



# Strengthening Socio-Emotional Learning in Aotearoa New Zealand: Teacher and Whānau Understandings of Wellbeing

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## Abstract

International data provide evidence of the strong association between socio-emotional learning and wellbeing in students. However, while socio-emotional learning programmes are generally viewed as effective in developing socio-emotional capacities in students, culture is rarely considered within frameworks underpinning such programmes. In Aotearoa New Zealand, the high variability found in schools relating to approaches to develop wellbeing likely reflects universalistic conceptualisations of wellbeing and the low consideration for culture and language in socio-emotional learning. This indicates the need to develop a framework for socio-emotional learning that reflects the context of Aotearoa New Zealand. In the current article, we explore the socio-emotional understandings of teachers, and families and Māori whānau through wānanga and intentional noticing within a design-based research methodology to inform the development of a co-constructed framework for socio-emotional learning. Crucial to socio-emotional learning were the relationships between students, teachers, families and Māori whānau across the learning pathway. Relationships were viewed as being underpinned by communication skills and holding understandings of emotions and emotional states. Overall, culture, language, and identity were viewed by as fundamental to wellbeing and should be at the fore of frameworks for socio-emotional learning, which should be localised within Indigenous understandings of wellbeing.

**Keywords** Wellbeing · Socio-emotional learning · Culture, language, and identity · Teaching practices · Children and students

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## Introduction

Wellbeing is ubiquitous in contemporary society; however, conceptions of wellbeing are often dominated by universalistic notions that fail to reflect the holistic nature of wellbeing and its accompanying practices for Indigenous peoples (see Gall et al., 2021). Universalistic notions have contributed to developing indicators and measurement tools for wellbeing that enable the comparison of individuals from varying backgrounds (Manning & Fleming, 2019; OECD, 2015) to determine wellbeing outcomes. The inherent flaw within universalistic approaches is that they overlook Indigenous peoples and their conceptions of wellbeing and their cultural priorities, even in the face of widespread recognition that wellbeing is culturally constructed (Manning & Fleming, 2019; Yap, 2017). Reasons for overlooking Indigenous conceptions of wellbeing are varied. These include a lack of consensus on the construct of wellbeing itself (e.g., Sointu, 2005), the lack of understanding of how Indigenous cultures conceptualise wellbeing, a lack of data around wellbeing for Indigenous peoples, as well as, power imbalances that continue to exist between Indigenous peoples and their nation states (Yap, 2017) that result in marginalisation, racism, and disempowerment and inequitable wellbeing outcomes for Indigenous peoples (Gall et al., 2021).

In this article, we extend upon our previous article (O'Toole et al., 2019) by presenting one aspect of our multi-year research project that related to challenging and reconstructing current notions of socio-emotional learning (SEL). We explored the understandings of wellbeing of teachers and families and Māori whānau (Māori who hold kin networks with reciprocal ties, whose relationships exist across multiple households; see Cram et al., 2020) to inform the development of a framework for SEL to bring culture and language to the fore in the development of responsive pedagogies and practices. In this article, we refer to families and Māori whānau as whānau; however, see Tinirau (2020) for an in-depth review of traditional and contemporary notions of whānau.

Our collaborating teachers were from Years 4 to 10 in one primary English-medium school that included a te reo Māori bilingual unit and one English-medium secondary school located in an urban suburb of Ōtautahi (Christchurch). Whānau included those of tamariki from the classes of the collaborating teachers. The current research arose directly from needs identified by our collaborating schools and their school community in relation to concern around the wellbeing of their children. Thus, the research represents a response to a prevalent and important issue within education and reflects the whakataukī below and the need to take time to reflect in moments of heightened emotions and discomfort (Pihama et al., 2019).

Me he maongā āwhā.  
Like a lull in a storm.

## Background

Internationally, data indicate that emotional and behavioural difficulties are being experienced by greater numbers of children across communities, from increasingly younger ages (Brauner & Stephens, 2006). These difficulties may contribute to further maladjustment (Gardner & Shaw, 2008), especially during adolescence when mental health difficulties can emerge to have negative outcomes to wellbeing, which often extend over prolonged periods (see Fleming et al., 2014). In Aotearoa New Zealand, a clear imbalance exists between Indigenous and colonial conceptions of wellbeing (Ahuriri-Driscoll & Boulton, 2019). Colonial practices (Manning & Fleming, 2019) that reflect power imbalances have enabled control over Indigenous land and peoples, and these practices continue to exert influence during the shaping of a postcolonial society (Lane & Makihara, 2016). Such practices have been at the clear expense of Māori. Ways of being, thinking, and acting, including in relation to wellbeing in Aotearoa New Zealand, as in many other colonised nations, have become a totalising discourse (Smith et al., 2019), reflecting Eurocentric epistemologies and ontologies, which continue to be actively privileged to this day (Macfarlane et al., 2015). Measuring or addressing wellbeing in Indigenous cultures, including Māori, who view wellbeing as spiritual and holistic, embedded within oral traditions of storytelling and collective notions of space and place within a network of relationships (Pitama et al., 2002; Smith et al., 2019), directly contrasts deeply embedded individualistic Eurocentric notions (Manning & Fleming, 2019) underpinned by universalistic one-size-fits-all notions (Harris, 2008). During crises, including in relation to wellbeing, Eurocentric epistemologies and ontologies become particularly privileged (Kukutai et al., 2020). Such privilege means that scant focus is given to understanding how Indigenous cultures, including Māori, view wellbeing and the role of socio-cultural histories in wellbeing (Manning & Fleming, 2019).

