



Learning te Reo Māori via Online Distance Education: A Case Study

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Abstract

Despite some gains in the regeneration of te reo Māori, the indigenous language of Aotearoa New Zealand, its long-term survival remains threatened. One avenue for regeneration seldom considered is the English-medium secondary school. This article reports on a case study where students in one such school chose te reo Māori as an option and, because no face-to-face teacher was available, opted to continue via online distance education. Their experience over a year was documented and analysed through the lens of Willems' (2012) quadripartite model of resilience. Despite high levels of motivation, the students encountered considerable difficulties from which educators and education policy makers can learn important lessons.

Keywords: te reo Māori; Māori language; online distance education; language

Introduction

Students enrolling in English-medium secondary schools who choose to learn te reo Māori as a subject may, for a range of reasons, opt to enrol in an online distance programme. In 2012 this was the case for approximately 430 students throughout New Zealand (Ministry of Education, 2014). These students included six from one school that was the site of a previous study that investigated factors relating to the uptake of te reo Māori as a subject (Jeurissen, 2014). These six students, who were to some extent motivated to learn te reo Māori as an outcome of being participants in the previous study, chose this language option because there was no teacher available to teach National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) level one at their school. As the researcher in the previous study, I felt some responsibility for the students' decisions and so wanted to document their experiences while providing any support that I could. Moreover, I wanted to investigate whether learning te reo Māori via online distance education could realistically contribute to existing regeneration efforts. Willems' (2012) quadripartite model of educational resilience provides a theoretical framework with which to view the students' experiences. It also provides a framework for school managers and educational policy makers to consider when offering online distance education for learners of te reo Māori and other subjects.

The status of te reo Māori

Despite some substantial gains, te reo Māori remains in a critical state: "the proportion of Māori who were fluent Māori speakers declined markedly over the last century" (Social Report, 2010).

Moreover, the number of Māori reporting they could hold an everyday conversation in te reo declined from 25.2% in 2001 to 23.7% in 2006 (Te Puni Kokiri, 2011). The decline is concerning, particularly in light of aspirations reported at national hui (meetings) in the 2011 report, *Te Reo Mauriora*, that the language could be considered safe only if 50% of Māori spoke it (cited in Te Puni Kokiri, 2011). The same report recommended that 80% of Māori should speak te reo daily by 2050. For these figures to become real rather than aspirational, measures for language regeneration, in addition to those currently in place, must be afforded attention. Jeurissen (2014) argued that English-medium secondary schools be considered fertile ground for regeneration, not least because of sheer numbers: according to 2011 roll return data for years 7 to 13, the number of Māori students in bilingual/immersion schools was 5.4%, with the other 94.6% of Māori students attending English-medium schools (Ministry of Education, 2015). Although the number of Māori students attending English-medium schools is high, fluent teachers of te reo are scarce. Consequently, some students who want to learn te reo as a secondary school subject can do so only by online distance education.

Distance education in the primary and secondary sector in New Zealand

In distance education “learners are physically separated from the institution that sponsors the instruction” (Schlosser & Simonson, 2006, p. 4). New Zealand has a long history of distance education (Barbour & Wenmoth, 2013). The first provider of distance education for primary-aged students, The New Zealand Correspondence School, was established in 1922 to provide for those children who lived in remote areas, were unable to access education due to ill health, or were in small schools and unable to obtain tuition in some subjects. In 1929, secondary-level courses were added (Tate, 1981). As more courses were included, the school became one of the largest in New Zealand, and it remains an important education provider with approximately 14,000 students enrolled in 2012 (Te Aho o Te Kura Pounamu, 2012). In 2009, the school adopted the name Te Aho o Te Kura Pounamu (Te Kura).

At the time of this study, Te Kura’s courses and programmes were sometimes alongside and sometimes collaborating with other providers of online education in secondary schools “approximately 20 Virtual Learning Networks (VLN) e-learning clusters; three regional health schools; 13 urban-based regional loops; and some tertiary institutions” (Barbour & Wenmoth, 2013, p. 3). Some of Te Kura’s students were dual-enrolled with both a traditional face-to-face school and a distance education provider such as Te Kura. Developments in technology and distance education have made it possible for students to maximise learning opportunities and engage in distance education for some subjects while attending their regular (mainstream) school. In the early years, distance education consisted entirely of print-based material sent by post. In the current distance education model, delivery might combine weekly video-conferencing classes; hard-copy materials and resources provided by an e-teacher; interactive video conferences; support material provided online by means of a learning management system; and, in some cases, face-to-face meetings between student and teacher (Bennett & Barbour, 2013). This mixture of classroom, vocational, and distance education modes is increasingly described as blended learning (Pullar & Brennan, 2008). In online distance education, students are separated from the teacher by distance, and communicate through an online learning management system. The students in this study were experiencing a blended learning environment by being dual-enrolled in their mainstream face-to-face school and a distance education provider. They were involved in online distance education for the purpose of learning te reo Māori led by a distance teacher, while learning their other subjects more traditionally with face-to-face teachers.

