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Ngā Kare ā Roto: The Feelings Within

Exploring kaiako experience delivering *I Feel*: a social-emotional learning experience in New Zealand primary schools.

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Abstract

Mental health concerns continue to rise across the globe, and Aotearoa New Zealand is not exempt. Research demonstrates that social and emotional learning (SEL) programmes can be a protective factor for individuals facing negative life events, inequality, and chronic stressors that may have lifelong effects. For children, the positive outcomes associated with SEL include improvements in their ability to focus their attention, manage negative emotions, build and maintain positive relationships with peers and adults, demonstrate resilience in difficult situations, and develop emotional intelligence (EQ). These skills provide lifelong benefits that extend beyond the individual, influencing education, employment, parenting, and community involvement.

Notably, when implemented in schools, SEL positively impacts both children and teachers. Social and emotional skills assist teachers in creating calmer and safer learning environments, equipping them with the skills and tools to support emotionally dysregulated students and reduce levels of stress and burnout. As kaiako enter the profession from a variety of backgrounds, cultures, and life experiences, they may not have developed all the social and emotional skills their students need. Consequently, kaiako often learn and practise SEL skills alongside their tauira as they teach them.

This qualitative study draws on the experience of eight kaiako who taught the *I Feel* SEL resources in their classroom in Aotearoa New Zealand. The research explored the experiences of teachers who implemented the *I Feel* series in their classrooms,

highlighting the impact of culturally grounded resources and the importance of teachers having strong social and emotional skills. The findings revealed four overarching themes: *Manaaki the Moment: SEL Strategies for Calm, Connected Classrooms*; *Te Ngākau Mārama: Learning the Language of Emotions*; *Tūrangawaewae and Fa'avae: Standing Strong in Cultural Identity and Connection*; and *The SELf-Aware Kaiako: Growing Hearts and Minds at Kura and Kāinga*.

The findings aligned with existing research detailing the benefits of SEL in supporting the development of EQ and positive behaviours among participants. Participants reported being positively impacted, both personally and professionally, by the *I Feel* resources. The study revealed a need for culturally responsive SEL resources that affirm identity while reflecting the universal experiences and emotions that humans share. Kaiako also expressed varying levels of understanding and experience regarding SEL and its positive influence on their personal relationships at home and the achievement of their personal goals.

Kaiako shared diverse perspectives on whether a kaiako's ethnic background should match a tauira's to effectively teach SEL in culturally competent and responsive ways. However, participants were unanimous in their views regarding the positive impact of using the *I Feel* resources with the tauira. These findings support a call for permanent, culturally responsive SEL programmes within Aotearoa's education landscape. They also have implications at a societal level, particularly for education

providers and those working with Māori, Pasifika, and other cultural communities in Aotearoa.

Although other disadvantaged groups, such as tamariki with additional or higher needs, were not the primary focus of this study, they were also found to benefit from the resources. Further research conducted through Māori and Pasifika frameworks would be advantageous in supporting the development of SEL resources grounded in culturally responsive approaches. Further exploration of the benefits of these resources for other vulnerable groups, including tamariki with additional or higher needs, is also recommended.

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E kore au e ngaro, he kākano i ruia mai i Rangiātea

I carry this work forward with deep gratitude for those who have sown the seeds — ancestors, mentors, and communities whose wisdom guides me still.

This thesis is dedicated to Raynold Sebastian Mariner.

Love. Sacrifice. Service.

Fa'afetai tele lava – I pay tribute to the eight kaiako who participated in this study. Thank you for your time and for being willing to share your experiences with me. Your knowledge, talents and the passion to work with our tamariki is evidenced in the holistic care you give to the tamariki you interact with.

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Reflecting on my life's journey, I am grateful for the people who have impacted my life, for better or worse, as those experiences have brought me to where I am today. Growing up in South Auckland, known for its lower socioeconomic demographic, gangs and violence, and now returning to live in South Auckland as an adult, I see the challenges the community still face. However, I also see a resilient, vibrant and creative community that is bursting with talent and life. This study was influenced by my desire to serve my community and bridge the gap to culturally responsive mental health care.

First and foremost, I wish to acknowledge our great creator and God for giving me the ability to undertake studies that have taught me humility and love for humanity.

To my father, Raynold Sebastian Mariner, who passed away during the writing of this thesis. Your love, hope, desire and ever-guiding influence remains with me every day. To my mother, who helped me enrol in my first university class and has supported me ever since. I love you both.

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patience for all of the projects I get involved with – including this one – made this all possible.

I pay tribute to the Māori and Pasifika scholars, past and present, who have paved the way for Māori and Pasifika researchers to come forward so we can rise together. This thesis is not mine alone. I honour those who walked before and beside me and those who give space for my questions and reflections. Thank you to those who have been strong support from day one and those I met along the way. My hope is that this thesis will contribute toward equity and wellbeing for all tamariki and whānau in Aotearoa and around the Pacific.

Me he maonga āwhā.
[Like a lull in a storm.]
— Traditional whakataukī

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Glossary

Note: Singular word te reo Māori definitions adapted from Te Aka Māori Dictionary

ACEs – Adverse childhood experiences

Aroha ki te tangata – Showing respect for people

Aotearoa – North Island of New Zealand; now used as the Māori name for New Zealand

CASEL 5 Framework – Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning; a framework outlining five core social and emotional learning (SEL) competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making

CSS – Culturally sustaining schooling

CYMHS – Child and Youth Mental Health Services

EQ – Emotional Quotient, a measure of emotional intelligence on life trajectories

Hui – Gathering, meeting, assembly, seminar, conference

IQ – Intelligence Quotient, a standardised measure to assess human intelligence across various domains, including abstract reasoning, memory, and problem-solving abilities

Kai – Food

Kaiako – Teacher(s)

Kaiawhina – Helper, counsellor, advocate

Kanohi ki te kanohi – Face to face (meeting or discussion)

Karakia – Prayer, grace, blessing

Kaupapa Māori – Māori approach

Koha – Gift

Kotahitanga – Unity, togetherness, collective action

Mahi tahi – Working together

Mana – Prestige, authority, power

Mana orite – Equality

Mana whenua – The indigenous Māori people who have customary authority and rights over a specific area of land

Manaakitanga – Generosity and care for others

Maramataka – Māori lunar calendar

Manaaki ki te tangata – Sharing and hosting people with generosity

Manawaroa – Resilient, enduring

Matakite – Visionary, seer, clairvoyant

Mātauranga Māori – Māori knowledge

Ngā Kare ā Roto – The Feelings Within (This project's name, gifted by Matua Rikki Solomon)

NZMHS – The New Zealand Mental Health Survey

OECD – Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

OECD/EU – OECD/European Union

Pākehā – English, foreign, European

Palagi – Foreigner or Outsider

Pūrākau – Myth, ancient legend, story

Rangatahi – Youth

SDOH – Social determinants of health

SEL – Social-emotional learning

SES – Social-emotional skill(s)

Tā moko – Traditional Māori tattooing designs on the face or body

Taha hinengaro – Mind, thought, intellect

Taha tinana – Body

Taha wairua – Spirituality

Taha whānau – Family

Tamaiti – Child

Tamariki – Children

Tāne - Male

Tangata whenua – Local indigenous people of Aotearoa (Māori)

Taonga – Treasure

Tapu – Sacred, prohibited

Tauira – Student(s)

Te ao Māori – The Māori world

Te Tiriti o Waitangi – The Treaty of Waitangi, New Zealand's founding document

Thematic Analysis (TA) – A qualitative research method used to identify, analyse, and interpret patterns of meaning (themes) within a dataset

Tikanga – Correct procedure according to te ao Māori

Tohunga – Expert, proficient, adept

Whakamana – Recognition of the strengths each person has

Whakapapa – Genealogy, lineage, descent

Whakawhanaunga – (verb) to have a relationship; (noun) having a relationship

Whakawhanungatanga – Establishing relationships and identity

Whakaiti – Humility as a researcher

Whakataukī – Proverb, significant saying

Wānanga – Meet and discuss, educational seminar

Chapter One: Introduction

> Ko koe te kaitiaki o ōu whakaaro.
> [You are the guardian of your thoughts.]
>
> — Traditional whakataukī

SEL for Future Generations, Today

Tomorrow's successful and resilient adults will develop from a childhood where they have been taught to engage in learning, make responsible decisions, achieve their goals, empathise with others, and grow supportive relationships. Supporting individuals on this pathway towards success and wellbeing is the goal of many parents and social and emotional learning advocates. Durlak et al. (2011) state that social and emotional learning can help develop the type of competent individuals who generate and coordinate flexible, adaptive responses to demands, and who capitalise on opportunities in their environment.

Significant effort has been expended over the last several decades to develop research on the benefits of SEL. Findings point to many positive impacts on academic, interpersonal and mental health outcomes. Notably, improvements in skills such as children's ability to focus their attention, manage negative emotions, build and maintain positive relationships with peers and adults, and show resilience in difficult situations have benefited students (Ladd et al., 1999; Raver, 2002). Not only does SEL support the development of emotionally intelligent (EQ) individuals, but it also serves as a protective factor for individuals facing negative life events, inequality, and chronic

stressors. Possessing social and emotional skills (SES) supports general wellbeing and physical and mental health from childhood to adulthood (Jones et al., 2015).