In Aotearoa New Zealand, the Youth2000 series of data from 2000 to 2012 indicated that our youth are experiencing poor levels of wellbeing (Fleming et al., 2014). More recent data indicate that levels of wellbeing are further declining, along with persistent inequities in wellbeing between Māori and other groups (Fleming et al., 2020). Aotearoa New Zealand currently sits 35th out of 41 OECD nations on child and adolescent wellbeing outcomes, a further decrease from its 2017 standing of 34th (UNICEF, 2020). McGregor and Webber's (2020) report from the 2015 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) data of 15-year-old students indicated that tamariki from Aotearoa New Zealand demonstrate anxiety levels markedly higher than the OECD average with a ranking of 31 out of 35 countries. These levels held regardless of whether students did and did not attend school regularly, suggesting that the relationship between anxiety and schooling is complex (McGregor & Webber, 2020). Students also reported lower levels of motivation, ranking 12th of the 35 countries and high levels of bullying, ranking 34th of the 35 countries (McGregor & Webber, 2020). Overall, this suggests that wellbeing is influenced by multiple factors but should be of high concern to our nation.

## Wellbeing and Education—An International Perspective

Schools play a central role in the development of wellbeing. Education and schools are an important setting where wellbeing can be promoted through the development of social, emotional, and behavioural skills, especially for children from disadvantaged or at-risk backgrounds (Domitrovich et al., 2017; Goldberg et al., 2019; Weare & Nind, 2011). Research has found that SEL programmes effectively develop socio-emotional capacities in students and are considered best practice to developing wellbeing, although reported effects vary in strength. Positive effects have been identified in self-esteem and self-confidence (Corcoran et al., 2018; Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017; Thomas et al., 2016), as well as in academic achievement, attitudes, behaviour, and engagement in learning (Corcoran et al., 2018). Research indicates that SEL programmes have the capacity to develop skills that foster stress management, problem solving, and decision-making capacities in students (Corcoran et al., 2018; Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017). Fostering SEL skills in students has been associated with reductions in behavioural and emotional difficulties, including conduct and emotional distress (Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017).

However, there is a close association between SEL skills and the values held by societies, reflecting the attributes deemed important to succeed within dominant cultures and environments (Anziom et al., 2021). Anziom et al. (2021) recognised that attributes vary between contexts, meaning that “SEL frameworks do not apply uniformly across individuals, groups, systems, or—especially—different cultural contexts” (p.2), thus, challenging the notion of universalistic outcomes to compare individuals from varying backgrounds. Regardless, the perceived malleability of socio-emotional skills and the notion that they can be effectively taught (Goldberg et al., 2019) to positively influence a large number of children simultaneously, rather than at an individual level (Merrell et al., 2008) has contributed to the recent, rapid growth of SEL programmes in schools. Research suggesting greater effectiveness when SEL programmes are implemented across the whole school has led to SEL programmes being a guise for whole school growth and improvement (Goldberg et al., 2019; Rimm-Kaufman & Hulleman, 2015), even though the effectiveness of whole school approaches is unclear due to variable impact (Goldberg et al., 2019).

The complexity surrounding the implementation of SEL programmes within educational contexts has been noted within research (see Green et al., 2018). Bottom-up approaches to developing SEL programmes have been attributed by researchers, such as Wigelsworth et al. (2012), to a lack of findings, mainly due to the lack of clear structure and guidance for programme implementation. Rimm-Kaufman and Hulleman (2015) outlined three main implementation factors influencing the effectiveness of SEL programmes in primary schools that included the partial implementation of programmes, the adaptation of programmes that result in the loss of strength or fidelity, and the lack of post-implementation supports for programmes. Durlak (2016) noted that variability in the implementation of SEL programmes could have major effects on their outcomes, with programmes with high levels of implementation having stronger effects for students than programmes with lower levels of implementation). The adaptation of SEL programmes is also common within literature (Durlak, 2016; Green et al., 2018); although, heavy emphasis

is placed on retaining integral features (identified mechanisms that matter) of the programme (Durlak, 2016). Adaptations to SEL programmes to align with school values, goals, culture and composition of students (Durlak, 2016) are often conceptualised as disparate to the frameworks underpinning the programmes. For example, in discussing two specific SEL programmes (Strong Kids and Strong Teens), Merrell et al. (2008) noted their underpinning in cognitive-behavioural and affective techniques, stating that scripted lessons can be adapted for cultural and other circumstances by following the suggestions in the manual. Such adaptations are the antithesis of Anziom et al. (2021) argument that SEL programmes must be underpinned by localised understandings of SEL, indicating the importance of Indigenous understanding in SEL.

Research has paid scant attention to the role of culture and language within SEL frameworks, which has often been considered an aspect of the home environment or a socio-cultural characteristic alongside socio-economic factors, and gender (Garner et al., 2014). In their review of SEL frameworks, Berg et al. (2017) reported that only 27 of 136 frameworks considered cultural and linguistic diversity in students. Culture was considered in fewer than 10 of the 136 frameworks. In contrast, behaviour, specifically the development of prosocial and co-operative skills, was the most common competency identified within the SEL frameworks. The lack of consideration for culture and language becomes even more problematic when one considers that SEL programmes are more effective when schools ensure that programmes are appropriate, culturally and socially, for their students and families (Zins et al., 2007) and when parent figures, family and community are involved (Elbertson et al., 2010). Loinaz (2019, p.32) questions whether SEL can be researched within the “vacuum of a single culture” and further cautions that research that utilises English-language frameworks within other cultures “perpetuates one crucial and problematic supposition: that social and emotional competencies are universal across cultures” (p. 32) and thus silences, Indigenous voices.