Online distance education and language learning for school-age students

There is considerable literature and research detailing online distance education for adults; however, in comparison, research with students in the primary and secondary sector is somewhat lacking (Lopes, O'Donoghue, & O'Neill, 2011). When describing the Australian situation, Lopes et al. lament: "given that distance education has been employed with school-aged students . . . for almost a century, it is surprising how little this phenomenon is understood" (2011, p. 176).

Tiakiwai & Tiakiwai (2010, as cited in Bennett & Barbour, 2013) feel these voices echo strongly in New Zealand, where literature dealing with online distance education and Māori students or Māori contexts is also sadly lacking. One study, with a VLN of schools in the remote northern region of New Zealand, investigated Māori students' perceptions of their online learning experience (Bennett & Barbour, 2013). Recommendations included systematic collection of data from students, and professional development for e-teachers so they can become more cognisant of research about engagement with Māori. Another early paper describing distance education for isolated Māori secondary students concluded that distance education can be modified successfully for delivery to Māori students, despite the fact that the "instructional design based on generally accepted principles of distance education and of individual delivery" (Amaru, Rae, & Shadbolt, 1995) is incongruent with indigenous people's preference to learn collaboratively and cooperatively. These investigations have some relevance for the current context but they did not specifically investigate language learning. Moreover, there remains a noticeable lack of research into learning indigenous languages, including te reo Māori, via online distance education.

Otsuka and Stevens (1997) conducted a study of language learning by distance in New Zealand with 14 students who were learning Japanese. The authors reported both positive and negative features of the students' experiences. On the positive side, they liked having few distractions when learning, and they appreciated the flexibility and independence of studying with Te Kura. They also felt that the tutor "was particularly attentive and provided them with detailed comments on their work" (Otsuka & Stevens, 1997, p. 29). Aspects the students did *not* enjoy included the lack of peer interaction, feeling isolated, and the lack of access to a face-to-face teacher. Moreover, students reported that they were not gaining mastery of the language. Three recommendations emerged from this study: first, that there be frequent face-to-face and telephone contact with the distance teacher; second, that textual materials be improved (with more pictures and drawings to help students understand complex grammatical explanations); and third, that language recordings that could be played at varying speeds should be developed (to support students who found it difficult to adjust to the speed of spoken Japanese).

The Japanese case study exemplifies problematic areas for learning a foreign language by online distance education, and these prove to be similar for the students learning te reo Māori in the current study. However, as already mentioned, no studies detailing the learning of indigenous languages via online distance have been found. Learning an indigenous language that is also endangered adds another layer of complexity to the delivery and experience of online distance education. When students choose to learn a language that is threatened, rarely spoken in their school and community, and possibly not valued, their chances of success are jeopardised by the context. Given the shortage of te reo Māori teachers, many students in mainstream secondary schools who wish to learn the language may have only the option of enrolling with an online distance provider. There is therefore some urgency to investigate the nature of their experience.

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to observe and document the experience of six students undertaking NCEA level one¹ te reo Māori via online distance education. Because the study was concerned with a single instance (one group) of a bounded system, a case study was an appropriate methodology (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000). In documenting students' experiences, the aim was "to portray 'what it is like' to be in a particular situation, to catch the close-up reality and 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973) of participants' lived experiences of, thoughts about and feelings for, a situation" (Cohen et al., 2000, p. 182).

The specific research question was:

What factors constrain and enable students' learning when undertaking te reo Māori via online distance education?

Participant selection in a case study demands careful attention, and in most cases sampling is purposeful (Richards, 2003). In this instance all students who chose te reo Māori as a an option for NCEA level one in 2012 were invited and agreed to participate. Table 1 displays relevant details for the students, all of whom were 15–16 years old.

Table 1 Participants' details

Name (pseudonym)	Ethnic group	Languages spoken and understood
Jane	NZ European, NZ Māori	English
Ana	NZ European, NZ Māori	English
Sarah	Scottish, German, Samoan	English
Hana	NZ European, NZ Māori	English
Tyla	Samoan	English, understands but does not speak Samoan
Kyla	Tongan	English, Tongan

Most of these students were participants in a previous study that investigated factors relating to the uptake of te reo Māori as a subject in an English-medium secondary school (Jeurissen, 2014). They were interviewed as year 10 students because they were considering studying te reo Māori in year 11. Although they were learning with a face-to-face teacher at that time, this would not be an option in year 11; hence the decision to proceed with online distance education. My professional interest was that of a teacher–educator specialising in second-language acquisition. Personally, as an indigenous New Zealander who has not learned te reo, I was also motivated to improve opportunities for the younger generation. Whānau² concepts of generosity, cooperation, and reciprocity were prioritised, and so a Māori world view underpinned the research process. In the bicultural context of New Zealand, transparent and culturally responsive engagement with stakeholders must be a priority for educational research (Taiwhati, Toia, Te Maro, McRae, & McKenzie, 2010). In this study, culturally responsive engagement included the provision of support for students as the study progressed. I did not deem it ethical to document students' experiences without providing help when they reported difficulties. The support provided to them is referred to in subsequent sections of the article.

