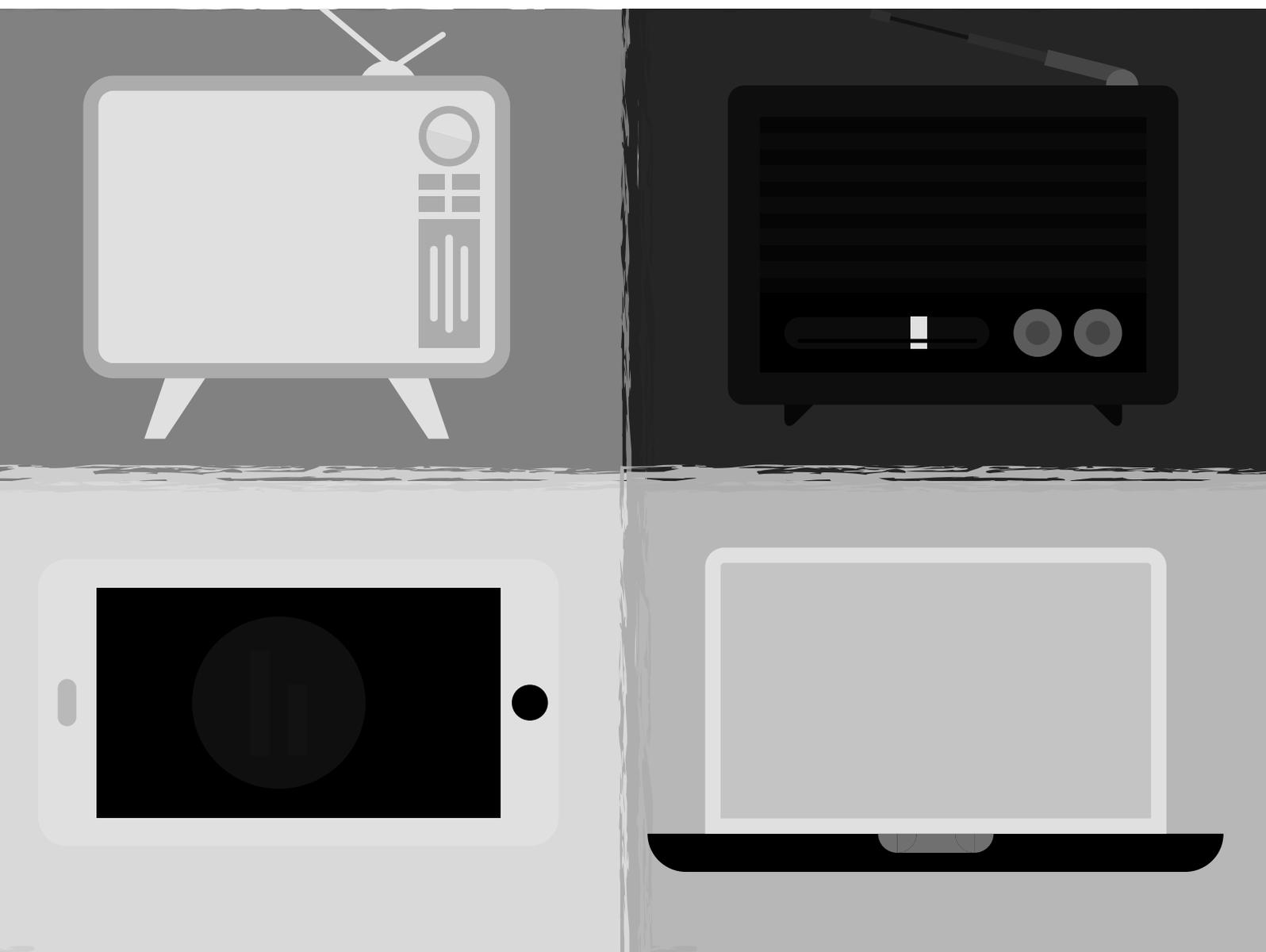


# New Zealand: Te Rito Toi (Reconnecting students through the arts)

Koen van Lieshout



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Type of intervention: governmental (independent public university)