## Wellbeing and Education—An Aotearoa New Zealand Perspective

In Aotearoa New Zealand, clear variability exists in the ability of schools to develop wellbeing in students. Research by Aotearoa New Zealand’s Education Review Office (ERO) (2015a, 2015b) identified wide variability in the ability of schools to respond to, and support, the development of wellbeing in students. Support for these findings is evident in more recent data from Boyd et al. (2017), in a national wellbeing survey of primary and secondary schools that drew on the model of Te Whare Tapa Whā and included the dimensions of social wellbeing, mental and emotional wellbeing, physical wellbeing, and spiritual wellbeing. They reported principal, teacher, and family responses related to supporting student wellbeing and positive behaviour. Boyd et al. (2017) used a response to intervention framework, advocated by CASEL, among others, to categorise activities into Tier 1 or universal approaches, Tier 2 or selective approaches for specific groups with identified needs, and Tier 3 for intensive approaches for high-risk students. They found that 27% of schools had zero or one approach to fostering wellbeing embedded, and only 26%

of schools surveyed had more than five approaches embedded within their school. Wellbeing and belonging in Māori and Pacific students was more commonly fostered in Decile 1 and 2 schools. Few schools consulted students about approaches to foster wellbeing and many schools (70%) placed a clear focus on approaches for improving student behaviour. The wide variability in approaches and apparent lack of approaches responsive to culture may be why many primary and secondary students are not experiencing advocated outcomes for wellbeing (ERO, 2015a, 2015b).

Wellbeing is essential for students to engage in and experience success within and across *The New Zealand Curriculum* and lifespan. Low rates of wellbeing are associated with negative educational outcomes for students in Aotearoa New Zealand, including increased rates of disengagement, standdowns, suspensions, and school abandonment (Bishop et al., 2009). For some Māori youth, disparities in wellbeing and educational outcomes are worse (Bishop et al., 2009). Ministry of Education data from 2019 indicated that Māori males experience stand-downs at approximately twice the rate as Pākehā males and Māori females experience stand-downs at nearly three times the rate as Pākehā females (Ministry of Education, 2020a, 2020b). Data are similar for Pacific students with males stood-down more frequently than Pākehā males and Pacific females stood-down nearly twice as frequently as Pākehā females. Youth also hold the highest rates of suicide and self-harm in our nation, which are worse for Māori (Fleming et al., 2014). Wellbeing is a major focus and concern within education and te Tiriti relationships. Recent government and educational developments reflect this, including the introduction of the *Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy* (Department of the Prime Minister & Cabinet, 2019) and *Our Code Our Standards* (Education Council, 2017) that place importance on repositioning Māori ideologies and values in Aotearoa New Zealand, which are instrumental to reclaiming Māori ways of being, to increase equity within education and schooling.

### The Role of Culture in SEL

The development of SEL practices that are culturally and linguistically responsive are fundamental to meeting the needs of students and their whānau, hapū (sub-tribe), iwi (tribe), and broader communities (Barnes, 2019; Macfarlane et al., 2017; Weisz et al., 2005). Such practices challenge the subjugation of Indigenous peoples, including Māori, and the notion that Indigenous peoples' cultural, social, or linguistic practices are deficient or problematic and therefore require remediation (Rogoff et al., 2017). Culturally and linguistically responsive SEL practices acknowledge that Indigenous cultural practices benefit all individuals (including dominant cultures) by expanding their repertoire of skills and practices (Rogoff et al., 2017) that foster wellbeing.

Macfarlane et al. (2017) have identified a willingness of educators to reposition Māori constructs within education, which contribute to addressing inequities for Māori. This willingness is of fundamental importance because Māori children are less likely to report that teachers treat them fairly or that teachers will hold high expectations for them (Crengle et al., 2013). The power imbalance that often has

traditionally existed within teacher and student relationships means that these models of relationships guide future interactions (Sabol & Pianta, 2012), thus leading to additional negative outcomes. However, Sabol and Pianta (2012) also noted the reconstruction of relational outcomes to influence interactions and relationships positively. According to Macfarlane et al. (2017), this suggests that teachers who place knowledge and understanding of student identity at the fore, and who are culturally and linguistically responsive are likely to create conditions for SEL that foster wellbeing in Māori (and other) students. Thus, teachers are an influential factor in the development of students' wellbeing (Durlak et al., 2011; Zembylas, 2007).