¹ NCEA is the New Zealand National Certificate of Educational Achievement—the official qualification for senior secondary school students. Level one is the first level of this qualification. In general, students work through levels one to three in years 11 to 13.

² Extended family or family group

The data-collection methods comprised two focus-group interviews, one early (FG1) and one later (FG2) in the year (Appendices A and B). The purpose of the focus groups was to explore students' experiences in some depth. I believed that the students would provide rich descriptions as they interacted with one another and, as a result, the participants' rather than the researcher's agenda would predominate (Cohen et al., 2000). Finally, individual interviews (II) (Appendix C) were conducted at the end of the year with all but one student who was unavailable (overseas) at the time. (After they had participated in two focus groups, I wanted to give the students the opportunity to talk openly about their individual experiences). A guided interview approach was chosen to increase the comprehensiveness of the data, make the analysis somewhat systematic, and increase the comparability of responses (Cohen, et al., 2000). All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed in full before the data was analysed.

Willems' (2012) model of educational resilience provided the framework for analysing the data. Educational resilience is often linked to student success or failure, particularly when attempting to theorise outcomes for at-risk students and those involved in distance education. Literature in psychology that deals with resilience includes the following terms for relevant attributes: 'optimistic', 'zestful', 'curious', and 'open to new experiences' (Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004, p. 320). However, in the field of education, Waxman, Gray, and Padron (2004) explain that resilience should not be viewed as a "fixed attribute of some students, but rather as an alterable process or mechanisms that can be developed and fostered"(p.14). Willems concurs and elaborates, arguing that "framing resilience in terms of either a personal attribute or deficit without considering the context and communities within which that distance learner is embedded is flawed, as an individual's responses cannot be dissociated from the context within which they are located" (2012, p. 14). Rather than placing the responsibility for educational resilience solely on the individual, a quadripartite model is suggested. In this model, responsibility for educational resilience is shared by four stakeholders: the student, the educator/supervisor, the institution, and the broader social community. (Willems, 2012). As data were analysed, responses were assigned to a particular stakeholder. It emerged that each had a significant influence on the students' experiences and assessment outcomes.

Findings and analysis

Findings are reported and analysed in terms of Willems' (2012) quadripartite model of educational resilience. Although each stakeholder both positively and negatively influenced students' resilience, these influences were not evenly balanced. It is acknowledged that a limitation of the study is that the contribution of each stakeholder is reported from only the students' perspectives.

Students' results for level one te reo Māori are provided at the end of this section.

The students

Students were extremely motivated and determined to succeed; all participants indicated they enjoyed te reo Māori and could see a purpose for learning the language.

I took it because last year I really enjoyed it and I kinda thought that if I took it [again] it would really help me with my career and uni. (Tyla, FG1)

While Tyla was motivated by career aspirations (she was considering teaching), others had deeper, perhaps more emotional motivations.

. . . but also cos of my dad; he always wanted to learn it . . . so yeah . . . (Ana, FG1)

I wanted to further my knowledge about my culture and heritage. (Jane, FG1)

The fact that these six students had chosen to take te reo Māori in year 11, despite there being no face-to-face teacher available, indicates high levels of motivation. This is further evidenced by one student's determination even in the face of opposition from family members. The following interview extract illustrates Kyla's mother's opposition to her choice.

Kyla: It wasn't easy [to choose te reo Māori as a subject] because my mum didn't want me to take it.

Researcher: Why was that?

Kyla: I don't know. She reckoned like, I can't get anywhere with it.

R: Right, and yet you still decided to take it?

Kyla: Yes because I liked it and . . . I reckon it can help me with what I want to do like later on, so yeah . . . it was pretty hard. (Kyla, FG1)

Students also overcame concerns about studying by distance and choosing te reo Māori over other attractive subject options.

It was really difficult for me [choosing te reo Māori] because I had lots of subjects that I was looking at and I could only pick three so it took a lot of thinking about things. (Sarah FG1)

I knew that I wanted to take it but when we found out that it was by distance then that made it a really difficult decision cos I didn't want to study it by distance. I'd like spoken to XX who took it before and she said it was real hard and all that kinda stuff so yeah, that made it hard. (Ana, FG1)

The determination to succeed with te reo Māori continued as the year progressed, even when students encountered difficulties. Difficulties, referred to by Willems (2012) as "invisible fences" (p. 22), included a lack of specific support for completing assessments, technology failures, and being unable to contact the correspondence teacher. Despite these issues, all students interviewed at the end of the year indicated they would consider choosing te reo Māori the following year, although they were unanimous they would do so only with a face-to-face teacher. When asked why she was still considering te reo Māori, Tyla explained:

Because I can see like everything you can do after school. There's so many jobs that, you know, require bilingual speakers or trilingual speakers and it's good to have Māori, like to be able to speak Māori and either go on to teaching or anything. It would just help me get a job or help me with my career when I finish school. (Tyla, II, 3/12/12)

While attitude and motivation are extremely important factors when considering the student's role, ability or proficiency as a learner is obviously significant. As previously mentioned, a limitation of the study is the lack of reliable student assessment data (although students volunteered their results which are reported later in the article). Students were asked about progress in their other subjects and how this compared with their progress in te reo Māori. All stated that te reo Māori was the subject they were finding most difficult. This is not surprising as it was the only subject being learned online and by distance. Students varied in the success they reported in relation to other subjects. Hana said she was passing some subjects, and the other five girls reported passing everything. Whilst these responses do not provide an in-depth account of the students' academic proficiency, they indicate the girls were not failing; it appeared that they were achieving at, or above, expected attainment levels in other subjects.

Despite this, the girls found the level of language in the online course challenging. Whilst this could be viewed as a problem with the course, data from the previous study (Jeurissen, 2014) signalled that the number of hours instruction that students had received in te reo Māori before

year 11 was insufficient. Moreover, one of the students in the current study, Sarah, had not taken te reo in year 10 at all. Thus, the students lacked the necessary prior knowledge in te reo Māori to progress easily in the year 11 course. Tyla explained, and all students agreed:

. . . it's like a big step up from last year . . . this requires more than just the basics to understand . . . we're still like learning the basics and they're trying to feed us all this new information . . . (Tyla, FG1)

These findings suggest that the students' motivation and attitudes contributed positively to their resilience. Moreover, all girls were academically capable of achieving. Unfortunately, levels of prior knowledge in te reo Māori appeared to have negatively affected their resilience.

The educator/supervisor

The educator/supervisor was the online distance education tutor. Two key findings emerged in relation to this stakeholder: communication was inadequate in terms of frequency and content, and communication improved in the later stages of the course.

The students were frustrated by not being able to contact their tutor, especially at the beginning of the course. When asked how they contacted him they all replied:

We email and stuff/we do try to ring/but he's never there [overlapping]. (FG1)

Students also commented about delays in responses. For example:

By the time he replied you were onto the next thing. . . . It got to a point where no one really bothered to ask him anything cos he'd just reply so late that you wouldn't get any other work done if you kept waiting for him. (Hana, II, 13/12/12)

Students commented on the nature of the feedback they received. Tutor feedback consisted of providing answers without explanations, and dealt with surface features of students' work. Kyla explained:

We can ask him to translate for us and he'll translate the whole story but it doesn't help us. Sometimes we want help with a story but he'll just give us the answers. He won't like show us how to do it; he'll just tell us how to do it straight away. (Kyla, FG1)

Sarah commented:

I sent my speech through and . . . I asked for feedback but all he did was put the macrons on top of my letters and I already knew I couldn't do that on the computer . . . that wasn't helpful. (Sarah, FG2)

Data from the second focus group and individual interviews showed that communication with the tutor had improved. This may have been a result of communication from the mainstream school that students were experiencing difficulty and/or the tutor's own realisation that students were finding the course difficult. Students reported receiving more timely responses and more helpful feedback.

XX was always gonna be there now, like whenever we emailed him, he would always email back, like fast and yeah it was helpful when we were doing our speeches. (Tyla II, 3/12/12)

XX is better. He doesn't just tell answers but makes us work it out for ourselves. (Kyla, FG2)

Willems (2012) asserts that the educator needs to consider connectedness and timely responses when promoting educational resilience. These students did not feel a connection with the tutor,

nor did they receive timely responses, particularly in the first part of the course. Lentell's contention that the tutor's role in distance education is little understood (2003) may explain these findings. Moreover, it may be that staff connectivity was "diminished for the sake of economic rationalism" (Willems, 2012, p. 21). Further research into the role of the tutor in online distance education is needed to investigate these possibilities.

The institution

The students were enrolled in two institutions: the online distance education provider and their mainstream school. For the purposes of data analysis, the online distance provider is considered the institution in this study, with the mainstream school being part of the broader social community. Pechenkina and Anderson (2011, as cited in Willems, 2012) found that institutional support structures have considerable influence on educational resilience, and these findings are reflected here in terms of course content, course structure, and course systems.

Students indicated that they found the course content difficult, repetitive, and poorly scaffolded. The following interview extract provides an example.

Jane: I just feel like we're just stopped. Cos we just keep on doing the same thing over and over.

Researcher: You keep doing the same thing over and over? Why is that?

Jane: Like, it's just questions. We just answer questions about stories, about different stories and yeah that's what we do.

R: Ok so you gotta read stories on the screen? And the questions you have to answer are in Māori?

All: Yes. (Jane, FG1)

The exchange below illustrates the students' need for additional scaffolding such as English explanations and illustrations.