Website: <https://www.teritotoi.org/>

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## General description

Te Rito Toi is an online resource to support primary education teachers in addressing student wellbeing as they return to the classroom. Te Rito Toi is a metaphor in Māori representing how the arts (Toi) are at the centre of all growth. The harakeke (flax) plant represents the whanau (family) in Māori thought. The rito (shoot) is the child. It is protectively surrounded by the awahi rito (parents) the outside leaves represent the tūpuna (grandparents and ancestors). The resource was designed in response to the covid-19 crisis and launched on the 24<sup>th</sup> of April 2020. Te Rito Toi believes that schools are not just preparing students for the future, but also need to help them make sense of the present. After disasters and crises, schools must prioritise helping learners to safely explore and address the changes in the world they live in. Students should discuss their concerns and questions in class, and be guided along the way. Teachers have a unique position to lead learners into engaging with their experiences during crises, and to help them imagine and explore the future. Based on international research that confirms the central role of the arts in meaning, making and the renewing of hope, Te Rito Toi positions the arts at the centre of children's return to schooling after disasters and crises.

University of Auckland scholars built Te Rito Toi based on research on engagement with schools post-disaster in diverse settings, such as Christchurch post-earthquake and post-terror attack, Mexico City post-earthquake responses

The coronavirus crisis led schools and universities to rapidly transition to a distance-learning mode, via the Internet, television or radio. This series documents some country initiatives that ensured education continuity for all using technology and provided support to teachers, students, and their families.



and Australia's earlier post-bushfire reaction in 2020. They found that when classrooms reopen following or during ongoing crises, teachers need research-informed support to manage the stories, questions and issues children inevitably bring to their classrooms during or after the disaster. Therefore, Te Rito Toi focuses on the classroom pedagogies most appropriate when schools reopen after a crisis, in order to provide teachers actionable advice on how to engage the students on these topics. Te Rito Toi's key objective is to provide clarity and reassurance with research-informed processes for teachers to make sure the return to school is a positive and life affirming experience for children.

The project privileges arts-based pedagogies as ways for teachers to reconnect students to learning safely and appropriately. Te Rito Toi provides guidelines for principals and teachers, lesson plans for teachers, detailed strategies for classroom support, and publishes accessible research on the bigger context of art and social and emotional learning on its online platform.

### Main problems addressed

The main issue addressed by this initiative is the stress and/or trauma (possibly) experienced by students during the lockdown, and the changes in their world due to the covid-19 crisis in general. Moreover, there is advice provided for different stages of school closure and reopening with respect to student wellbeing.

- *Providing lesson plans for teachers through different mediums of art.* Te Rito Toi provides a range of lesson plans for teachers, specific to different age groups and student needs. Lessons take on different mediums of expression, such as imagination and conversation (e.g. with a plush bear toy), dance, acting or drawing. Some lessons are specifically dedicated to anxiety, loneliness, or exploring emotions. Descriptions of each of the lessons are short and action-oriented; as such, there is not a lot of preparation required for teachers besides choosing which lesson fits their context best. The lessons detail an arts-based activity, what is required to engage in the activity, and the steps teachers would need to take to guide students through this lesson. The project privileges arts-based pedagogies as ways for teachers to reconnect students safely and appropriately to learning. The online support includes arts based lesson plans, links to useful picture books (known to be particularly useful in these situations), advice for managing stories and questions and advice for teachers and principals for general management.
- *Advice on family violence and child abuse.* This is a one-page brief with some basic framing of the issue, practical actions to take, and resources specific to the New Zealand context. As a short overview with a number of key points, it serves as a reminder of the impacts of the covid-19 crisis on home situations of the students. There is also guidance on what pastoral care should look like, including the reminder that every employee of a school should anticipate providing such care at times (if approached by a student about an issue they are experiencing).
- *Information leaflets on different stages of school closure and reopening for principals and teachers.* There are four stages outlined: (1) during lockdown, (2) preparing for reopening, (3) partial reopening, and (4) full reopening. There is a two-page note describing each of these stages, with a focus on the wellbeing and security of teachers and principals themselves, and actions they could take to support families and students. These recommendations are based on post-disaster research in various contexts and provide a range of suggestions that could be tailored to specific situations. These can serve as a reference guide in an accessible format that schools can build on while determining the (relatively autonomous) strategies they need to take at each of these stages.
- *Providing support for principals in taking this approach.* There are a number of blogs and short leaflets with the academic research underlying the lessons on anxiety, setting boundaries, building resilience, creative thinking, and the role of art. There is a particular focus on accessible language, so they can serve as quick reference works for principals and teachers. Authors span experts from various disciplines and represent a number of countries.
- *Advocacy and awareness about the need for a focus on socio-emotional wellbeing of students.* Beyond providing actionable steps to be taken, a last issue Te Rito Toi addresses is to put the

issue of student wellbeing post-disaster on the agenda. The project has explicitly engaged with the national organisation of principals, and participated in a number of webinars inside and outside of New Zealand to talk about the type of work and the reasoning behind the work. The message they seek to portray is to not focus on “how kids catch up” upon their return to school but rather “how we help kids make sense of the world”.