## Identifying the Research Need

According to Averill and McRae (2019) culturally responsive practices are fundamental to fostering student wellbeing. This requires, among other aspects, the incorporation of the cultural knowledge and experiences of diverse students to not only enhance learning but to empower students. Critical to developing culturally responsive practices is fostering the “development of values and capabilities in tangible ways” through shifts in consciousness and practice through a “holistic commitment to change” (Averill & McRae, 2019, p.296). Developing SEL practices that are culturally responsive and sustaining requires integration across the curriculum, pedagogical practices, and leadership across all school levels (Highfield & Weber, 2021). Classrooms are one context, within mainstream education to explore and identify values and capabilities that may contribute to developing SEL practices and student wellbeing (Rimm-Kaufman & Hulleman, 2015). According to Loinaz (2019), teacher perceptions of SEL are fundamental to understanding the development of student wellbeing. For Māori, whānau are also “a site of wellbeing and a vehicle for ... active transformation” (Pihama et al., 2015, p. 260). This means that whānau play a pivotal role in sustaining past, present and future generations as a critical structure within Māori culture (Pihama et al., 2015). For many Māori, whānau are the support base in which tamariki are located and the place where tamariki receive knowledge, and on which hapū and iwi are dependent. However, it is also evident that inequities exist for Māori in health and wellbeing outcomes, with many Māori experiencing low levels of wellbeing (see Filoche et al., 2018; Lawson-Te Aho et al., 2019; Sewell et al., 2021). As such, understanding wellbeing requires the voices of whānau, their diverse communities (Kukutai et al., 2020), and their lived experiences (Pohatu, 2015). Given the need to problematize and reconstruct current frameworks of SEL within Aotearoa New Zealand, the overall aim of our research project was to (1) develop a reconstructed framework for SEL with teachers, whānau, hapū, and iwi and (2) to develop culturally and linguistically responsive SEL pedagogical practices, within the classroom context. In the current article we explore the first aim of our research with teachers and whānau, guided by the following questions:

- (1) What are teachers' current understandings of wellbeing?

- (2) What are the current understandings of whānau regarding wellbeing?
- (3) How can whānau and teacher understandings of wellbeing contribute to reconstructing a te Tiriti o Waitangi framework of SEL?

## Our Approach

We drew on two key models underpinned by Māori and Western knowledge bases that reflected Māori and non-Māori worldviews. These models included an Indigenous model of health and wellbeing: *te whare tapa whā* (see Durie, 1998) and a Western developmental model of SEL known as the Collaborative for Academic, Social, & Emotional Learning (CASEL) model for socio-emotional learning (CASEL, 2020). *Te whare tapa whā* is a holistic model that reflects *hauora* (health) within *te ao Māori* (ways of being) (Jackson et al., 2018). *Te whare tapa whā* includes four elements; *taha tinana* (physical health), *taha wairua* (spiritual health), *taha whānau* (family health), and *taha hinengaro* (mental health). The grounding of these elements is through *he tātai whenua*, the connections to the environment, including socio-historical and political contexts. To remain healthy, balance is required between these elements and damage or unbalancing of any element can result in the individual and/or their collective becoming unwell (Jackson et al., 2018). Derived from Western traditions of psychology and human development CASEL (2020), the CASEL framework is an international model that includes five interrelated areas of competence; self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationships skills, and responsible decision making. The development of skills contained within the framework have short- and long-term outcomes that extend beyond the areas of socio-emotional competence (Ross & Tolan, 2018).

The liminal space between the aforementioned models was reflected through *he awa whiria* (a braided river) model (Macfarlane et al., 2015). According to Macfarlane et al. (2015), *he awa whiria* depicts the need for Western knowledge bases and practices to merge with Indigenous knowledge bases and practices. *He awa whiria* represents the interconnection and interaction between Indigenous and Eurocentric epistemologies that are argued to act more powerfully together, thus reflecting *te Tiriti o Waitangi* and the moving forward of New Zealand's bicultural society forward through partnership (Macfarlane et al., 2017). Within the liminal space of *he awa whiria*, Macfarlane et al. (2017) contended that the development of new knowledges and understandings can occur, which importantly reflect Indigenous cultures in education. As Kukutai et al. (2020) noted "the opportunity to draw on dual knowledge systems significantly increases the social actors involved ... that is critical in determining positive Māori futures and a resilient notion" (p. 14).

Our research was guided by principles within *Kaupapa Māori* that included *te Tiriti o Waitangi* and the relational and partnership components of the articles of *te Tiriti* (see O'Sullivan et al., 2021 for an overview of critical *te Tiriti* analysis indicators). This included ensuring equitable participation for Māori, including whānau, hapū, and iwi throughout the research process (Article 1) including language choice (Article 3), their influence over research priorities (Article 2) including *rangatiratanga* and the right to control their own decision-making



within the research process, and the importance of wairuatanga in wellness throughout the research process (Article 4). Importantly, te Tiriti o Waitangi provides the basis by which existing SEL frameworks could be challenged within an Aotearoa New Zealand context (Pihama, 2001). The research was also guided by the principle of *ata* and growing respectful relationships, with a special emphasis on *whānau* and the relationships they hold within their lived realities (Pohatu, 2004; Rangahau, n.d). Thus, our research acknowledged the centrality and legitimacy in research of *te reo Māori* (Māori language), *mātauranga Māori* and *tikanga* (knowledges, customs, and values) (Smith, 2012).

We utilised a qualitative design-based research methodology that recognises educational research is often divorced from practice. Design-based research inextricably links research with practice, enabling the creation of usable knowledge within learning environments (The Design-Based Research Collective, 2003). A Western methodology, design-based research has been used within Indigenous communities to gather understandings of Indigenous communities (e.g., Eady, 2008; Trimmer, 2019). Design-based research is underpinned by the notion that new theories and practices can be developed within natural contexts, which creates conditions for generalisation, in this case, to other classrooms and schools (Bakker & van Eerde, 2015; Barab, 2006; The Design-Based Research Collective, 2003). New theories and practices are developed through iterations that are socially situated (The Design-Based Research Collective, 2003). The iterative cycles fostered the development of understandings and the refinement of issues, both pedagogical and theoretical (The Design-Based Research Collective, 2003). Importantly, the iterative cycles of research enabled an ethical approach to Indigenous knowledges to be enacted on a collective basis (Simonds & Christopher, 2013). Ethical approval (2019/08/ERHEC) was given by the Educational Research Human Ethics Committee of the contracted university.