Jane: So now we're like still doing term one work and it's the end of term two and like the stories that we have to get, it's just they read a whole story, there's no pictures and stuff, and I'm a visual learner so I can't, I look at the words . . .

R: So you've got stories that you have to read . . .?

Jane: Yep, and it reads it aloud to you and it's also on the screen. Then you have to interpret the story and answer the questions that they ask you.

R: And the questions are in Māori as well?

Jane: Yep.

R: And there's no pictures or . . . ?And how do you know what the story's about?

Jane: Just have to try and work it out.

Sarah: You have to translate the words that you don't understand.

R: So there's no pictures or anything and no one to speak to you in English first to say "This is a story about . . .

All: No. (FG1)

Students perceived a lack of structure in the course, particularly in terms of a timeline.

R: Right, I wonder why you haven't done any assessments yet?

Ana: Oh we can choose when we do it. [overlapping]

Tyla: It's up to us.

Hana: We don't have dates.

Ana: We can choose when we do it.

R: So it's not very structured?

All: No.

Tyla: It's just really messy. When you're learning in the classroom you like work your way through step by step, like each subject or topic. But with correspondence it's all over the place. You jump from one story or topic to another. Like you know, back and forth . . . (FG1)

Students also reported that the online education provider's systems were not in place at the beginning of the year and that there were difficulties with technology.

Jane: Well at the start of the year we started about 5 weeks late because of the XXXX (name of school), so when we did start we were behind so now we . . .

Hana: They like didn't send us our login and then they shut their system down for like, two or three weeks. (FG1)

Comments about inadequacies of the system are reported from only the students' personal perspectives and it was beyond the scope of this study to investigate their claims in depth. However, their reports were consistent, and conversations with school management reinforced them. It appeared that institutional support structures were, as Pechenkina and Anderson (2011, as cited in Willems, 2012, p. 20) described, "an impediment to educational resilience."

The broader social community

The community component of the quadripartite model incorporates "not only the distance learner's broader academic community, including their peers, who might also be geographically dispersed, but also the community in which the distance learner lives, encompassing their networks of family and friends" (Willems, 2012, p. 22). Factors which emerged as significant influences for the students in this study were whānau, the school curriculum, systems and values, and members of the broader school community.

Whānau both positively and negatively influenced students' resilience. Only one student, Kyla, was discouraged from learning te reo Māori at school by her parents because they believed it would not be helpful in the future. However, for the remaining five students, the strongest positive influence lay in the favourable attitudes of both immediate and extended whānau. When discussing reasons for learning te reo, Māori students reported feeling encouraged by whānau either directly or indirectly. Both Sarah's and Tyla's parents encouraged them because they felt the language would be good for future career opportunities. Other students were encouraged by whānau members' own aspirations, as illustrated by these interview extracts:

[I took te reo Māori] . . . also cos of my dad; he always wanted to learn it so yeah . . . (Ana, FG1)

. . . my nana she's always like been really passionate about it so like I was, ok I'll do it.
(Hana, FG1)

Although all but one whānau had positive attitudes towards te reo Māori, none of the students had family members in their homes who spoke the language. Some reported having extended whānau they could talk with, but this occurred only occasionally at family gatherings. The absence of te reo Māori speakers in the students' daily lives negatively affected their resilience.

Two of the six students lived in homes where Pacific languages were spoken (Tongan and Samoan), and although this did not give them access to specific support for their te reo Māori, it signals positive attitudes towards language learning. Moreover, there are many similarities between Pacific languages and te reo Māori in terms of rhythm, intonation, and some phonemes, so the bilingual home lives of these students positively influenced their resilience.

The reo Māori curriculum experienced by the students in the mainstream school before the uptake of the year 11 online distance course was significant. Findings relating to students' inadequate prior knowledge reported in the previous section can be attributed to the curriculum that was delivered before year 11. In years 7, 8, and 9 te reo Māori was compulsory for one school term (approximately 10 weeks), and the content was introductory, seldom going beyond basic vocabulary and greetings. Year 10 students were exposed to more advanced learning and increased hours; however, the te reo Māori year 10 teacher interviewed for the previous study (Jeurissen, 2014) admitted that the school curriculum lacked the required hours to prepare students for studying te reo Māori in year 11. Ana's comments are indicative of those made by all six students.

[We needed] . . . more classes in the junior school – not enough classes to build up the understanding needed to get ready for the year 11 course. One term in year 10 is not enough to get you ready for year 11. (Ana, FG2)

Support systems in the mainstream school were inadequate, particularly at the start of the year. The students were not aware of a specific person at the school being their supervisor or eDean, although the part-time te reo Māori teacher for the junior students gave support where and when she could. It was not only the online distance provider's technology systems that were problematic, so too were those of the mainstream school. Students reported computers and/or the internet worked only sporadically, and access to a printer was difficult. Their comments indicate considerable frustration.