Mental health concerns, including complex long-lasting mental health conditions, are rising. Concerningly, international data indicates that emotional and behavioural difficulties are affecting more children across all communities and at increasingly younger ages (Denston et al., 2022). In Aotearoa, current data reflects the same trend (Ministry of Social Development, 2025). Failure to develop SES, such as the ability to regulate emotions, settle disagreements, and work out peaceable arrangements – or to learn how to get along despite differences – clearly has significant negative impacts on children, youth and their communities (Goleman, 2020).

Emotions can help or hinder a child's engagement with academic learning, work ethic, commitment, and ultimately their success in school. Relationships and emotional processes have an important impact on how children learn (Durlak et al., 2011). A child's ability to manage their emotions influences learning. When a child can self-regulate (calm themselves) and refocus their behaviour and attention, they are building the foundations and strengthening their ability to be resilient during difficult tasks, and to maintain focus over a long period of time. (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018).

The term SEL has become popular among practitioners, parents and policy makers, as it emphasises learning and growth in positive ways. Educational institutions note that SEL helps schools meet their school objectives while also improving

academic learning and school connectedness (Jones and Doolittle, 2017). Franklin et al. (2012) note that SEL interventions result in two benefits. First, students show increased social-emotional skills (positive attitudes towards self and others, and positive social behaviours), and second, they have reduced internalising and externalising problems compared to control groups of peers. Other benefits include increases in self-esteem, improved connection to school, better classroom behaviour, improved academic motivation and performance; as well as reductions in conduct problems, bullying, aggression, and emotional distress (stress, anxiety, and depression) (Ura et al., 2019; Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2012).

Elias et al. (1997) define SEL as the way an individual acquires a set of social and emotional related skills, attitudes, behaviours and values that direct their thoughts, feelings and actions to enable them to succeed in school, work and life. Furthermore, SEL is defined by CASEL (2012) as "the process through which individuals acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions, and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions" (p. 4). SEL is a process to teach an individual or group the social and emotional competencies deemed acceptable to the population they live in (Ura et al., 2019). Investigated further in this report is the importance of adapting SEL programmes

to the environment and culture of the community where the SEL intervention is being delivered.

Children and youth require more than just academic and vocational skills to succeed in school, work, and life. Numerous studies have shown that social, emotional, behavioural, and character skills, knowledge, attitudes, and competencies – collectively referred to as non-academic skills and competencies – matter for many areas of development, including learning, health, and general wellbeing (Brush et al., 2021). Goleman (2020) posits that one's emotional quotient (EQ) is more important than the intelligence quotient (IQ), as EQ is imperative to wellbeing. Further, essential EQ skills can be taught, regardless of an individual's IQ. Goleman (2020) states that EQ provides a platform from which an individual can assess and manage their own emotions, and influence and motivate other individuals and groups. EQ is the basis from which a person can change and improve their life. SEL programmes and interventions act as mechanisms for individuals to learn or improve the necessary skills to increase their EQ (Goleman, 2020; Serrat, 2017; Jones & Doolittle, 2017).

Addressing rising concerns around mental health in Aotearoa's communities, the Ministry of Social Development (2022) advises that early intervention is key. Early intercession can help reduce and prevent a cascade of further mental health issues from occurring in the lifespan of today's children, who are tomorrow's adults. The World Health Organization (WHO) (1996) policy states that the mental health needs of young people are part of the education sector's role and that child mental health is a key area

of public concern that policymakers need to target in order to address the social and emotional wellbeing of children. Schools are key intervention sites for mental health (Greenberg et al., 2017) due to their ability to reach large numbers of students who can learn skills and practices that improve mental health outcomes at critical developmental ages (Chodkiewicz & Boyle, 2017). The ability to learn self-regulation, develop a sense of agency, and to feel connected to other people can be provided in school environments (Osher et al., 2020). CASEL (2012) advises that the optimal environment for SEL occurs through effective classroom instruction, student engagement in positive activities inside and outside of the classroom, and where parents and community are included in the planning, implementation and evaluation of the SEL programme (Bond & Hauf, 2004; Hawkins et al., 2004).

In Aotearoa, health and wellbeing is a broad topic that covers a vast array of factors involved in a child's wellbeing. The New Zealand Ministry of Education (MoE) provides programmes to support the hauora and wellbeing of children in schools, such as PB4L (Positive Behaviour for Learning) and RTLB (Resource Teachers: Learning Behaviours). The Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy (MoE, 2024) expresses the need for educators to better understand and possess the skill to respond to the SEL needs of children. The Ministry of Education's 2012 curriculum refresh instituted a focus on managing self and relating to others as part of their effort to strengthen SEL in schools.

Māori are the tangata whenua (people of the land) in Aotearoa; however, New Zealand is also known to be multiethnic. Auckland, a northern city in the North Island of

New Zealand, is famously known as the largest Pacific city in the world, due to its large population of Pacific Island residents (Raymond & Leo-Anderson, 2021). This demographic represents an important consideration for the implementation of SEL in schools in Aotearoa. Teachers who use SEL interventions and strategies need to use culturally responsive practices that are student-centred, requiring the use of culturally and linguistically relevant materials that meet the needs, interests, and developmental character of students (Cavioni et al., 2020; Denston et al., 2022).

This study explores the Māori and Pasifika experience of SEL. It traces the cultural and equity implications that arise from SEL application within mainstream educational facilities, and how culturally grounded, relational and strength-based approaches can fortify identity, belonging and emotional wellbeing. Supporting this approach, Malik and Marwaha (2022) state that it is vital to screen for child development, understand family dysfunction, and support families in establishing healthy, nurturing environments. While adversity affects learning, how a school and teachers respond matters.

Furthermore, kaiako who develop responsive and supportive relationships with students provide protective effects, as they nurture emotional security through consistency, empathetic communication, modelling productive social behaviours and the ability to respond to the child's needs (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018). Studies utilising SEL programmes observed notable improvements in classroom and school environments. These include better classroom functioning with students

demonstrating resilience in classroom activities, less distracted behaviours, better engagement with tasks, improved academic outcomes, and children who are able to build better social relationships with peers and teachers (Jones & Doolittle, 2017).

As children spend much of their day with teachers and peers at school, these relationships are important (Jones et al., 2021). Safe, secure, enriching environments typified by positive relationships promote SEL skill development and buffer against the effects of stress and trauma (Osher et al., 2020). Not only do strong, positive relationships help create a supportive environment towards SEL, but they also help facilitate self-regulation, an essential foundational skill related to other SEL domains (Eisenberg et al., 2010; Sameroff, 2010). Supporting the SEL of children in Aotearoa today ensures we have a bright, healthy and culturally grounded future where every child feels seen, valued and empowered to thrive. This study addresses these ideas and explores the experience of teachers and children involved in an SEL intervention in Aotearoa.

Dominant Frameworks in SEL

CASEL (CASEL, n.d.) is a non-profit organisation dedicated to promoting the integration and practice of evidence-based SEL in education facilities from preschool through to high school. The CASEL framework, termed the CASEL 5, promotes five sets of cognitive, affective and behavioural competencies essential to SEL: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making (CASEL, 2012). These competencies are crucial to a child's wellbeing and

development (Denston et al., 2022). The CASEL framework is critiqued through a culturally responsive lens in this report.

As SEL is still a new and developing area in Aotearoa's schools (Goodman, 2021), exploring the outcome of an SEL intervention created in New Zealand, by New Zealanders, delivered in New Zealand classrooms, may support an increase in, and improve delivery of, further SEL interventions. A literature review reveals that New Zealand currently has limited resources and implementation plans in place for SEL in Aotearoa's schools (Education Review Office [ERO], 2016; Goodman, 2021). There is a need for SEL programmes that provide children and family members the ability to partner in creating positive relationships and a space where students feel connected, cared about, and physically and emotionally safe (MacFarlane et al., 2017; Goodman, 2021). The incorporation of Te Tiriti principles is also essential in ensuring successful Māori outcomes (Goodman, 2021).

The literature review identified a gap in knowledge concerning the influence of SEL on teachers. Despite a clear understanding of the impact SEL programmes have on students, there has been limited focus on how SEL contributes to the improvement of teachers' social and emotional abilities. Teachers who are socially and emotionally competent demonstrate increased skills in comprehending and managing both their own and others' emotions. They also exhibit stronger capabilities in building relationships and report heightened self-efficacy in the teaching profession. In turn,

these capabilities are positively associated with increased job satisfaction and decreased levels of stress and burnout (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

There is also limited Māori and Pasifika input into indigenous SEL perspectives and resources. By integrating Kaupapa Māori approaches, educators can create a rich tapestry of learning experiences that honour Te Tiriti o Waitangi and the dual heritage of Aotearoa New Zealand. This approach has the potential to nurture holistic growth in our youngest learners, helping bridge cultural gaps, and fostering a more inclusive and culturally responsive educational environment (Houghton-Katipa, 2024). When considering the cultural influence on social-emotional development, cultural theorists such as Keltner et al. (2019) suggest that “the emotions of a culture are also essential to defining that culture” (p. 80) and that emotional patterns within a culture typically exhibit similarities.