We engaged in iterative cycles of research with Māori and non-Māori teachers from two collaborating schools and families and Māori *whānau*, *hapū*, and *iwi* to understand wellbeing and to challenge and reposition how SEL was conceptualised and taught within schools. The first school was a contributing primary school with students from Year 0 to 6 (approximately 5 to 12 years of age) and the second school was an English-medium secondary school with students from Year 7 to 13 (approximately 12 to 18 years of age). Two teachers were from the primary school. One teacher taught in a Level 2 immersion *te reo Māori* context with students from Years 4 to 6 (approximately 9–12 years of age). In this class, students were taught in *te reo Māori* between 51 and 80 per cent of their classroom time. The second teacher taught Year 6 students (approximately 11–12 years of age) within an English-medium context. Three teachers were from the secondary school. Two teachers taught within Years 7 and 8 (approximately 12–13 years of age) and the third teacher held a dual leadership and teaching role. *Whānau* and *hapū* were those who held connections with the students of the collaborating teachers, while *iwi* members were from the wider *ropū* within which the research was being carried out.

## Data Gathering

To gather the shared understandings of teachers and whānau, data were collected using wānanga. Wānanga, as a method of data gathering is an approach within Kapa Māori research (Mahuika & Mahuika, 2020) and are ethical spaces that uphold the mana (status) of all involved. Wānanga, as a practice, enables individuals to gather, share, and critically discuss, deliberate, and consider ideas (Ermine, 2007; Mahuika & Mahuika, 2020) or issues and topics that are relevant as a collective (Smith et al., 2019). Wānanga extend beyond simply talk to include active engagement in collective thinking (Smith et al., 2019) and the creation of mātauranga through traditional and new knowledges (Mahuika & Mahuika, 2020). We used wānanga to gather data because wānanga normalise the importance of emotion, whakapapa, and oral traditions (Mahuika & Mahuika, 2020). Wānanga reflected mātauranga Māori and tikanga that included karakia (incantation), waiata (song), and manaakitanga (caring) with the sharing of kai (food and drink). Wānanga acknowledged the expertise of all present, with all participants situated as learners and knowledge-bearers in the facilitation of joint meaning making.

The wānanga were founded on whakawhanaungatanga, which fosters the development of relationships between individuals by connecting them to the whenua (land), whakapapa (lineage), and whānau. Each wānanga commenced with individuals having the opportunity to self-determine whether to engage in a form of pepeha that provided a verbal map of oneself. Pepeha are a story of place, including where you are born and are from, and the rivers and mountains that connect one to place, and the people one is connected to, including whānau. Pepeha enabled connections to be recognised, which supported the establishment of a safe space for sharing and for the continued development of relationships, which was important for developing shared understandings and minimising conflict moving forward. Data was collected in the form of qualitative field notes during the wānanga. The field notes reflected the notion that all ideas were valid and that no eligibility or ineligibility existed regarding what could be recorded in the field notes or identified during analyses (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018). This also ensured the discussion of shared ideas within a safe space for Māori and non-Māori participants and how their data was represented and subsequently shared. The field notes detailed the shared meaning-making that arose within each wānanga, which were recorded in each wānanga by a member of the university research team. Where necessary, clarification was sought from participants regarding their shared ideas as part of the wānanga process to ensure that the ideas and worldviews of all participants was respected (see Kennedy & Cram, 2010). The recorded qualitative field notes informed the data analysis, which occurred during the subsequent research wānanga, thus, supporting the design-based research approach.

The wānanga focused on tikanga and kawa (customs, habits, and ceremonies) to develop shared understandings, thus reflecting rangatiratanga among those in attendance (Mahuika & Mahuika, 2020). The wānanga with the co-researcher teachers was held during a research hui that occurred over a typical six-hour school day and included five of the six teachers from the two schools (One teacher was on year-long leave). The wānanga for whānau were carried out across a 2-week period at

the collaborating schools following consultation with local iwi. Holding wānanga at the schools met the needs of whānau around picking up or dropping off children and varied working hours. Whānau were invited to attend one of a series of wānanga held across various times of the day at the co-researcher schools; thus, fostering the ability of individuals to self-determine if the wānanga space constituted a safe space for them. In total, 11 whānau members attended five wānanga with each wānanga lasting approximately 90 minutes.

Each wānanga had its own discursive flow through the understandings elicited via a series of topics. The topics within this approach emphasised the development of a storyline that recognised the lived historical, social, and situational experiences and constraints of participants and how these contribute to the research process and the shaping and analysis of data (Liamputtong, 2010). It also acknowledged the subjectivity and the positions of each individual involved in the research. Teachers shared their perceptions and understandings of wellbeing, guided by a range of topics that included the role, function, and components of emotions, emotional literacy, the role of colonisation on Māori emotions and emotional regulation, living as Māori and Indigenous ways of learning and healing, and developing wellbeing through culturally responsive practices. In the families and Māori whānau wānanga, understandings of wellbeing were elicited through a series of topics and questions that asked participants what wellbeing meant for them and their tamariki (i.e., What does wellbeing look and sound like to you? What tells us your children's wellbeing has been disrupted?), what factors disrupted wellbeing and what this meant for whānau and their whānau, and what factors supported and fostered wellbeing in themselves, their tamariki and whānau, as well as in their community.