There's heaps of computers in the room but some of them have technical issues and all that kind of stuff and that's just real difficult. (Ana, FG2)

Sometimes it takes me like half a lesson to log on to my account, not the XXXX (online distance school) website. . . . It's cos we share them with the international students and stuff.
(Kyla, FG1)

When asked if any measures were taken to deal with technical issues, students explained there was support, but unfortunately problems recurred. Referring to the school technician, students stated:

Yes, he's been in heaps to help. (Ana, FG1)

He fixes them all the time. (Tyla, FG1)

Changes in the way the students were grouped part-way through the year were reported by the girls as having considerable impact on their learning. At first, all of the students were in one classroom and each had access to a computer (albeit not always working). In response to the

technical issues, students were moved to work in pairs in three separate work spaces (in other teachers' classrooms). Students reported that, on the whole, this change was detrimental because they were able to draw on only their partner for support, whereas the whole group had previously been a resource.

When we were together it was more helpful, because if we were just with our one partner they kind of made us go together in levels, or not levels. I was with Ana and we were practically the same level so we can't really go higher or lower [than they are]. So we couldn't really help if I was stuck she was obviously stuck because we were the same level, but if I was with someone else it would've been like better. (Jane, II, 6/12/12)

Less tangible, but no less significant from the students' perspectives, were their perceptions of the extent to which the school valued te reo Māori. When asked, students unanimously responded that the school did not value the learning of te reo Māori. They believed the school wanted to be *seen* to support te reo Māori, but that the support was merely 'tokenistic'. This excerpt from focus group two illustrates their feelings.

Ana: And I think it's just like, they sorta just want to be known as like a Māori, not a Māori school but they want other schools to know that you know XX [name of school] does have this . . . they want places like YY [name of neighbouring school] and that to know that oh they have a kapa haka³ group, they have a year 11 class but we **don't** like they sorta just –

Jane: Use us when they need us, kind of?

Ana: Yeah, they use us when they need us.

Tyla: That's so true.

Ana: And not trying to be mean, but it's sorta the same with the kapa haka group –

Jane: They're not going to use you until they need a gym opening and stuff –

Ana: Unless there's something important that they need done to show that they're like –

Jane: Māori.

Ana: Then they're just like, kapa haka—what? Like it's not a big issue. . . (FG2)

The school curriculum and the systems put in place to support the delivery of te reo Māori by online distance learning were inadequate in many ways, thus negatively affecting students' resilience. Recognition of a supervisor or eDean in the school was noticeably lacking. This role is often referred to in the international literature as that of 'facilitator'; it has been argued that in online distance education contexts, it is frequently underestimated and misunderstood (Davis & Niederhauser, 2007), and that appears to be the case in the current study. Moreover, the students perceived that the school did not value te reo Māori.

However, as the year progressed, some support was provided from a range of sources within the school and broader community. Students talked about four specific components of support which were put in place during the year: provision of bilingual dictionaries and workbooks; a parent volunteer helper; a bilingual teacher assistant; and the opportunity to attend a hui with other students learning te reo Māori in the local area.

Bilingual dictionaries were provided for each student. However, during the first focus group it became clear that, apart from these, students relied solely on the online material, and they

³ A Māori cultural and performing group

indicated that it would be helpful to have some other hard-copy resources. As stated earlier, as the researcher, I assumed some responsibility for students studying te reo Māori, and so offered to purchase language workbooks, in the hope that they would be of some assistance. Although they did not solve all the problems, students said these hard-copy resources were good for ‘some bits’, including ‘speech writing’.

A community member and fluent speaker of te reo Māori (a parent with a child at the school), volunteered to tutor the students. Although the help was not regular or frequent, students agreed that it was extremely valuable.

Oh yeah, when she came in she was really good. Translating our paragraphs, that was the best part. (Hana, II, 13/12/12)

Further support was provided in the form of a bilingual teacher assistant. The school employed the assistant on a casual basis, and although sessions occurred a little more frequently than those with the parent volunteer, the girls’ timetables (based on a 6-day rotation, and thus different each week) made it difficult to schedule more regular sessions. Students’ responses indicated this support was valuable. For example:

Oh yeah, she was helpful . . . yeah she was, definitely (Hana, II, 13/12/12)

Near the end of the year, through my university networks, I learned about hui being held for students from local secondary schools preparing for NCEA external examinations. These were organised voluntarily by local teachers and university academics. The distance education students were invited to attend and three were able to take up the opportunity to attend one of the hui. For these students the hui, held at a local marae,⁴ was invaluable.