To effectively build teachers’ bicultural pedagogy and practice, professional learning and support are critical. The literature is saturated with recommendations for more resources and for bicultural early childhood education to be supported by Māori mentorship and professional learning and development for teachers. While such recommendations are essential in progressing bicultural aspirations, authors have argued that resources and professional learning and development for students and teachers are insufficient. To enhance the bicultural competencies of teachers, there is a need to reframe attitudes and behaviours and bring a wholehearted desire to implement te reo Māori me ōna tikanga (the Māori language and its cultural practices)

meaningfully (Houghton-Katipa, 2024). As Schonert-Reichl (2017) attests, SEL requires teachers to "know themselves" and "accurately understand their own well-being", which supports their ability to promote, model, and utilise SEL in their personal and professional lives (p. 138).

SEL for teachers is a key factor in helping prevent burnout. Study findings demonstrate that adults who are able to recognise, label, understand, express, and regulate their emotions are less likely to experience burnout and more likely to be able to resolve their emotions (Brackett et al., 2010; CASEL, 2012). Teachers who have developed robust SES are not only equipped to assist their students with their emotional regulation, but also themselves (Palomera et al., 2008).

Research Aim

The objectives of this research were to explore the impact that the *Ngā Kare ā Roto: I Feel* series has on children's and teachers' emotional literacy and wellbeing, and the impact a teacher's SES and culture has on the delivery of the programme.

Ngā Kare ā Roto: The Feelings Within began with a number of research questions that guided the interview process and provided a framework for this report:

- What impact does implementing a social-emotional intervention in primary school have on teachers, children involved in the intervention, and families/guardians of the children?
- Are social-emotional interventions conducted in primary schools beneficial to children, teachers and others?

- What impact does educating children about the emotions of anxiety, panic, sadness and resilience have on their mental, physical and emotional wellbeing?
- Does culture play a role in the dissemination, use and understanding of social-emotional resources?

The *I Feel* Study

In 2024, Cultural Hubb Ltd carried out a study entitled *I Feel*. Conducted by lead researcher Abel Junior Tutagalevao, the study explored how the *I Feel* social-emotional book series supports SEL and development in the classroom. The aim was to identify the specific benefits that these resources provide to the learning and growth of primary school children and their teachers. Running for six weeks during Term 3 of 2024, the study captured responses from approximately 130 classrooms (1,500 children and 53 teachers) across Aotearoa New Zealand.

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Subsequently, a smaller subset of teachers were asked to participate in a more focused study to explore the impact that the *I Feel* SEL resources had on tauira and kaiako emotional literacy and wellbeing, and the impact a teacher's SES and culture have on the delivery of the programme. The study was also held in Term 3 of 2024, with interviews being held within four weeks of the Cultural Hubb study concluding. Eight

kaiako participated, and the study was conducted by Renee Mariner-Solomon. This smaller research study is the focus of this report.

Methodological Framework

This study is guided by the principles of Kaupapa Māori research (KMR). L. T. Smith (2015) explains that KMR is "research by Māori, for Māori and with Māori" (p. 47). This research approach provides Māori and non-Māori researchers a pathway that fulfils the rigours of academia while simultaneously acknowledging and supporting Māori ways of being (Mahuika, 2008). As a Māori/Pasifika researcher, employing KMR principles for this study was important to me as I wanted to ensure the research benefited Māori and Pasifika communities in an empowering context and was conducted in a way that was inclusive, respectful and beneficial to Māori and Pasifika. Wilson et al. (2022) state that one of the primary benefits of KMR is that it ensures research is conducted through an indigenous lens that normalises the context and what it means to be Māori from a te ao Māori perspective. I incorporated principles of te ao Māori so that the research methodology was conducted in a way that was familiar and respectful to all participants, and particularly to Māori.

This qualitative research study employed semi-structured interviews to understand and explore the experiences of kaiako implementing the *I Feel* social and emotional resources used in primary schools in Aotearoa. Reflexive thematic analysis was used to analyse and interpret the data. A literature review revealed that although kaiako are responsible for administering SEL interventions and programmes, there is

little evidence on the impact SEL intervention delivery has on kaiako themselves. The research is grounded in indigenous and culturally sustaining paradigms that honour the worldview of Māori and Pasifika communities. This research utilises indigenous knowledge such as mātauranga Māori to explore the experience of participants of the *Ngā Kare a Roto: The Feelings Within* research. Principles of te ao Māori that uphold tikanga were used to support the gathering of knowledge. Whakapapa, whakawhanaungatanga, manaaki ki te tangata and aroha ki te tangata were woven throughout this research process to ensure Māori values were upheld.

Scope and Structure of the Report

The scope and structure of this report consist of five main chapters. Chapter One provides an insight into the research and the researcher, outlining the research processes and frameworks used to guide this study. Chapter Two provides a critical review of scholarly literature related to SEL and the methodologies and pedagogies of belonging and identity, which helps to identify gaps and opportunities that could enhance SEL practice in classrooms and the social and emotional wellbeing of children in Aotearoa. Chapter Three outlines the methodological framework. It highlights the use of Kaupapa Māori research principles and principles of te ao Māori throughout the study, alongside the six phases of thematic analysis (TA) employed to ensure rigour and robustness in data analysis and interpretation, resulting in four themes emerging from the data. Chapter Four presents the study's findings through four interconnected themes from the reflexive TA approach detailed in Chapter Three. Chapter Five provides

a critical and culturally grounded discussion of the findings and integrates existing literature while providing insights into culturally responsive practice and perspectives in education. A conclusion is also provided, followed by a list of references and then appendices, tables and figures.

Privileging te Reo Māori

Although this thesis is written primarily in English, it is grounded within a Kaupapa Māori framework and therefore intentionally weaves te reo Māori throughout the text. The inclusion of Māori words is not intended to privilege one language over another, but rather to enrich the thesis in ways that English alone cannot. As the indigenous language of Aotearoa New Zealand, te reo Māori carries meanings, histories, relationships, and worldviews that are often difficult to translate fully. Its presence reflects the cultural and philosophical foundations upon which this research is built.

The whakataukī *He iti, he iti pounamu* reminds us that even small things can hold immense value. In the same way, even the inclusion of a single Māori word can add depth, richness, and cultural integrity to the discussion. It is hoped that these words invite readers to engage more deeply with the concepts presented, foster a connection with the whenua and the people of this land, and encourage curiosity to explore the beauty and wisdom of te reo Māori. Rather than privileging one language, this approach acknowledges that te reo Māori offers unique understandings that strengthen the overall narrative and honour the mātauranga of Aotearoa.

Personal and Professional Positionality

As a child of multi-ethnic diversity, I come to this research with a unique perspective and worldview that has evolved from life experience, observations, values, and traditions. I grew up in South Auckland, Aotearoa, an area well known for its high Māori and Polynesian population and lower socioeconomic environment. Even though we lived in South Auckland, we lived in predominantly white neighbourhoods and schools in the area. My father was born in Samoa and migrated to Aotearoa to attend school in New Zealand and never returned to live in Samoa; effectively cutting himself off from the culture when he married my Pākehā mother. My father felt learning Samoan would not help us get very far in life. My mother is Pākehā, of NZ European descent. When I was 6 years old, it was discovered we had whakapapa to Kai Tahu, but it would take another 25 years before I connected with my iwi. I identified as Samoan when I was growing up, even though the dominant culture we were connected to was Pākehā. I often felt too Palagi/Pākehā for the Samoans and too Samoan for the Palagi/Pākehā and always questioned my place of belonging. I lived in Samoa for 4 years, yet still felt like an outsider to the culture. I married a Māori tāne who introduced me to te ao Māori, and for the first time I felt a sense of belonging in Aotearoa. These days, I proudly say I am a woman of multi-ethnic origins. From my own experiences and growing up surrounded by friends and whānau who faced systemic disadvantage, I witnessed and experienced the emotional and educational insecurities that shaped their sense of belonging. As I learned to navigate different cultural vistas and disadvantaged viewpoints, my

resilience was affirmed. These experiences inspire me to create spaces where children – especially those who feel disconnected or uncertain of their place – are seen, supported, and empowered to thrive.

I bring my experience as a mother, nurse, and naturopath to this research. I currently work as operations manager for a religious organisation overseeing the daily operations at sixteen schools in Fiji, Tonga, Samoa, Kiribati, and Mexico. I am a co-writer, social media coordinator, and designer of the Cultural Hubb books, and I take special interest in social and emotional learning and neurodivergence education. I acknowledge my Christian upbringing and the impact this brings to my worldview, as well as my commitment to inclusion- and equity-promoting practices and research. These values guide my desire to create and promote resources that are culturally grounded and honour indigenous knowledge such as mātauranga Māori. I am both an outsider and insider in this research. As an insider, I am part of the communities I am researching, as well as being a writer of the books being used in the intervention. As an outsider, my engagement with teachers is not as a fellow educator but as a researcher. I realise the impact this may have on teachers viewing me as an expert or author on the subject, which may influence their responses, however, this does not make me an expert for the research questions being explored: that of the kaiako's experience with resources. The KMR approach to this study supported the development of relationships of trust and ensured that whakapapa, whakawhanaungatanga, manaaki ki te tangata

and aroha ki te tangata were applied to promote openness with participants so they felt comfortable to give open and honest feedback without hesitation.