## Data Analysis

Following the wānanga, data were analysed by the collaborative research group across two research hui. Analyses occurred using open (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), which included the independent interpretation of field notes from the wānanga to occur through close reading (Given, 2008). Within open coding, a focus was placed on identifying the commonalities, variations, and points of difference within the data. These points were annotated and aligned with the data. During axial coding, the annotated points were examined and discussed (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), and the collective construction of tentative categories emerged, which were refined further through engagement with the data according to how they addressed each “axis of interest” (Given, 2008, p. 52) that enabled themes to be identified.

Following the identification of themes, teachers were asked to engage in a period of noticing around their current teaching practices. This contributed to the spirals of inquiry within the design-based research methodology and enabled themes to be further refined. We drew exclusively on Mason's (2001) intentional noticing that situated teachers within a stance beyond casual attention to the ordinary and habituated practices within one's experiences. As such, intentional noticing enables individuals to deepen and broaden their understandings of different aspects of their professional

practice. In the current study, noticing acted as a means by which teachers could intentionally bring experiences to the forefront of daily practice for future attention, which supported the deconstruction and reconstruction of their professional practices. Intentional noticing was agentic because it ensured that the teachers informed their own future practices. Intentional noticing was guided by three questions that related to SEL in relation to the teachers' own practice (What are you noticing about your practice?), their students (What are you noticing about your students?) and their students' whānau (What are whānau noticing about their child?).

## Findings

Analyses of the teacher data indicated relationships as a prominent theme. These were multi-dimensional and included relationships with culture and language, with one's self, and with learning. The role of culture and language in relationships with students and their whānau were recognised by teachers; however, these understandings were not always present within their explicit practices with tamariki and whānau. Teachers attributed the gap to assumptions made regarding the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of students and their whānau, which one teacher noticed was reflected in their tendency to pose "simple questions [to whānau] with yes, no, a lot". Teachers noticed that the development of relationships was influenced by their assumptions because they influenced subsequent interactions that teachers had with children and whānau. The teachers also noticed that belonging and identity were fostered in whānau and tamariki when teachers explicitly engaged in dialogue with whānau about their children, such as "This is what I notice ... What are you noticing?".

The identified gap between teachers' held understandings and their explicit practices relating to culture and language within relationships was not solely restricted to students and their whānau. Data suggested that teachers paid scant attention to their own cultural and linguistic backgrounds within their professional practice. Teachers noticed that this negatively influenced developing relationships with students, and by extension, their whānau. The teachers in the current study related this to the vulnerability that can occur for teachers around their teacher identity within their professional practice. For example, one teacher identified that being viewed as competent within their professional practice was integral to their teacher identity and that their teacher identity could be compromised if they were "worried about critique and being incompetent." One teacher identified that teachers, "don't want to be vulnerable because they don't want colleagues to see it." However, while demonstrating vulnerability appeared to compromise teacher identity for some teachers, for some teachers, it appeared to contribute to fostering their teacher identity. For one teacher, vulnerability meant "being honest, being open" with other teachers and, "verbalise [sic] how to ask for help". For another teacher, it meant asking, "what can you do better [as a teacher]?"

The data identified that vulnerabilities were created for teachers within their teaching practice in the area of emotions. The teachers noticed that they were less able to anticipate emotions or were less sure of how to negotiate emotions or

emotional states within the educational space. The emotions and emotional states were not restricted to their students, as the teachers identified they were, at times, unsure of how to negotiate their own emotional states with students. One teacher commented that emotions were “scary” and that they held concern around “doing something wrong.” Another teacher connected the vulnerability around emotions with teacher identity and teacher wellbeing. They noticed that perceptions around teacher identity reinforced “the need to be seen as in control” and that unease around emotions could result in teachers attempting to dominate relationships to exert control, which they noticed often occurred at the expense of teacher wellbeing. Teachers noticed that sharing more aspects of themselves within their professional practice with students, including their own lived experiences around task anxiety and failure to reach goals, contributed to altering perceptions around emotions. These changes also contributed to developing and strengthening relationships with students and colleagues within the school community, as well as *whānau*, *hapū*, and *iwi*.

Teachers identified that relationships between students within the secondary context were often underpinned by emotive language that was often heavily situated within racist and derogatory statements. These statements were unconsciously normalised within some groups of learners to the extent that students “didn’t think they had done anything wrong.” Students appeared to hold low understandings of how their language was perceived within interactions, which influenced the perceptions that other individuals held of them within the student community. One teacher noticed that these interactions were often heavily based in power relationships as the statements often caused chain-reactions between students that reinforced the notion that, “I am better than you.” Bringing these interactions to the forefront of practice to be deconstructed and reconstructed through open conversations provided opportunities for students to view interactions from a variety of perspectives. Importantly, the teachers noticed that this gave the “power back to the student to make his [sic] own changes”, thus contributing to strengthening identity and relationships. The reconstruction of practices had a cyclic effect because the conversations provided students with the ability to diffuse future situations, thus these practices became lived experiences for students and teachers.

