. While whakamā was a significant barrier to language use, it was also a powerful driver of cultural engagement. Participants who had previously been indifferent to their linguistic heritage found that their own whakamā forced them to engage more deeply with their identity.

Nevertheless, whakamā was not just an individual burden but a systemic one. The perceived societal expectations of fluency created a psychological barrier, discouraging learners from using Te Reo Māori in everyday interactions and creating a perpetual cycle of insecurity and disengagement. Thus, normalising the language in professional and social spaces is considered a critical step to normalising language learning. This highlights the need for structured support systems, regular positive reinforcement, peer networks, and safe spaces for practice.

Despite what may appear to be a strong discourse on negative challenges when partaking in Te Reo Māori in the workforce, participants would loudly proclaim that Te Reo Māori was, in fact, a force of resilience and empowerment. Reclaiming their reo was often framed as fulfilling a greater purpose, an act of resistance, healing, and cultural affirmation. For these participants, it was not simply about learning words but restoring Tino Rangatiratanga and reclaiming cultural agency. For many participants, Te Reo Māori was not just a linguistic tool but a spiritual charger, as it enabled the deepening of their wairuatanga and reinforced their connection to whakapapa, tūpuna, and the spiritual dimensions of Te Ao Māori.

This finding aligns with Te Huia (2013), who argues that whakamā is not merely an emotional constraint but a catalyst for cultural reintegration. When properly supported, individuals can move beyond linguistic hesitation into spaces of self-empowerment.

Perceptions of Wellness

While Te Whare Tapa Whā provided a familiar lens through which to analyse participant experiences, findings suggested that the impact of Te Reo Māori was much more nuanced than a straightforward categorisation into one of the four walls. Each wall had a context that participants related to. However, from a purely thematic perspective, wellbeing and language can intersect across multiple Te Whare Tapa Whā dimensions at any given time. Based on the nature of the feedback, it became apparent that contextualising one's wellness is inherently fluid and shifts in response to past experiences and present environments.

The perception of wellbeing and wellness was wide-ranging and supports the justification to use Te Whare Tapa Whā as a model to capture and reflect holistic health. Te Whare Tapa Whā provided participants with a culturally grounded framework to articulate their experiences of wellbeing, allowing them to assess the holistic impact of Te Reo Māori on their physical, emotional, and spiritual health.

Te Whare Tapa Whā is universal in its application, but also reflects the unified view of the universe, which is fundamental to the Māori worldview. Its unique Māori character enables Māori to take greater ownership of the insights the model can bring and, therefore, in this ownership begin to reverse the impact of colonisation. (Roachford, 2004, p.49)

Insights from this research revealed that each participant understood Te Whare Tapa Whā well in relation to their wellbeing and understood how Te Reo Māori influenced wellness. The level of knowledge of both topics is reflected in the depth and breadth of answers for such a small data set. It highlights the broader range of perceptions that were enabled to be elicited by rudimentary scales such as Te Whare Tapa Whā.

Participants found their reflections on wellbeing, as measured by Te Whare Tapa Whā, to be very practical and effective in giving them licence to articulate and assess the impact of wellbeing, particularly if there had been impacts or improvements.

However, findings suggest that Te Whare Tapa Whā may not fully encapsulate the depth of language-related wellbeing. Participants' experiences reveal that Te Reo Māori operates beyond the four walls of the model, intersecting with intergenerational healing, workplace culture, and national identity, elements that extend beyond traditional hauora frameworks.

Collective Notions

Engagement with Te Reo Māori fostered whakawhanaungatanga and relationship building, strengthening collegial support networks and reinforcing a collective identity within the workplace. Although not always explicitly discussed, participants acknowledged that their language engagement often extended to non-traditional learning environments such as the AUT choir and other ad-hoc activities and interactions, contributing to improved wellbeing and workplace satisfaction.

The findings also reinforce that language revitalisation is not merely a personal endeavour but a collective and intergenerational commitment, shaping a broader movement toward cultural empowerment. This explains why the concept of koha was so prominent among participants, as participants felt a profound obligation to give back to their communities for the opportunity to reclaim their linguistic and cultural heritage. Language reclamation occurs at both an individual and societal level, as Māori language learners often engage in revitalisation efforts to reconnect with their identity, whānau, hapū, and iwi (Hutchings et al., 2017).