As both a researcher and resource creator, I am aware of the potential bias that could arise when interpreting data. I personally hope the resources are effective and support SEL and SES development in those utilising them. However, I acknowledge the risk of overinterpreting the results positively to achieve a favourable outcome. I have employed the following measures to ensure unbiased collection, review and analysis will occur: following the reflexive thematic analysis approach to the research, discussing results with my supervisor and addressing the strengths and weaknesses participants highlight in the interviews. I also acknowledge that my background and access to resources allow me to utilise academic resources, publishing platforms, and cultural assets that may not be available to others. As a woman of multi-ethnic origins, I acknowledge the privilege of being able to move between these cultural contexts, which means I may be blind to those who experience less access or visibility.

My positionality influenced this research in multiple ways. My cultural identity supported the relationship development between Māori and Pasifika kaiako, who expressed gratitude for culturally grounded resources. My dual role as author-researcher may have made teachers more open to sharing feedback but required I also take a backseat role as author and request honest feedback, not gratitude. By acknowledging my positionality, I do not claim neutrality; rather, I wish to make visible my background, beliefs, identity, and experiences that all influence this work. As a

Māori and Samoan researcher, I realise I am one of very few within this space. I believe my positionality is not a limitation but a strength that provides insight, empathy and cultural grounding for this research, which aims to support the wellbeing and resilience of tamariki and kaiako in Aotearoa.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

SEL has been identified as an early intervention strategy to mitigate the development and increasing severity of mental health concerns across an individual's lifespan (Ministry of Social Development, 2022). SEL has also been recommended as a protective mechanism against negative social determinants of health and inequity (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018). Increased research into the benefits of SEL has identified a range of positive outcomes, including improvements in academic achievement, interpersonal relationships and mental health. Notably, improvements in a tamaiti's ability to focus attention, regulate emotions, and demonstrate resilience have been associated with enhanced classroom engagement and learning outcomes (Ladd et al., 1999; Raver, 2002).

This literature review begins by examining the educational and wellbeing experiences of Māori and Pasifika learners in Aotearoa New Zealand. It then explores the role of culture, cultural competence and SEL in supporting effective teaching and learning for both kaiako and tauira. The review then considers the relationship between Emotional Intelligence (EQ) and Intelligence Quotient (IQ), followed by an examination of the importance of early intervention for promoting mental health and wellbeing. The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) five-competency framework is then discussed, before concluding with an exploration of the critical role teachers play in the successful implementation of SEL.

Māori and Pasifika in Aotearoa

Aotearoa (New Zealand/NZ) is comprised of a multicultural population of approximately 5.3 million people (Stats NZ, 2026). New Zealand Māori represent 19.6% of the total population at 978,246 people (Stats NZ, 2025a) and people of Pacific Island descent, referred to as Pasifika, represent 8.9% of the population at 442,632 people (Stats NZ, 2025b). One-quarter (1,250,000 people) of Aotearoa's population is under 19 years old, and this group is made up of 46% European, 27% Māori, 10% Pasifika and 17% other (Miller & James, 2025). The Pasifika population is comprised of different ethnic groups, with Samoan at 43%, Cook Islands Māori and Tongan at 19% each, and Niuean at 7%. An increasing percentage of Pasifika are being born in New Zealand and represent 67.4% of the total Pasifika population, a 1.4% increase from the 2018 census (Stats NZ, 2025b).

Demographic data indicate that Māori and Pasifika populations are substantially younger than the overall New Zealand population. In 2025, the median age in NZ was 38.1 years; however, the median age for Māori was 27.2 years, and for Pasifika it was 24.9 years. Individuals aged 0–19 years in New Zealand were comprised of 35% Māori and 36% Pasifika (Stats NZ, 2025a). These demographic trends are important for informing research, policy and service planning as they identify the cultural, environmental and health needs of this age group and demographic. Critical analysis indicates that this younger Māori and Pasifika demographic will be associated with higher birth rates and predictably larger population growth compared to the average

New Zealand household. Māori and Pasifika households will most likely be made up of families with more dependants, and possibly adult parents (grandparents), living in the home than working adults, indicating possible high strain on available resources. A stronger demand for education facilities and teachers and a higher need for health care catering to younger populations, such as vaccination programmes, nutrition education and youth support services, will be required (Stats NZ, 2025b).

Key influencers of health and wellbeing are the places where people are born, grow, work, live, and age. Education, access to nutritious food, decent housing, and working conditions heavily influence health. Broader structural factors – such as economic policies, infrastructure, social norms, and political systems – play a significant role in shaping health and wellbeing. These conditions are collectively described as the social determinants of health (SDOH) (WHO, 2025). Statistics and associated population information can inform research design and methodology to ensure valid and reliable data is collected that benefits the population they are studying. Likewise, interpretation of data and conclusions need to be developmentally appropriate and meaningful to the population studied. Due to the age of the population, I have focused my research on education, schools and kaiako as a source of gathering information.

In 2023, the rate of all tamariki living in Aotearoa New Zealand aged between 2 and 14 years of age experiencing emotional or behavioural problems and psychological distress increased from 9.8% in 2020 to 11% in 2023. For Māori and Pasifika children,

the statistics reveal higher rates of distress experienced, with Māori at 12.5% and Pasifika at 13.3% in 2020, increasing to 17% for Māori and 15.5% for Pasifika in 2023 (Ministry of Social Development, 2025). These statistics highlight the emotional, behavioural, and psychological distress increasingly experienced by Māori and Pasifika. Aotearoa has one of the highest suicide rates in the OECD/EU (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development/European Union), with disproportionately higher rates among youth of Māori and Pasifika descent (OECD, 2025). In 2022, Aotearoa ranked 35 out of 41 in the OECD/EU report for child and youth wellbeing (Duncanson et al., 2022) and ranked the fourth lowest (32 out of 36) for child wellbeing. In 2025, New Zealand ranked the lowest (36 out of 36) on the UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office of Research and Foresight league table of child wellbeing (UNICEF Innocenti, 2025). Harris et al. (2024) found that, over a 16-year period, Māori and Pasifika young adults aged 15–24 consistently experienced racism, compared to European and other groups in New Zealand. This experience resulted in negative mental and physical health, reduced life satisfaction, and lack of access to health care. This study provides evidence of the relationship between racism and the realities of young people of Māori and Pasifika descent in Aotearoa. Harris et al. (2024) recommend that anti-racism research and interventions are needed to ensure Māori and Pasifika youth are respected and valued in society.

Ensuring students are treated equitably is essential for SEL to be successful. Creating and maintaining safe, supportive learning environments for all students is a

key component for successful SEL implementation and outcomes (Jones et al., 2021). The National Equity Project (2018) encourages teachers, educators, and those delivering SEL programmes to reflect on their own cultural understandings and worldview to identify any bias and avoid reinforcing negative stereotypes. Self-assessment can be confronting; however, it is essential for adults working with tamariki in SEL programmes to master. Though often well-intentioned, a "colour-blind" approach to SEL undermines cultural competency and responsiveness. When educators ignore cultural differences – especially prevalent in schools with low cultural diversity – they risk reinforcing unconscious bias and silencing critical conversations about racism, diversity and privilege (Drummond-Forrester, 2020). For Māori and Pasifika educators who approach learning and teaching in this way, cultural identity is removed and unconscious bias is reinforced, contributing to educational inequalities for Māori and Pasifika (Alansari et al., 2022).

An example of this is the assumption that all Pasifika are migrants to Aotearoa New Zealand. While it may once have been commonplace to associate the Pasifika population with migration, the present-day situation is very different. In 2023, 67.4% of the Pacific population was born in Aotearoa, and 32.6% were born overseas (Stats NZ, 2023). Research shows that it is becoming increasingly important to acknowledge the difference between island-born Pasifika and Pasifika born in Aotearoa, as identity and generational differences are becoming increasingly diverse for these groups (Kapeli et al., 2020; Almao & Ioane, 2023). Understanding the needs of migrant Pasifika versus

NZ-born Pasifika students gives researchers and kaiako the opportunity to understand that migrant families may still be learning how to navigate the differences between life in New Zealand and life in the islands. NZ-born Pasifika are navigating cultural expectations at home while also being expected to integrate with the Western education model. Further, gaining an understanding of the history of Pasifika migration provides kaiako with a historical and political context that may prevent Pasifika from engaging with non-Pasifika or Western authorities, such as healthcare systems, due to intergenerational trauma and experienced racism (Fa'alogo-Lilo & Cartwright, 2021).