## Mobilising and developing resources

The development of resources largely centred on the connections Prof. Peter O'Connor has built throughout his professional career. These connections formed through work on the Australian bushfires, and earthquakes in Mexico, Japan, and New Zealand (Christchurch). These events built both an interest in and significant experience around returning to school after such events. Mobilising resources, therefore, took the following forms.

Under the leadership of Prof. O'Connor and Prof. Carol Mutch, a large number of academic contacts wrote lesson plans and/or other advice as a favour to the project (i.e. free of charge). These experts focused particularly on addressing trauma in schools after the students return, and on delivering fully fleshed out activities ready to use by teachers. According to Te Rito Toi, these resources were the first substantial curriculum resources in the arts and mental health for primary schools in at least fifteen years. They consist of:

- a series of lesson plans focusing on anxiety;
- a series of nga toi (arts) lessons;
- adapted materials to provide drama lessons;
- materials that focused on making sense of social distancing;
- a poetry lesson;
- detailed advice for teachers and principals on the return to school;
- advice around family violence and child abuse post-COVID-19;
- materials on Māori ways of understanding wellbeing through local customs - Hā Ora, meaning “breath of life. (These are written by representatives and educators from the Māori community, and partially written in Māori as well)

Existing philanthropic grants for the research centre in the department that houses most of the University of Auckland staff involved in the project were used for the creation of the website (totalling NZD 30 000 ~ EUR 15-20 000). The budget for the creation of Te Rito Toi was both easily accessed and mobilised. The website was built between April 1<sup>st</sup> and April 23<sup>rd</sup>, using the contacts and resources (e.g. the web developers) from this same research centre.

Lastly, the platform was built through a partnership led by the University of Auckland alongside the NZ Principals' Federation, NZEI, The Sir John Kirwan Foundation and partly funded by the New Zealand National Commission for UNESCO. There has historically been good cooperation and trust between those diverse actors, which has helped create a large support network for the project in the country. In part, the small size of these professional networks in New Zealand have also helped in this process.

## Fostering effective use and learning

First, the platform fosters effective use and learning by ensuring that the resources can be implemented at a very low cost. The focus on different stages of reopening or closure of schools sets a clear pathway for which actions need to be taken at which point. The lessons are short, tailored to different grades and focus on a particular topic and art form. Teachers can implement and execute the resources as provided on the website. The research, moreover, follows the same mould – short, accessible pieces of writing that do not

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require hours of reading. This format ensures that the barrier to using these resources for teachers and principals is as low as possible.

Second, the teachers' union and principals' federation are both active supporters and partners in the project. These organisations have near complete coverage, as 90 percent of all teachers in New Zealand are members of the union, and all principals in the country are in the federation. Both teachers and principals in New Zealand look to these institutions for support and guidance and thus knowledge of and interest in Te Rito Toi has become widespread in the country. This environment is further fostered by the government, which has had an active focus on wellbeing policy throughout its term.

Third, people's awareness of Te Rito Toi has increased through demand-led webinars. A number of organisations both inside New Zealand and abroad organised such opportunities to speak about the initiative, its purpose and method. This fostered effective use by both spreading the word and by building trust in the platform, as organisers often are teacher or principal-led groups.

In terms of pedagogy, the lesson plans also foster effective use and learning. Storied arts provide safe opportunities to engage with the topic of emotions and trauma. The methods are based on well-researched and tested pedagogical methods. Lessons, for example, ask children to give advice (to a toy bear) about ways to improve mental wellbeing – a method that allows children to become actors (agents) rather than victims (passive). The research behind these lessons helps instil trust in their effectiveness, whereas the design and execution of the lessons as described will foster student engagement and learning around wellbeing.

### Implementation challenges

There were a number of implementation challenges to get this project up and running.