That collective viewpoint also lends weight to Te Reo Māori revitalisation, which cannot be sustained solely by individual motivation alone; it requires systemic, institutional, and national-level change to ensure its survival and growth. Language cannot be confined to symbolic gestures for genuine revitalisation, and it must be normalised within professional, social, and cultural spaces (Haar et al., 2019). Participant One explicitly voiced the importance of seeing both Māori and non-Māori engaging with the culture, as this created a safer, more inclusive, and valued workplace environment. This further speaks with Haar et al. (2019) organisational research, who argue that organisations that actively support Indigenous language engagement experience increase team cohesion, workplace satisfaction, and cultural inclusivity.

Participants strongly advocated for systemic interventions that embed Te Reo Māori as an integral component of workplace culture. They emphasised that revitalisation efforts must extend beyond symbolic gestures to sustained institutional commitment. Many highlighted that learning Te Reo Māori in isolation was one of the most significant challenges. Without consistent exposure and reinforcement in daily interactions, language retention suffered, making it difficult to sustain progress. Participants expressed that having real-world conversations within culturally safe spaces was an effective and empowering way to build confidence in their linguistic abilities. At a more strategic level, this aligns with *Maihi Karauna: The Crown's Māori Language Strategy* (Te Puni Kōiri, 2019), which aims for one million New Zealanders to have some ability in Te Reo Māori by 2040.

Findings also reinforce that overcoming whakamā requires both personal perseverance and systemic intervention. Participants stressed the need for safe, inclusive spaces where mistakes are normalised, and learning Te Reo Māori is encouraged without fear of judgment or failure. Rameka & Stagg (2021) highlight that the inability to speak Te Reo Māori can negatively impact an individual's sense of belonging, identity, and cultural acceptance, emphasising the need for structured institutional support.

The future of Te Reo Māori hinges on its normalisation in professional, educational, and social settings. Learning pathways must extend beyond formal education into everyday interactions for revitalisation to be sustained and meaningful. Participants found their engagement with Te Reo Māori strengthened through non-traditional learning spaces such as music, workplace choirs, kapa haka, and community-led initiatives. These findings suggest that language revitalisation efforts must embrace a broader range of learning opportunities, particularly those that enable Te Reo Māori to be lived, shared, and experienced beyond the classroom.

This aligns with Rameka & Stagg (2021), who highlight that the absence of Te Reo Māori in professional spaces can diminish Māori employees' sense of belonging. To address this, organisations could implement structured language programs, establish peer mentoring networks, and cultivate environments where Te Reo Māori is seamlessly integrated into daily operations, as Māori employees are likely to engage more positively with workplaces that acknowledge and uphold their cultural values (Haar & Brougham, 2013).

Chapter Six: Conclusion

*E iti noa ana, nā te aroha
Although it is small, it is given with love*

Conclusion

The findings of this study reinforce that Te Reo Māori is more than a language; it is a powerful vehicle for transformation, reclamation, and resistance, restoring cultural identity and fostering collective empowerment. For participants, engaging with Te Reo Māori was not simply about learning vocabulary and grammar but about reclaiming a sense of identity and righting historical wrongs. Every act of engaging with the language was intentional, whether as an assertion of defiance against linguistic suppression or as an act of koha, contributing to its revitalisation for future generations. By breaking down mental barriers, participants not only supported their own reo journeys but also paved the way for whānau past, present, and future.

The impact of Te Reo Māori extends beyond linguistic proficiency, profoundly influencing emotional, spiritual, and social wellbeing. This study confirms that language revitalisation fosters a multitude of psychological benefits, enhancing participants' overall sense of hauora. Participants' understanding of wellbeing was enriched by strengthening the intrinsic connection between language and the dimensions of Te Whare Tapa Whā.