And one of the teachers [at the hui] came and helped us and that was really helpful because he explained what it is and how to get the answer. Like “look for the key words that you know”. And that kinda helped in the exam as well. It really helped in the exam, cos of . . . like that kinda exercise was in the exam. So by doing that we kinda knew how to look at it and try get that answer. That was really helpful. (Ana, II, 6/12/12)

In summary then, components of the students’ communities had positive as well as negative effects on resilience. For most, whānau attitudes to their learning te reo Māori were positive, although there was no practical support because immediate whānau did not speak te reo Māori. Hard-copy resources provided some support although, on their own, these did not appear to significantly help the students. They felt most supported by the face-to-face help from the parent volunteer, the bilingual teacher assistant, and teachers at the hui. This reflects Simpson’s assertion that supportive communities can provide “very real encouragement for distance learners” (2003, as cited in Willems, 2012, p. 22). The school curriculum, some school systems, and the perception that the school did not genuinely value te reo Māori were negative influences on students’ resilience. Although the students were ‘overseen’ by several staff members, no one acted consistently as an advocate for them or facilitated their studies as recommended by Davis and Niederhauser (2007).

What did the students learn?

All of the students were disappointed with the amount of te reo Māori they learned. Sarah’s comment is indicative of those made by all:

⁴ An open area in front of a meeting house; often also the complex of surrounding buildings.

It's been really hard and I haven't learned as much as I wanted to and I struggled like, the whole year. Yeah, and the work was way too hard for me and the communication between the teachers was like terrible. (Sarah, II, 3/12/12)

Students' actual achievement results are not available through the New Zealand Qualifications Authority for reasons of privacy; however, these students willingly volunteered their results of both external and internal assessments. These results are displayed in Table 2.

Table 2 Participants' NCEA level one standards attempted and gained

Name	Internal assessment standards	Attendance at end of year external exam	External assessment standards
Jane	6 listening credits achieved	Yes	Reading: not achieved Writing: not achieved
Ana	6 listening credits achieved	Yes	Reading: not achieved Writing: not achieved
Sarah	6 listening credits achieved	Yes	Reading: not achieved Writing: 6 achieved
Hana	6 listening credits achieved	No	Not applicable
Tyla	6 listening credits achieved	No	Not applicable
Kyla	6 listening credits achieved	Yes	Reading: 6 achieved Writing: not achieved

In total, students can attempt five standards at level one. Each of these is worth six credits (i.e., there are 30 possible credits). In this study, five students achieved six credits and two achieved 12. (Readers not familiar with NCEA should be aware that students can: *not achieve*, *achieve*, *achieve with merit*, or *achieve with excellence*. Therefore, the students in this case study who achieved received the minimum passing grade.) At the school in this case study, achieving 12 credits is the minimum required to continue te reo Māori at level two. The NCEA system is complex, and space precludes an explanation here, but in simple terms, only two students, Sarah and Kyla, gained enough credits to 'pass' level one. None came close to achieving the 30 possible credits.

Discussion and implications

There is no disputing that te reo Māori is an endangered language: the Waitangi Tribunal (2011, as cited in The Royal Society of New Zealand, 2013) identified that "Restricted use of te reo in public contexts, and uneven attention in the education system, have led to concerns that te reo Māori is approaching a crisis point" (p. 5). The mainstream school in which this research took place is one in which te reo appears to receive uneven attention. Students who wanted to learn te reo Māori were able to do so only by online distance education. This research sought to explore whether they were able to progress in their learning when this was the only option. NCEA assessment results show that the students achieved very few credits, and most were not able to progress to level two. These results are reflected in the interview data, which revealed students' own beliefs that they learned very little. Studying te reo Māori via online distance education did not result in successful learning outcomes, satisfaction, or enjoyment for the students.

While I hesitate to generalise based on one case study it seems that, in its current form, online distance education is not a viable option for te reo Māori regeneration in secondary schools unless each of the four stakeholders takes responsibility for making some changes. Willems'

(2012) quadripartite model of resilience helps us to understand why this is the case, but more importantly, the model signals the many layers of support students studying online and by distance require if they are to experience success, satisfaction, and enjoyment in their learning.

We are warned that:

Overemphasis on the individual disguises the fact that individual issues have a social basis, that multiple factors are at play, and that any discussion of educational resilience needs to factor in the learner's social, economic, and cultural context . . . (Willems, 2012, p. 17).

Thus, when offering online distance education for students in secondary schools, educators and education policy makers should consider the following questions. Do the students have the necessary prior knowledge to realistically engage with the course, and are they deeply motivated to succeed? Does the online tutor understand the importance of 'connectedness' with the students and do they have the capacity and tools necessary to enable this connectedness? Does the online distance education provider have proven and robust systems to enable effective and timely delivery of resources? Do the students have access, within their broader social community, to practical support and advice? (In the case of te reo Māori, this support should ideally include fluent speakers in the immediate whānau.) If the answer to any of these questions is 'no', serious consideration should be given as to whether the students would benefit from taking the online course.