For Māori, Durie et al. (2009) describe how indigenous health practices and beliefs were targeted by colonial and missionary authorities. The Tohunga Suppression Act 1907, for example, outlawed the practice and teaching of traditional healing, which resulted in the loss of many Māori healing practices and the loss of confidence in practitioners and access to traditional healing knowledge for generations until the act was repealed in 1964 (Durie, 2009; NiaNia et al., 2017). L. T. Smith (2021) states, "The whole process of colonisation can be viewed as a stripping away of mana (our standing in the eyes of others and therefore in our own eyes)" (p. 225).

The World Health Organization (WHO, 2025) states that SDOH are key factors that help predict the barriers an individual, family and community may face in accessing health care and education. Lower socioeconomic environments often mean worse health for those living in the environment (WHO, 2025). Alegria et al. (2023) and Kalu et al. (2024) posit that SDOH are the root cause in determining positive or negative

health outcomes, including mental health. Teachers spend a large proportion of their time with students. The design and methodology of my research will utilise teachers' experience and observations of tamariki who come from communities where SDOH such as poverty and limited access to education and health care may negatively impact their ability to access mental health resources; coincidentally, these communities contain higher populations of Māori and Pasifika. Understanding how SDOH impact a community helps researchers recognise the barriers a community faces and is key to removing bias and variables that may otherwise lead to misunderstanding mental health in that community.

Lack of access to mental health education and general health care limits opportunities for people to seek early intervention for mental health concerns, resulting in deteriorating and long-term mental health concerns (Alegria et al., 2023; Kalu et al., 2024). Social inequities, such as a lack of community support or discrimination against minority groups, increase marginalisation and feelings of loneliness and helplessness in minority groups (Keim-Klärner et al., 2023; Pearce et al., 2023). Minimal effort has been made to reduce disparities in SDOH for Māori and Pasifika, and inequities persist (Marriott & Alinaghi, 2021). Tamariki who grow up at socioeconomic disadvantage are two to three times more likely to experience mental health problems than their non-disadvantaged peers (Kirkbride et al., 2024). Globally, over the last two decades, the demand for mental health care has increased in communities where social, demographic and economic hardship are experienced (WHO, 2022), and this demand is

evident in tamariki and young people where mental health problems emerge for the first time (Kirkbride et al., 2024). This research interviews teachers who teach in socially disadvantaged areas of Aotearoa. Interview questions will explore the impact the SEL intervention taught to tamariki had on tamariki ability to regulate their emotions, manage stress, and improve learning participation and outcomes in the classroom. Information gathered through interviews will seek to understand if an SEL intervention supports tamariki to gain tools to regulate their emotions, manage stress, and ultimately improve classroom environments, relationships, and learning.

Aotearoa's only national survey of mental health, Te Rau Hinengaro (Oakley Browne et al., 2006), included New Zealanders aged 16 years and older and collated data from 2003 to 2004. This data is over twenty years old and does not capture the mental health experiences of tamariki or youth under the age of 16 (Oakley Browne et al., 2006). There is an urgent need for comprehensive mental health data that accurately represents the lived experiences of tamariki, rangatahi and adults in contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand, especially Māori and Pasifika tamariki and rangatahi whose experiences are often underrepresented in national datasets (Miller & James, 2025). Te Rau Hinengaro (2006) draws attention to the rate of mental disorders being disproportionately higher for Māori (29.5%) and Pasifika (24.2%) when compared to other groups (19.3%). Further, Māori and Pasifika have lower rates of access to mental health services, and when they do access mental health services, the care is not culturally responsive (Baxter et al., 2006). Between 2019 and 2021, access to infant,

child, adolescent and youth mental health services decreased from 5.7% to 5.1% for Māori and from 2.8% to 2.4% for Pasifika. The greatest reductions were observed among tamariki aged 5–9 years old, with Māori access rates declining from 2.7% to 2.2% and Pasifika access rates from 1.3% to 1.0% (Whāraurau, 2023).

The Youth Health Wellbeing Survey (YHWS) entitled “What About Me?” was conducted in 2021. The YHWS surveyed 23% (7,711) of rangatahi in Years 9 to 13 living in New Zealand and sought to understand the health and wellbeing of New Zealand youth (Ministry of Social Development, 2025). The YHWS found that 28% of youth reported symptoms of serious mental health distress and that 12% had made a suicide attempt in the past 12 months. Importantly, the YHWS found that significant mental distress and attempted suicide were more common in socio-economically disadvantaged communities (Ministry of Social Development, 2022). Statistics New Zealand (Stats NZ, 2021) confirm that Māori and Pasifika tamariki are more likely to reside in socio-economically disadvantaged communities). Further, Te Rau Hinengaro found that the mental health literacy rate – the ability to recognise, treat and prevent anxiety and depression – was higher in NZ Europeans (85%) compared to Māori (69%) and Pasifika (69%) (Hudson et al., 2017). Given this difference, there is a need to improve mental health literacy for Māori and Pasifika in Aotearoa (Kapeli, 2020). Despite strong evidence that mental health resources are required for Māori and Pasifika, preventative factors such a low income, high unemployment rate and a negative stigma around mental health restrict access to counsellors, psychologists or other mental

health support services. Due to the high cost of accessing these services, government or financial support will need to be acquired.

Cultural beliefs and understanding shape how we view mental illness and its causes and should be carefully considered and included when providing mental health care for groups associated with poorer health outcomes, such as Māori and Pasifika (Whāraurau, 2023). Māori view mental health challenges and causes through a te ao Māori lens, and this is a perspective that often conflicts with the Pākehā model of healthcare delivery predominantly offered in Aotearoa. Spiritual aspects of health and wellbeing are often absent in Western models of wellbeing, whereas taha wairua (spirituality) in te ao Māori is often considered the foundation of everything else (Durie, 1998). NiaNia et al. (2023) further explain that within Māori worldviews, experiences associated with wairua and matakite are often understood as a natural part of life, contrasting with Western interpretations which may pathologise or fear such phenomena.

The bio-psycho-social model used by many New Zealand mental health clinicians does not consider Pasifika peoples' spiritual beliefs or their worldview about the causes of mental health problems. Clinicians who understand the problematic use of a mainstream health model and service over a culturally attuned service are essential to providing mental health care that meets the needs of Pasifika clients. An inability to acknowledge the worldview of an individual may lead the individual to feel disengaged from the mental health service, and clinicians may inappropriately use culture as a way

to explain treatment difficulties or failures (Fa'alogo-Lilo & Cartwright, 2021). NiaNia et al. (2025) confirm that a lack of relational fit, inability to understand the mental health of ethnic groups, providing treatment from a Western viewpoint to people from non-Western cultures, and a lack of understanding of ethnic spiritual beliefs further alienate minority groups from seeking mental health support. If teachers are delivering mental health services in school, would understanding the cultural and ethnic worldview of the children's upbringing also influence the success of teaching SEL principles in classrooms?

The Māori and Pasifika population in Aotearoa is young, with a higher birth rate than other populations, indicating a need for growth in mental health services to cater to this increasing population. Increased growth necessitates improved and increased mental health services to meet the mental health needs of these populations. Research that identifies where the populations reside, the SDOH that impact them and other barriers Māori and Pasifika face can support the development of early intervention models that provide mental health education at a young age, which is critical to support a resilient and strong Aotearoa (Simpson et al., 2016). A Tamariki's development is impacted by the environments they live, learn and play in. Schools are one of the most influential environments due to the influence they have on the cognitive and social development of children. Mental health professionals have been concerned with education settings and a child's social and emotional adjustment when starting or changing school has been a long-term concern of schools. Often the battle between

teaching literacy and numeracy skills at school is undermined by the need for SEL and literacy that helps to improve engagement and behaviour in class (Atkins et al., 2010).

Culture, Cultural Competence, and SEL

The World Health Organization (2019) noted that mental health and wellbeing approaches often ignore social, political, historical, and cultural contexts that determine health and wellbeing. Cultural diversity represents the varied practices, values, and beliefs held in a culture. SEL frameworks should not be applied uniformly across individuals, groups systems, or different cultural contexts, as doing so risks removing cultural differences and diverse worldviews that underpin indigenous and other culturally distinct approaches to wellbeing (Denston, 2022).

Teachers can support the development of a student's social and emotional competencies by directly teaching SES using engaging curriculum materials and implementing specific instructional and classroom-management practices (Durlak et al., 2011). Hamre and Pianta (2007) and Mashburn and Pianta (2006) found that kaiako-tamariki interactions and instructional practices in the classroom are two major predictors of positive student academic performance and social adjustment, suggesting a need for teachers to be competent at both teaching and demonstrating SES. The ethnic diversity of Aotearoa New Zealand further suggests that teachers use culturally informed methods of teaching SEL so students can relate to and understand the consequences of their actions and to promote emotional regulation as it relates to their worldview (Kumst & Scarf, 2015). Culturally responsive teachers recognise that

students subscribe to diverse worldviews. Studies suggest that teachers who are culturally competent utilise culturally responsive teaching methods – including cultural knowledge, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students – – to create relevant learning activities and effective learning resources for students (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018). Teachers who support the development of SES in their students tend to provide an intellectually demanding curriculum and support students to learn, practice and master the curriculum. They express confidence in their students, provide teaching strategies that help students monitor their own learning and progress, and encourage students to excel and build on the resources made available to them (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018).