- *Getting people on board.* The project relies heavily on buy-in from other experts, who provide all the materials, and on the users: teachers and principals. Moreover, government support – particularly the ministry of education – was key in creating space for a wellbeing-led return to school. The situation in New Zealand, where both teachers and principals are (almost fully) represented in two organisations makes such a task easier. Moreover, the good connections of the initiative-takers behind Te Rito Toi improved such support, as did the wellbeing focus of the government. However, the speed with which this project needed to be set up did require significant pull and time investment to organise this buy-in, which was done by temporarily increasing working hours of key individuals.
- *Speed and human resources.* As teams are relatively small and the whole project was set up in 3 weeks, there was a heavy burden placed on key people in the organisation. For the web developers, this also meant working overtime, and for academics – who all still had to do their regular work, and work on the adaptations required for their own schools closing – similar additional hours were logged.
- *Technical challenges related to the website.* There were some tech glitches along the way, and the google analytics strategy behind the project needed to be figured out. The website was mainly designed to be easy to navigate and to look appealing, and was built specifically for this project.
- *Budget.* There was very little budget for the platform available, and no money specifically raised for its creation. Only the design of the website cost money though, given that the rest was solved through favours.
- *Dissonance with policy priorities.* The predominant narrative in the education community is that schools need to help students catch up with academic work and get back to normal as quickly as possible. Publicly supporting this work with a research-informed practice approach has been critical to ensure it was taken as a serious complementary alternative to the “back to normal” or “catch up” strategy.

## Monitoring success

Three indicators of success are currently considered.

The first is reach and use within New Zealand. In the first month since the launch on April 24, the online resource has garnered over 250 000 page views by 37 000 teachers. Nearly half of all primary teachers in New Zealand has visited the website, and the average teacher visits or downloads eight pages per visit.

A second measure of success is international engagement with the resources and/or topic area. Overall, Te Rito Toi has been viewed and accessed by people in 112 countries around the world. Countries around the world have looked at similar approaches as 1.2 billion children return to schools after lockdowns. Canadian, Hong Kong and Australian educators are looking at using local expertise to build their approaches. This global push for a return to classrooms through the arts saw Te Rito Toi highlighted by UNESCO and the World Alliance of Arts Educators in a webinar held on May 20.

Third, a measure of success is the effect of this resource – and other resources to a similar end – on the prominence of art in education, particularly when utilised to address wellbeing or emotions. The overwhelming uptake in the resource led Perry Rush, President of the NZ Principal's Federation, to call on the Ministry of Education to rebuild the arts in schools. The article attracted both national and international interest and support. Webinars about the use of the arts and a focus on wellbeing attracted over 30 000 teachers in Australia and New Zealand. As a result, the arts and wellbeing became the focus for many students as they returned to school in New Zealand and Australia. UNESCO and the World Alliance of Arts Educators picked up a global push for this approach.

## Adaptability to new contexts

The approach is applicable to other contexts. The main necessities are a lot of passion and the willingness to get the work done. In this case, the drivers of the project had many connections they could rely on, which significantly reduced the cost of operations. However, provided more time and (some) more resources – which need not be very high (the total for this project is under EUR 20 000) – a less developed network need not be an unsurmountable barrier. Every country that reopens schools could set up a similar platform, or translate some of the resources provided by Te Rito Toi and employ them there.

The scalability of the project in New Zealand is mostly relevant in scope, not reach. The number of resources – particularly the lessons – could further expand, provided those writing the lessons have the time and opportunity to do so. However, it is not entirely clear this would be necessary, given this element of the curriculum is meant to take place upon return to schools, not necessarily as a consistently sustained element.

The initiative can be sustained after the covid-19 crisis. Those elements particularly dealing with trauma and disaster might be less relevant, but dealing with student wellbeing through art and learning about emotions and communicating feelings retain their applicability. This could be seen as a transformative practice, wherein art takes a very therapeutic role in learning and helping students make sense of the world around them.

## Key points to keep in mind for a successful adaptation

1. Build on networks already in place with content creators and website builders – these could take the form of favours and/or as work with some monetary compensation.
2. The resources should be short, simple and actionable. Teachers and principals should not need to spend hours reading materials, but be able to use the guidance and resources on the website with as little time investment as possible.
3. The buy-in from teachers and principals is dependent on how their trusted institutions deal with the resources. Ensuring there are strong connections with those institutions, and generating support from them is key.
4. Speaking directly to these groups, e.g. through webinars, could be a great way to answer pressing questions, further foster trust, and generate awareness about the resource.

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