Teachers noticed that developing understandings of emotions and emotional states contributed to students and teachers developing the confidence to move out of their comfort zones to further inform their developing repertoire of socio-emotional skills. The teachers viewed that a relational approach to developing SEL via implicit experiences was fundamental; however, the data also conveyed the importance of explicit skills in SEL. The implicit experiences were used as a catalyst to develop explicit skills including, “strengths-based compliments” or “seeing from someone else’s perspective”, although teachers also used explicit skills to, “set [students] up” for future experiences. The reciprocal relationship that existed between implicit and explicit experiences in the development of SEL also identified that the roles of teachers and students in SEL within the school context were interchangeable; individuals could hold the role of either teacher or a learner, known as *ako*. The effect of the interchangeability of roles appeared to empower teachers and students by challenging and repositioning the dynamics of the traditional classroom setting in relation to SEL towards normalising the importance of emotions and emotional

states for all involved. This occurred in both secondary and primary contexts, differing from traditional relationships where one teacher noticed that “metacognitive processes [were more likely] to be verbalised with students in the primary school setting than the secondary setting.”

Analysis of the whānau data identified that wellbeing was fundamental within the home environment. They identified that relationships were fundamental to fostering and maintaining wellbeing. Whānau collectively emphasised communication as a critical aspect of relationships with different family members across different contexts and was an important aspect of wellbeing for all whānau involved. Language was identified as fundamental to whānau recognising different emotions and emotional states in themselves and their tamariki. Interestingly, whānau placed importance on the role of body language in recognising different emotional states in tamariki. Whānau commented that body language was a key means by which to “identify underlying reasons” and to “decipher what they want to talk about.” The emphasis on body language appeared greater when wellbeing was compromised in their tamariki, during which time whānau noticed they communicated less, “were reluctant to tell about their day” and they “used less words [and were] less open to talk about their day.” The role of emotions in communication was also identified as a prominent theme. Whānau viewed the ability of their tamariki to verbalise emotions as a fundamental life skill that required developing. This appeared to largely derive from the social, cultural, and historical experiences of whānau themselves and their lived experiences that inextricably tied communication with culture and identity, as they sought to “give them everything that I never had”.

Whānau data also identified that communication around emotions and emotional states were influential in the relationships that whānau held with tamariki and the relationships tamariki held with others in the school context. However, whānau clearly viewed understandings of emotions and emotional states were an area that tamariki lacked skills in, especially within the school context. Whānau commented that their child, “doesn’t name it—emotions”, while other whānau identified that “at school they don’t use their language so well.” Whānau reported that the emotional states of children and whānau could be heightened as they navigated relationships within the school context. Whānau reported that verbal interactions between children increased in influence as they progressed through the primary and secondary contexts. Like teachers, whānau also identified the normalisation of interactions between children that contained language underpinned by racist and derogatory statements. Interestingly, whānau highlighted recognising that “we have our own assumptions”, which were influenced by “what we’ve been taught growing up”. Understandings of assumptions, enabled children to view interactions and contexts from perspectives different to their own. As such, negative attitudes toward oneself or others were viewed as “opportunities to change.” Whānau commented that developing skills via relationships and fostering communication strengthened the identity of children, as they were taught “to be themselves”, which supported their children to manage emotions and emotional states within the school context.

While whānau viewed relationships as crucial to wellbeing, the data emphasised the importance of whānau and community. Both were viewed as important social support systems for children and other whānau members. Whānau

identified the importance of “feeling connected” and having “connections to home and belonging.” Data indicated that whānau and community groups were experienced differently by whānau members. Groups included close friendship groups, local neighbourhoods, and neighbourhood, sport, and religious organisations, and iwi and hapū organisations. Groups also offered different levels and types of support for whānau members, which varied according to needs over time. It was also clear that whānau sought communities for various reasons, including “feeling inspired [or] inspiring others” and “creating connections and opportunities for engagement—shared load.” Often whānau indicated a link between whānau and community groups and the development of skills, both for whānau and tamariki. The development of skills could be implicit or explicit. Whānau reported that involvement in community groups fostered their child to be “more self-sufficient” and develop “planning and problem-solving skills.” Whānau reported a wide range of feelings and experiences regarding these communities. Not all whānau supported the role of whānau or community groups, with some whānau reporting disconnect within some whānau and community groups, which was often related to their lived experiences. At times, whānau and community groups resulted in heightened feelings of pressure to belong, while membership in other groups provided opportunities to be fully connected within their communities and a strong sense of belonging that positively influenced wellbeing.

The influence of socio-historical experiences in developing wellbeing was identified within the relationships that existed between whānau, communities, and schools. Whānau data indicated that relationships with schools were influenced by the relationships that children and whānau members held with teachers. As with community groups, some relationships reflected close connections to the school. Schools actively developed strong relationships with whānau through whakawhanaungatanga. Whānau reported that when relationships with schools were strong it “felt like all the boxes were ticked” and that they were “all on the same page.” This suggested to whānau that schools were responsive to culture, language and identity, as well as societal forces, which contributed to the development of genuine relationships and wellbeing. Whānau reported that schools “created connections and opportunities for engagement”, including through “shared cultural connections”, which meant a “shared load” and an understanding of different familial contexts. It also supported the importance that whānau placed on schools in terms of acknowledging their high aspirations for their children, which they viewed as contributing to developing wellbeing in their tamariki. For most whānau, these aspirations favoured holistic and collective aspects related to community and whānau, although whānau identified the importance of academic and SEL skills in their children. However, in other cases, whānau reported wider educational experiences that included communication with whānau, including children of overt racial assumptions and verbal abuse, stereotyping and bullying. The data suggested a reciprocal effect of SEL for whānau, as whānau reported that children, at times, enacted SEL skills to de-escalate parental experiences; “I had to look at my son, [who] gave me pause to my behaviour”, suggesting that the development of socio-emotional skills was mutually reinforcing to developing wellbeing in whānau members.