Culture, as defined by Gay (2018), is a dynamic system of shared norms, values, customs, beliefs, and behavioural standards of a society. Culture shapes the way we interpret, understand, interact with, and make meaning of the world and life (Gay, 2018). In Aotearoa New Zealand, Māori and Pasifika people are distinct indigenous peoples yet share the same ancient whakapapa (genealogical connectedness) and cultural bonds through Te Moana Nui a Kiwa – the great Oceania ancestral connection (Mead, 2025). Pasifika is a label that encompasses 17 different nations (Teariki & Leau, 2023) and includes nations such as Tonga, Samoa, and the Cook Islands (Matika et al., 2021). The term Pasifika originates from the Samoan language and is commonly used in education literature to describe Pacific people. However, viewing Pasifika as one collective group can cause cultural differences to be overlooked or undervalued. In Tonga, for example,

Pasifiki would be used instead of Pasifika, and other languages have their own words which are also correct (Riwai-Couch, 2023). Each Pacific group having their own way of being Pacific is an important distinction for culturally competent teachers to make (Kapeli et al., 2020). Just as Māori iwi and hapū have their own tikanga and ways of being Māori (Riwai-Couch, 2023), Tongan, Samoan and Cook Islands cultures have their own specific ways of being Pacific (Kapeli et al., 2020).

The collective label "Māori and Pasifika" was born in Aotearoa from New Zealand government policy. Although the term acknowledges the Pacific connection between these people, it also distinguishes Māori as tangata whenua and Pasifika as migrant communities (Enari & Haua, 2021). The Treaty of Waitangi, signed in 1840, is a highly contested document that was used to determine the rights, power, governorship and sovereignty between the Crown and Māori at the time of its signing. Māori chiefs present at the signing of Te Tiriti o Waitangi (the Māori text), believed the Crown promised to protect Māori rights and properties and affirmed their status as tangata whenua, safeguarding their sovereignty (Archives New Zealand, 2023). Bishop Manuhuia Bennett described Te Tiriti as 'the promise of two peoples to take the best possible care of each other' (Waitangi Tribunal, 1992, p. 30). However, what was done to Māori by the Crown in the decades following the signing of the Treaty was far from caring. Many violations of the Treaty – such as the dispossession and confiscation of lands and resources, usurping Māori power and authority, excluding Māori from governance and education, breakdown of Māori social structures, and ongoing prejudice – have left Māori in a state

of poverty, marginalisation, and deprivation, a state far from the hope and promises made to Māori at the time of the signing (Mutu, 2019). Intergenerational distrust of Pākehā is embedded in Māori communities and is still evidenced by the second-class status Māori are ascribed through discrimination in employment and housing and the disparaging of te reo and Māori culture in Aotearoa, which demonstrate the continuing nature of colonisation in Aotearoa (Mutu, 2019).

Research shows that cultural connectedness and active cultural engagement increases well-being, especially for those who identify as of singular Māori ethnicity. Māori culture is based on relational connectedness, implying that disconnection from culture can have negative impacts on wellbeing, including mental health. Disconnection from culture therefore inhibits Māori access to wellbeing in culturally specific ways (Greaves et al., 2023). A person's worldview is strongly influenced by their culture, and how they see the world is critical to defining and guiding beliefs about what SES are important or deemed desirable amongst groups and individuals. How a person interacts and communicates, for example, varies immensely across cultures and within cultures, especially when factors such as age and gender are considered. SEL programmes selected for a school should reflect the cultural norms, values, and wisdom of the students within the school and community. Careful consideration of the types of skills, values, attitudes, and behaviours that are most relevant to the local culture and how those behaviours are expressed are essential selection criteria and outcome measures (Jukes , 2020). SEL researchers and practitioners believe that all

students, regardless of socioeconomic status, age, and culture, can benefit from SEL and development (Atwell & Bridgeland, 2019), however, some high-profile SEL programmes often prioritise the development of SES and ignore the exploration of the cultural assets available to enhance the programme (Jagers, 2019).

Joseph Houghton (as cited in Riwai-Couch, 2023, p. 231) explains that teachers need to understand three main points to successfully teach Pasifika and Māori students. First is to understand the basics about being from the Pacific, especially that Pasifika are not homogenous. Second is that cultural significances for a person of the Pacific includes emotional and spiritual, physical, and the impacts of migration. Thirdly, teachers need to know what it means to be a Pacific student in class. Detrimentally, kaiako who do not take the time to understand these differences will construct their own assumptions, regardless of whether they are correct or not (Riwai-Couch, 2023).

Cultural beliefs influence many aspects of mental health. Pasifika and Māori mental health beliefs differ from Western beliefs due to their contrasting perspectives on mental distress, cultural identity, and social and family connections. Such aspects are relevant to SEL because how a person communicates, copes, and is supported will determine their willingness to seek help and treatment (Vaioleti, 2006; Kapeli et al., 2020). Research conducted on the importance of cultural considerations and SEL implementation identified that strengthening identity, providing a sense of belonging, spirituality, healthy relationships, family and social unity, and good physical health are essential to prevention and intervention strategies for mental health. Wang and Degol

(2016) found that strong student achievement resulted when support for student psychological needs, interpersonal relationships, communication, and a strong sense of belonging exist. This is relevant to SEL as the same cultural considerations, including the strengthening of identity regardless of cultural heredity, are essential to successful SEL programme impact for Māori and Pasifika tauira (Kapeli et al., 2020; Le Va, 2025).

The Fonofale model of health (Pulotu-Endemann, 2001), a Pacific framework for use in a New Zealand context, uses a Samoan fale to describe the holistic characteristics of wellbeing for Pacific people. Family or aiga are represented as the foundation of the fale, indicating that wellbeing is heavily dependent on familial relationships as a source of identity, belonging, and support. The roof represents culture: the values, beliefs, language, and traditions that shape who we are and how we view and interact with the world. The four posts represent physical, spiritual, mental, and other factors that determined one's place in society, such as gender, age, life stage, and socioeconomic influence. These holistic determinants are impacted by the environment, time, and context (Crawley et al., 1995). The Fonofale model is used in mental health, counselling, and other health and social services and can support kaiako in delivering SEL in a culturally responsive and informed manner. Recognising the important roles that family, culture, spirituality, and physical and mental health play in the wellbeing of Pasifika tauira gives kaiako an opportunity to identify culturally competent teaching methods (Pulotu-Endemann, 2001).

In 1983, Te Whare Tapa Whā was introduced as a Māori health model by Tā Mason Durie (Durie, 2011). Māori health perspectives such as Te Whare Tapa Whā were viewed with scepticism by healthcare practitioners of the time, as Te Whare Tapa Whā challenged the dominant Eurocentric view that health transcended culture (Durie, 2011). Te Whare Tapa Whā compares Māori health to the four walls or posts (pou) of a house. The pou are taha wairua (spirituality), taha hinengaro (intellect and emotions), taha tinana (physical body) and taha whānau (family and relationships with others). This holistic representation of Māori health and wellbeing resonated with Māori who were questioning the Western approach to mental health that relied on medication and rejected the inclusion of spirituality and the importance of relationships to land, whānau, and Māori identity (Durie, 2011). As such, Durlak et al. (2011) found that multicomponent SEL programmes, as opposed to single component programmes (classroom-based programmes), that invite the participation and partnership of parents, families, schools, and communities, are essential to Māori and Pasifika wellbeing. SEL programmes and practices that encourage tamariki to assert their self-determination (ability and power to decide for oneself) and affirm their Māori and Pasifika identities are key to restoring health and wellbeing (NiaNia et al., 2017).

Cultural SEL assets are elements that contribute to creating vitality and strength and making life enjoyable and worth living. Cultural SEL assets can be material, emotional, or spiritual and may include things that preserve and protect cultural identity, such as art, language, ceremonies, music, dance, and storytelling.

Incorporating SEL with culturally sustaining pedagogies connects the SEL programme with the community in a way that fosters cultural wellbeing, cultural identity, and development, while building safe and inclusive learning environments (Jones et al., 2021).

Webber et al. (2023) argue that Aotearoa is in a unique position to address mental health in an educative way, led by Te Tiriti, for all New Zealanders. Denston et al. (2022) believe the establishment of a Te Tiriti-led education approach to mental health will address the imbalance between indigenous and colonial concepts of wellbeing. Te Tiriti-led mental health initiatives could look like: Māori-designed and operated initiatives that use Māori cultural assets in their mental health services, led by Māori and provided for Māori; providing institutional training to support the identification of practices that perpetuate inequity for Māori and Pasifika; or organisations being required to report on Māori and Pasifika mental health outcomes with continual reflection about improving those outcomes. A Te Tiriti-led approach could also address the impacts of colonisation and racism on health and wellbeing and support culturally sustaining pedagogies in Aotearoa. Positioning SDOH as foundational to wellbeing rather than viewing mental health as an individual occurrence and unrelated to whole-person wellbeing supports a Te Tiriti-led approach (Webber et al., 2023). When education facilities uphold Te Tiriti, they grow bicultural and equitable learning environments founded on mātauranga Māori, te reo, and whanonga pono (values).