The role of the supervisor in the students' face-to-face school is vital, and professional development is required to support those given this task to understand the nature and scope of the work. With "the growth of the internet and the proliferation of computers and home and in educational settings" (Compton, 2009, p. 73) it is no wonder that substantial shifts in teachers' roles and responsibilities are required to provide optimal educational experiences for students involved in all the various modes of online distance education. Essentially, a supervisor needs to understand that they are "responsible for providing immediate, personal, face-to-face communication with students; engaging in local problem-solving of many types; and mentoring students" (Davis & Niederhauser, 2007, p. 14). Guidance for ways in which supervisors and distance teachers could work together would be valuable, as would opportunities for them to meet, even if only once or twice a year.

It is recommended that specific professional development be extended to the distance teachers of languages and this should include ways to build relationships with students. Teaching language online is different to teaching other subjects online because "the subject matter is communication" and at the lower level there is a need "to focus on the form of the interaction as well as the content" (Hamper & Stickler as cited in Compton, 2009, p. 73). Compton's recommendations for online language-teacher professional development could be usefully combined with Amaru, Rae, and Shadbolt's (1995) recommendations to examine and adapt the delivery of courses to recognise both majority and minority cultures.

One of the strongest findings to emerge was the value of the face-to-face support the students received from within their broader social community. This reflects Otsuka and Steven's (1997) findings with learners of Japanese. Whilst online distance education might not generally imply face-to-face support, advancements in the field are making this more possible. For example, synchronous video conference or Skype links could be arranged periodically, and in-depth study days for clusters of students from different schools could be scheduled before internal assessments and external examinations. Online tutors and study groups (Pullar & Brennan, 2008) are other possibilities. Schools should also investigate employing teacher assistants, particularly for teaching languages.

Conclusion

Online distance education plays an important role in ensuring equitable learning opportunities for students living in remote areas and those unable to access subjects in their mainstream school—as is often the case for students who choose languages when numbers are small and teachers scarce. However, more research into the experiences of students learning by online distance in secondary contexts needs to be carried out. LaPointe (2005) laments the fact that the field of distance education has not made research a central focus, and the effects of this have been detrimental. Furthermore, Barbour (2009) explains that we need a better understanding of the skills learners need to be successful in a “largely independent, technology-mediated environment” (p. 19).

Online distance delivery for learning te reo Māori requires further specific research. The current study has barely scratched the surface and, due to its limitations, has perhaps raised more questions than answers. Online tutors need to find ways to connect meaningfully and effectively with students. In addition, ways in which the distant teacher and school supervisor can connect and collaborate must be improved. In this study, the supervisor’s role was underestimated and/or poorly understood and it would be worthwhile investigating the breadth and depth of this issue. The findings of this study add weight to Bennett and Barbour’s (2013) recommendation that e-teachers need support to develop effective pedagogies for working with Māori students in an online environment. Poor-quality online experiences such as those experienced by the students in this study must be eliminated for others to be encouraged to learn their indigenous language with a distance teacher.

On a positive note, despite the constraints of learning te reo Māori via online distance education, three of the six participants in this study continued to learn te reo Māori in 2013. The mainstream school, recognising the difficulties the students had faced with online distance education, found and employed a reo Māori teacher with the necessary skills to teach senior classes face to face. Hana successfully repeated the level one course, and Sarah and Kyla went on to successfully complete level two. At the time of writing, Kyla is working on level three. The determination and subsequent success of these students can be attributed to their high levels of motivation and the support from their whānau and mainstream school.

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Appendix A

Focus Group Interview One (FG1)

1. Why did you choose te reo as an option for Year 11?
2. Was this a difficult or easy decision for you? Why?
3. What do you hope to achieve this year, with your te reo Māori?
4. What do you think will help you to achieve these goals?
5. What might make it difficult for you to achieve these goals?
6. How did you feel when you learned you would need to do the subject by distance online?
7. What has it been like so far?
8. Are you finding the learning easy, or difficult to manage? Why?
9. Are you getting help and support other than what is provided by the online distance education provider?
10. What has been good so far about taking this subject?
11. Have there been any downsides to taking this subject and, if so, what are they?
12. Is there any way things could be made better/easier for you, in terms of learning te reo?
13. Even though it's only the beginning of the year, thinking ahead, is it likely or unlikely that you will continue with te reo in year 12? Why?

Appendix B

Focus Group Interview Two (FG2)

1. How has your learning been going?
2. Are you on track to reach your goals with your learning? Why or why not?
3. Have your goals changed in any way? Why or why not?
4. What has been helpful for your learning?

5. What has made your learning difficult?
6. At this school, do you think learning te reo is valued? Why or why not?
7. How are you feeling about taking te reo next year?

Appendix C

Individual Interview (II)

1. Tell me what it's been like for you learning te reo online this year.
2. How do you feel about what you've learned this year?
3. What has been helpful for you, in terms of learning te reo?
4. What has made it difficult for you?
5. Have you been able to use your knowledge of te reo at other places/times at this school? If so, in what ways? If not, why not?
6. Have you been able to use your knowledge of te reo at other places/times outside of school? If so, in what ways? If not, why not?
7. Are you intending to take te reo next year in year 12? Why or why not?



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