## Weaving the Themes Together

Within the liminal space of the current study, the collective data indicated that SEL was crucial to the development of wellbeing in students. Teachers and whānau viewed that communication was critical to developing student wellbeing and identified that certain communication skills and knowledge helped foster the necessary positive conditions. While teachers and whānau implicitly and explicitly developed communication skills in ākonga that fostered wellbeing, whānau were more likely to emphasise the role of body language in the wellbeing of ākonga, while teachers emphasised the role of verbal language. Interestingly, whānau identified differences in how ākonga used verbal language between whānau and school contexts, noting a lowered propensity to use verbal language to communicate effectively within the school context. Whānau specifically identified difficulties in verbal language within the area of emotions and emotional states. Less use of verbal language to communicate may be related to how teachers consciously and unconsciously manage emotions and emotional states that become established as conscious or unconscious emotional rules, often inhibiting the expression of emotions, especially negative ones (Lee et al., 2016; Loinaz, 2019). Differences have been found to exist in teachers' approaches to the role of emotions and emotional states within classroom settings, which are influenced by culture. In their multi-cultural research, Loinaz (2019) identified that only 63% of UK teachers held the view that teachers should be comfortable expressing emotions. In contrast, Spanish and Swedish teachers were significantly more comfortable expressing emotions. Differences were especially evident in terms of the role of negative emotions. Loinaz (2019) also found that teachers, including those who were comfortable expressing emotions, were less likely to view that it was appropriate to express negative emotions within the educational setting. However, research indicates that suppressing negative emotions can be disadvantageous to teachers because such emotions negatively impact teaching, as well as for students, who experience lower levels of interpersonal functioning and lower levels of wellbeing due to negative experiences (Gross & John, 2003; Lee et al., 2016).

In our study, it was clear that negative emotions, such as those associated with assumptions and stereotypes, created vulnerabilities for students and teachers. However, negative emotions and vulnerabilities were viewed as a vehicle for deconstructing and de-escalating interactions to foster the development of wellbeing, through both implicit and explicit teachable moments. The subsequent building of skills within one's repertoire was identified as empowering by teachers, for teachers and students. This also meant that the development of relationships between teachers and students focused on practices that fostered skills related to the underlying reasons that resulted in the external demonstration of behaviour and not around controlling and punishing behaviours that derived from negative emotions at an individual level, which has long been viewed as synonymous with SEL programmes. Such experiences supported teachers in recognising how their responses and those of their students were situated within culture, language, and identity, which were held in high importance by whānau in developing wellbeing. Teachers and students became learners and knowledge holders through interactions. Vulnerability, within this context, appears to hold close alignment to Berryman et al. (2018) notion of



risk taking within responsive pedagogies. Such perspectives challenged and repositioned traditional Western perspectives of SEL and teacher/student relationships, which contributed to the development of a relational space for culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogies (Berryman et al., 2018), in which wellbeing can be developed.

Our study highlighted the importance of developing SEL practices to foster wellbeing within both primary and secondary settings. While research has identified that SEL programmes are effective in developing SEL capacities in students and are considered best practice, research often fails to differentiate between educational or cultural contexts within their findings (Wigelsworth et al., 2012). While SEL programmes have been enacted within secondary contexts, the identification of positive effects for SEL within secondary contexts has been variable (see Humphrey et al., 2010). Variability may be partly attributed to research indicating that teachers within secondary school settings are less likely to be comfortable expressing emotions or being tolerant of emotions than teachers within primary school settings (Loinaz, 2019). In their research, Wigelsworth et al. (2012) attributed their lack of findings to the bottom-up approach taken to their SEL programme and the lack of clear structure and guidance for programme implementation. However, such attributions fail to acknowledge the clear positioning of Western frameworks in the development and interpretation of SEL practices and wellbeing (Macfarlane et al., 2017), which predominately disregard culture, language, and identity. Our study suggests that a bottom-up approach is essential to developing SEL practices that are culturally and linguistically responsive because it places students at the centre, and acknowledges the role of teacher and whānau and their understandings in the development of SEL practices that foster wellbeing. According to Macfarlane et al. (2017) socio-cultural contexts (that include historical and political contexts) are authentic when they are cognizant of cultural identities.

## Concluding Remarks

Our study identified that culture, language, and identity are fundamental to understandings of wellbeing in students. We identified that understanding these elements can contribute to developing relationships among students, teachers, and whānau, in a mutually reinforcing manner. Our study highlighted the importance of emotions to relationships and wellbeing and included positive and negative emotions. Vulnerabilities, while present, can provide a space for challenging, deconstructing, and reconstructing established ways of being. We identified that the voices of whānau and teachers together are important to understanding wellbeing in our young and thus are influential in developing localised frameworks of SEL. The understandings of teachers and whānau enabled us to create spaces where culture, language, and identity could come to the fore to be embodied within SEL practices. The current study sat within the liminal space between Māori and Western epistemologies and ontologies. This can be a difficult space in which to operate and the lived realities of individuals may have prohibited some whānau from participating in the current research space. Other contexts and cultures may identify different understandings of

wellbeing that influence SEL. Of key importance is taking time and making space for cultural and linguistic understandings and knowledges of wellbeing for the benefit of all, as the whakatāuki earlier suggested.

Me he maonga āwhā.  
Like a lull in a storm.

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