Western health frameworks often overlook the importance culture plays in Māori and Pasifika wellbeing. The number of young Māori and Pasifika is expected to surge in the coming generations. With this expected increase, and research demonstrating that young Pasifika have higher rates of mental health issues yet are less likely to access mental health services, urgent attention is required to ensure mental health service provides are upskilled to address this need, while also recognising Western values and practices will not meet the needs of this demographic (Kapeli et al., 2020). Kapeli et al. (2020) also note that current Pasifika health models champion older-adult Pasifika perspectives and adopt a pan-Pacific approach to wellbeing. While Te Whare Tapa Whā and the Fonofale model are widely used models of wellbeing (MoE, 2024), Kapeli et al. (2020) suggest that these models of wellbeing need to be re-evaluated and revised to account for the increasing multi-ethnic and increasingly diasporic realities of these populations, ensuring the lived realities and intersectional identities of today's sociocultural landscape in Aotearoa New Zealand are understood and catered to.

Cultural and ethnic connections provide support in Māori and Pasifika communities. Research identifies that prevention and intervention strategies for mental health should revolve around key protective factors such as strengthening cultural identity, especially to support a strong sense of belonging to culture and places, spirituality, healthy relationships, family and social unity, socioeconomic stability, good physical health, and healthy habits (Kapeli et al., 2020; Le Va, 2025). Culturally responsive SEL programmes that support and affirm cultural values and belonging are a

protective factor for mental health. If SEL programmes do not contain culturally competent materials or mātauranga, teachers may adapt the materials to incorporate sociocultural values that students in their class can relate to, thereby increasing the likelihood of successful student outcomes.

When tauira are taught to focus on their individual SEL experience, they do not learn how they connect with or are similar to others in the world around them. They experience their emotions in isolation, and they do not experience how the social, cultural, and political world impacts them (Kapeli, 2020). Students learning SES in a classroom setting see, hear, and learn that other tauira have similar challenges, and emotions connect them to the people and resources around them.

Webber et al. (2023) discuss the value of a Te Tiriti-led approach in improving Māori mental health by recognising tangata whenua as the people of the land and that Māori culture and language are core elements of Māori wellbeing, identity, and success. A Te Tiriti-led approach is characterised by the involvement of whānau (family), iwi (tribe) and hapū (extended kin). This ensures Māori are included in the design of the programme and tikanga Māori and te ao Māori are incorporated into the programme, thereby acknowledging that understandings of health and wellbeing are founded in cultural ways of knowing. Māori concepts of wellbeing can be adopted by cultures who traditionally have individualistic foundational beliefs, thereby supporting the notion that identity is important to all students regardless of culture (O'Toole et al., 2019).

To support the establishment of a Te Tiriti-led approach to SEL in schools, the Ministry of Education established a new policy, “Mental health education: A guide for teachers, leaders and boards of trustees” (MHEG). The guide incorporates Te Tiriti as the basis for a whole-school approach to mental health education for Years 1–13, and it is used as a resource to improve health and mental health for all tamariki in Aotearoa (Fitzpatrick & Webber, 2022). The MHEG works to uphold the bicultural intentions of Te Tiriti, and it includes concepts such as hauora (health), mauri (life force) and mana (power/charisma) alongside traditional and contemporary mātauranga defined and implemented by Māori (Webber et al., 2023).

The MHEG invites schools to work with the diverse and changing cultural experiences and realities of Māori and Pacific people, suggesting that education curriculums be adapted to support the learning and needs of Māori and Pasifika students and their communities (Fitzpatrick & Webber, 2022). Pasifika and Māori have a shared whakapapa (genealogical heritage), with many of the principles, values, and approaches that provide insight into te ao Māori being closely aligned with Pasifika worldviews. This implies that initiatives designed for Māori and Pasifika can be beneficial for both groups (Enari & Haua, 2021). The MHEG further suggests that teachers and schools should be knowledgeable about Pasifika models of health such as the Fonofale model (Crawley et al., 1995), to help improve engagement and connection to students and communities by drawing on relevant and inclusive mental health education frameworks (Webber et al., 2023). Unfortunately, some schools treat

SEL as a separate educational track for underprivileged students who need “fixing” rather than as a part of academic education. Webber et al. (2023) notes that SEL students who are marginalised from the dominant culture and are dealing with the impacts of a racial colonial past suffer the most. For SEL to be successful, we need more teachers who are culturally connected and culturally competent and who understand the impact of inequality on health and wellbeing and the social and emotional needs of the tamariki they serve.

SEL practices have helped influence disciplinary techniques in schools. Schools that incorporate SEL into their curriculums are more likely to utilise restorative practices – such as peer mediation, restorative circles, and parent-teacher conferences – rather than punitive discipline, such as suspension, detention and zero-tolerance policies. This change has led to increased graduation rates and a reduced number of students out of school from suspension (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018). Punitive discipline that results in the disproportionate exclusion of students with darker skin colour, who often also came from low-income families, and students with disabilities more often than others. These same students are also more likely to receive harsher penalties than other students. For example, in the USA, students with darker skin colour in Years 1-8 are more likely to be suspended or expelled from school when compared to their light skin classmates (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018).

Aotearoa reflects a similar trajectory for Māori and Pasifika students. Denston (2022) reveal the inequality in Māori and Pasifika stand-down rates at schools in

Aotearoa: Māori boys experience stand-downs at twice the rate of Pākehā boys, while Māori girls experience stand-downs at nearly three times the rate of Pākehā girls. Similarly, Pasifika boys are stood down more frequently than Pākehā boys, and Pasifika girls experience stand-downs twice as frequently as Pākehā girls. These disparities outline the systemic inequalities in education and the need to reposition Māori ideologies and values into education frameworks in Aotearoa to reclaim Māori ways of being and to improve equity in education and schooling.

Implementing and integrating SEL as an overall school initiative supports the development of a school system that does not target troubled tauira but promotes SEL for all tauira. Riwai-Couch (2023) indicates that the starting point for change is for educators to understand their own biases, to be critically conscious about race and power in policies and institutions, and to alleviate our biases in decision making and interactions with others. A teacher's personal SES is essential to providing education spaces that promote education equality for all tauira regardless of culture.

Ellison-Loschmann et al. (2024) suggest that whānau-based SEL studies rather than individual-based surveys could provide valuable insight into the diverse aspects of ko āu (self), whānau (family), hapū (extended family), and iwi (community). When we measure individual participants as individual units of study, we restrict our understanding to a Western context, which creates challenges in understanding the complexities of the lived experiences of Māori and Pasifika. When we view individuals as part of a great whole, we begin to see the intersectionality that creates an individual.

Tipene-Leach et al. (2019) posit that “getting it right for Māori, does in fact get it right for everyone” (p. 96). Māori and Pasifika wellbeing is based on a holistic paradigm comprising hinengaro, wairua, tinana, and whānau. Understanding that whānau are an integral part of an individual’s experience provides increased possibilities for researchers and teachers to view the individual from multiple dimensions of whānau and community, rather than simply the individual. Notably, He Ara Oranga: Report of the Government Inquiry into Mental Health and Addiction (New Zealand Government, 2018) supports the idea that holistic and indigenous-led paradigms may be beneficial for all populations when aiming for transformational change and improvements in mental health and addiction outcomes and services.

Hattie (2023) states that the factors that contribute the most to reducing achievement gaps are family intervention, religious faith, and the culture of the school. Highfield and Webber (2021) suggest that culturally sustaining practices should be integrated within all levels of the school and in partnership with Māori. Enabling Māori to succeed as Māori requires teachers to teach in ways that make learning enjoyable, engaging, and effective for Māori (MoE, 2024b). This approach to educational transformation promotes collective action and improved learning conditions that benefit not only Māori but all students (Bishop et al., 2009; Highfield & Webber, 2021). Culturally relevant pedagogy raises the achievement levels of diverse students who have been underserved by the education system. A firm grounding in one’s language, culture, and history is a fundamental prerequisite for the development of culturally

healthy students and communities. Although Māori student achievement programmes have been a strong focus in Aotearoa for almost 20 years, most Māori learners have not experienced positive approaches to SEL (Highfield & Webber, 2021). Many SEL programmes are developed based on the social and cultural norms of dominant groups, without consideration for the values and experience of other populations within the community (Brion-Meisels et al., 2019; Jagers et al., 2019). Highfield and Webber (2021) found that many school leaders promote Māori culture and values positively and express a keen interest in Māori students achieving success in ways that support their identity and beliefs. Teachers commit to Māori student success by being vocal about their support for and being actively engaged in Māori led initiatives. Despite these efforts, data demonstrates that most school leaders are not monitoring and evaluating the impact of these initiatives on Māori student achievement. Lack of student outcome data means we do not know if these initiatives are resulting in the desired outcomes for Māori achievement (Highfield & Webber, 2021).