Key Findings

This study makes one thing abundantly clear: Te Reo Māori serves as a conduit for identity affirmation, healing, and cultural resurgence. For participants, learning and using Te Reo Māori was a deeply personal and transformative journey, one that fostered self-determination, empowerment, and the reclamation of cultural pride. It also provided a means of confronting and overcoming intergenerational language trauma.

Despite its numerous benefits, the study highlights the persistence of whakamā, which remains a significant emotional barrier discouraging language use. Participants described a deep-seated fear of making mistakes, being judged, and feeling pressured to meet fluency expectations. However, rather than viewing whakamā solely as a hindrance, this study reframes it as a paradox—both an obstacle and a catalyst for cultural reintegration. While whakamā may discourage engagement, it also signals a deep cultural awakening and a desire to reconnect. Recognising whakamā as a

transformative stage rather than a permanent barrier shifts the narrative towards empowerment and perseverance.

The link between Te Reo Māori workplace engagement and wellbeing is no longer anecdotal; this study situates it within existing multidisciplinary research affirming that language use enhances cultural identity, self-esteem, and workplace satisfaction. Language revitalisation was framed as both spiritual reclamation and professional empowerment, reinforcing a deeper connection to cultural traditions while fostering mental resilience and emotional strength. Many participants described overcoming whakamā and experiencing increased confidence, pride, and fulfilment, further demonstrating the relationship between language revitalisation and holistic wellbeing.

This research sought to explore the central question: How does Te Reo Māori enhance the wellbeing of Māori staff at AUT? Thematic Analysis revealed that participants perceive Te Reo Māori as a cultural anchor, a spiritual connector, and a social unifier—strengthening their identity and overall hauora. Findings indicate that participants actively integrate Te Reo Māori into their personal and professional lives, enhancing workplace relationships, fostering inclusivity, and increasing job satisfaction.

Implications of the Findings

This study provides both theoretical and practical insights into the role of language revitalisation in workplace wellbeing, demonstrating its transformative potential beyond linguistic competency. By framing these findings through Te Whare Tapa Whā, the research underscores the holistic nature of language engagement, highlighting its deep embedment within a Māori worldview.

The findings also reinforce the need for sustained institutional commitment to Te Reo Māori revitalisation, particularly in higher education and professional settings. While AUT has taken steps to integrate Te Reo Māori, this study highlights the importance of embedding bilingual policies, expanding language programs beyond the classroom, and fostering a workplace culture where Te Reo Māori is actively used rather than symbolically acknowledged.

Limitations of the Study

While this research offers valuable insights, several limitations regarding the study's scope, interpretation, and applicability must be acknowledged. One primary limitation is the study's sample size, which was confined to Māori staff at AUT. As a result, findings may not be fully generalisable across other institutions or sectors. Notably, academic staff were underrepresented, limiting the study's applicability to a broader staff-wide

perspective. While qualitative research prioritises depth over breadth, a larger sample size across multiple organisations may better represent how Te Reo Māori engagement influences workplace wellbeing.

Additionally, my positionality as a Māori researcher must be critically examined, as it inevitably influenced data collection, interpretation, and Thematic Analysis. As a Māori researcher, my insider status may have shaped data collection, interpretation, and Thematic Analysis. While Kaupapa Māori methodologies emphasise the importance of lived experience and cultural accountability, balancing researcher subjectivity with critical academic rigour must be factored in. Despite best endeavours to adhere to reflexive practices to mitigate bias, my personal experiences may have shaped how the findings were framed.

Another limitation is the context-specific focus of the study. This research was conducted within a university setting, where bicultural policies, professional development initiatives, and institutional support for Te Reo Māori were firmly established. It may differ significantly from government agencies, corporate workplaces, or community organisations. Future research should examine language revitalisation across diverse professional sectors to explore sector-specific challenges and opportunities.

Moreover, this study focused on the experiences of Māori staff and did not examine non-Māori perspectives on Te Reo Māori engagement in the workplace. Investigating how non-Māori colleagues perceive, support, or engage with language revitalisation could provide a more nuanced understanding of barriers and enablers across different professional spaces.

Lastly, as a qualitative study, this research does not provide quantifiable data on the measurable impacts of Te Reo Māori on workplace wellbeing. Future studies incorporating longitudinal data, workplace satisfaction surveys, and psychological wellbeing assessments could offer empirical evidence to substantiate these findings further.

Despite these limitations, this study establishes a strong foundation for continued research on Te Reo Māori and workplace wellbeing. By acknowledging these constraints, future studies can refine methodologies, expand perspectives, and advocate for systemic, sustainable support for Te Reo Māori within professional settings.

Directions for Future Research

This study has underscored the importance of Te Reo Māori in workplace wellbeing but has also highlighted several avenues for further investigation. Continued research is essential to ensuring the sustainability of language revitalisation efforts and identifying strategies to strengthen institutional support.

One critical area for future research is the long-term impact of workplace Te Reo Māori initiatives on staff wellbeing, career progression, and organisational culture. While this study captured immediate benefits such as increased confidence and strengthened relationships, longitudinal research tracking language learners over time could assess whether workplace-based Te Reo Māori programs lead to sustained improvements in job satisfaction, retention, and overall wellbeing.

Additionally, with the rise of digital learning platforms, research exploring the role of technology in supporting workplace-based Te Reo Māori learning could provide innovative solutions for making language learning more accessible in hybrid and remote working environments.

Finally, further studies investigating the intersection of Te Reo Māori engagement, employee mental health, and workplace productivity could provide empirical insights into how language revitalisation contributes to overall organisational wellbeing. Moreover, research exploring the intersection of Te Reo Māori engagement and organisational leadership could provide critical insights into how managerial support influences language revitalisation outcomes in the workplace.

Closing Summary

This study reaffirms the vital role of Te Reo Māori in strengthening Māori identity and enhancing workplace wellbeing. Embedding Te Reo Māori in professional environments not only benefits individual language learners but also drives systemic transformation, advancing language revitalisation, cultural empowerment, and institutional equity. AUT and similar organisations have the opportunity to lead by example, ensuring that Te Reo Māori is not just symbolically acknowledged but actively spoken, valued, and normalised in everyday professional interactions.

Ultimately, this research reinforces the fundamental truth that when a language thrives, so do its people. This study highlights the inseparable link between linguistic wellbeing and collective empowerment by contributing to the growing body of scholarship on Te Reo Māori revitalisation. The future of Te Reo Māori depends not only on the dedication of individuals but on systemic change, policy-driven support, and the collective commitment of institutions, workplaces, and communities across Aotearoa.

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Glossary

Māori Word	Definition
Ahuatanga	Likeness, characteristic
Aotearoa	New Zealand
Engari	But
Hapū	Sub-tribe, clan
Hauora	Wellbeing, health
Hui	Meeting, gathering
Iwi	Tribe, nation
Karani	Grandmother
Koha	Gift – especially one maintaining social relationships and has connotations of reciprocity
Kōrero	Speech, conversation, discussion
Karanga	A formal call or greeting in Māori culture
Karakia	Prayer, incantation
Kaumātua	Elder, respected person
Kaupapa	Principle, topic, policy, initiative
Mātauranga	Knowledge, wisdom, education
Mana	Authority, prestige, power
Manaakitanga	Hospitality, kindness, generosity
Marae	Māori meeting grounds
Mihi	Greeting, acknowledgment
Pepeha	Traditional Māori way of introducing oneself
Pono	Be true
Reo	Language, voice
Taonga	Treasure, anything of value
Tautoko	Support, endorsement
Te Ao Māori	The Māori worldview
Tika	To be correct
Tikanga	Customs, correct procedure, protocol
Tino rangatiratanga	Self-determination
Tūpuna	Ancestors
Wahine Toa	Strong women
Waiata	Song, chant
Wairua	Spirit, soul
Wānanga	To meet and discuss, deliberate, consider
Whānau	Extended family, family group.
Whakamā	To be ashamed, shy, embarrassed
Whakapapa	Genealogy, ancestry, lineage
Whakamāoritia	To translate into Māori
Whakataukī	Proverb
Whakawhanaungatanga	Process of establishing relationships
Whenua	Land