In New Zealand, an education approach that integrates mental health and wellbeing with Te Tiriti and Aotearoa-specific opportunities is more likely to achieve success and generate significant impact for students, youth, and communities (Webber et al., 2023). Riwai-Couch (2023) warns against ‘peppering’: the taking of selective elements from Māori culture and sprinkling them into the school environment. In many schools in Aotearoa, it is common to select Māori values as school values without fully understanding what those values imply. To avoid these situations, schools should work

with mana whenua and their Māori communities to understand what values are important to the local community, what it means to them, and what it might look and feel like in the school setting. If this consultation and cocreation is not done, it may lead to the Māori community having different expectations from the school community about a practice that is Māori (Riwai-Couch, 2023). Consideration should be given to the time and effort required to work with schools in establishing culturally responsive practices. Boardsworth et al. (2024) illuminate the dependence on Māori staff to guide and educate tauiwi (non-indigenous Māori) to understand te ao Māori worldviews, knowledge, and practices and that, despite independent and collective tauiwi efforts to learn, they frequently rely on their Māori colleagues to guide them. This reliance on Māori to support tauiwi navigating Māori indigenous spaces and places increases the workload on their indigenous counterparts. Haar and Martin (2021) describe this as "aronga takirua": the cultural double shift experienced by Māori scientists as they navigate two worldviews. This is similar to what was discussed previously regarding the impact of indigenous teachers, especially Māori, having to take on extra roles to support Māori observances in the school.

Emotional Quotient (EQ) vs Intelligent Quotient (IQ)

Emotions can help or hinder a child's engagement with academic learning, work ethic and commitment, and ultimately their success in school. Relationships and emotional processes have an important impact on how tamariki learn (Durlak et al., 2011). Supporting intellectual development activities at school has been the main focus

of education facilities. Although mental health professionals have long been concerned about the learning taking place in schools, educators have increasingly been concerned about the social and emotional development of children. A child's intellectual education is often affected by the child's ability to regulate their emotions and behaviour in class (Atkins et al., 2010).

Goleman (2020) posits that EQ is more important than IQ, as EQ is imperative to wellbeing. Further, essential EQ skills can be taught and improved, regardless of an individual's IQ. Goleman (2020) states that EQ provides a platform from which a person can change and improve their life, assess and manage their own emotions and influence, and motivate other individuals and groups. EQ is the basis of SEL programmes and interventions that act as mechanisms for individuals to learn or improve the necessary skills to increase their EQ (Goleman, 2020; Serrat, 2017; Jones & Doolittle, 2017).

SEL is defined by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) (2020) as

> the process through which all young people acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions, and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions.

Elias et al. (1997) state that SEL is the way an individual acquires a set of social and emotional related skills, attitudes, behaviours, and values that direct their

thoughts, feelings, and actions to enable them to succeed in school, work, and life. The term SEL is often used as an umbrella term for many subfields in psychology, human development, and education interventions (Jones et al., 2021; Jones & Doolittle, 2017). Each SEL intervention may have different foci or scope: some focus on one set of skills, such as recognising and expressing emotion, while others cover broader skills and include cognitive or executive functioning skills. It is important to understand that social and emotional skills develop through developmental, contextual, and cultural interactions and environments, which vary for every individual (Jones et al., 2021).

While significant efforts have targeted raising academic standards, teachers are increasingly focusing on alarming deficiencies in social and emotional literacy. The failure to develop social and emotional skills – such as how to deal with and regulate emotion or how to settle disagreements and work out a peaceable arrangement – has significant negative impacts on youth and their communities (Goleman, 2020). SEL programmes are designed to build and improve SES and competency by teaching specific skills through direct instruction. Programmes include introducing and modelling SEL skills and supporting students as they use and apply SEL skills in diverse settings. SEL programmes often target teacher practices and school norms and expectations to help students develop improved perceptions of themselves, others, and the school. Studies utilising SEL programmes observed notable improvements in classroom and school environments, such as better classroom functioning, students showing increased resilience in classroom activities, better engagement with tasks,

improved academic outcomes, and better social relationships with peers and teachers (Jones & Doolittle, 2017).

CASEL (2012) found that SEL skills are essential to developing good citizens, students, and workers. When quality SEL intervention is integrated into learning environments and provided over multiple years, risky behaviours such as drug use, violence, bullying, and school dropout rates are reduced (Song & Kim, 2022). SES act as a protective factor when dealing with negative life events, inequality, and chronic stressors, and they support general wellbeing and physical and mental health from childhood to adulthood (Jones et al., 2015). CASEL (2012) advises that the optimal environment for SEL occurs through effective classroom instruction, student engagement in positive activities inside and outside of the classroom, and where the parents and community are included in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of the SEL programme (Bond & Hauf, 2004; Hawkins et al., 2004). A child's ability to manage their emotions positively influences learning. Negative emotions such as fear of failure, anxiety, and self-doubt reduce a person's ability to process information and to learn, whereas positive relationships with teachers and positive emotions open the mind to learning. When students are challenged and supported to perform at the limits of their current abilities, their ability to transfer knowledge and skills to new areas of learning improves their ability to achieve (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018). SEL is well placed to support the development of equitable schools and learning environments (Jagers et al., 2019; Aspen Education & Society Program, 2018; Gregory &

Fergus, 2017), thereby improving not only a child's EQ but positively influencing their IQ (Goleman, 2020).

Jones et al. (2021) emphasise that the right type of SEL resource matters. Tamariki who have positive and developmentally appropriate relationships with adults have more opportunities to practice interactions that support SEL. School-based SEL programmes strengthen students' connection to school and peers, fostering positive social-emotional competencies, prosocial behaviour, and attitudes toward self and others (Durlak et al., 2011). As students developed stronger connections to school, there is a reduction in conduct problems, bullying (Franklin et al., 2012), aggression and emotional distress (Ura et al., 2019; CASEL, 2012). Social learning theory dictates that learning can occur through observing others or through direct experience (Bandura, 1977). For tamariki who do not have supportive relationships at home or in other situations, relationships with adult staff and teachers at school may be the most reliable and frequent source of and opportunity to practice SEL skills (Brion-Meisels & Jones, 2012). High-quality relationships in a school environment have been shown to help students develop and use SEL competencies, protect students who are at higher levels of risk, and mitigate the effects of inequality, victimisation and adversity (Osher et al., 2020). The learning environment is also important as a child is likely to pay attention in a classroom when they are not also worrying about peer aggression (Jones et al., 2021).

Equity-oriented practice is foundational to effective SEL implementation as it addresses biased practices and structures that prevent students from succeeding. Equitable learning environments ensure students, regardless of their background, have access to learning resources and support, are valued, and are encouraged to take ownership of their learning (Jagers et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2021). Many students feel disconnected from school as they progress in their learning journey from primary to secondary school and lack the SES to cope with the challenges they encounter, impacting negatively on their health, behaviour, and academic performance (Durlak et al., 2011).

Kaiako widely agree that academically inclined graduates use SES to engage and work well with others from diverse backgrounds. They are also more likely to engage in healthy behaviours such as exercising, eating well, and behaving responsibly and respectfully (Elias et al.,1997; Greenberg et al., 2005). Despite understanding the benefits of SEL programmes in schools, a kaiako's competing demands and limited time and resources can outweigh the implementation of SEL (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998).

The Importance of Early Intervention and Mental Health

Globally, mental health concerns have increased, accompanied by a growing prevalence of complex long-lasting conditions. International data further indicates that emotional and behavioural difficulties are affecting more tamariki across all communities and at increasingly younger ages (Denston et al., 2022). In Aotearoa,

current data reflects the same trend (Ministry of Social Development, 2025). The Ministry of Social Development (2022) advise the use of SEL programmes as an early intervention to help reduce the severity and cascade of further developmental mental health issues along the lifespan. SEL has been identified as a critical component of healthy development, mental wellbeing, moral reasoning, achievement motivation, learning, and academic achievement in tamariki (Cavioni et al., 2020; Durlak et al., 2011; Jones, 2021).

Goleman (2020) proposes learning mindfulness to promote self-awareness and SEL competency to mitigate early childhood inequalities. SEL strengthens the same neural pathway that controls concentration and impulse control. When a student learns SEL, they are strengthening their cognitive control and capacity to focus on whatever is most important at that moment (Goleman, 2020). The Stanford Marshmallow Test (Mischel et al.,1989)) assessed delayed gratification in four-year-olds and inspired longitudinal research globally. In Aotearoa, the Dunedin study tracked 1,000 tamariki aged 4–8 years old into adulthood, revealing that cognitive control was a stronger predictor of financial success, health, and civic responsibility than childhood IQ or family wealth (Poulton et al., 2015). This further highlights the transformative impact emotional intelligence (EQ) has on life trajectory (Goleman, 2020), with SES increasing an individual's ability to build and maintain healthy relationships and interact and work well with others throughout their lifetimes (Cavioni et al., 2020). In contrast, Kumst and Scarf (2015) found that preschoolers were more likely to delay gratification when they

clearly understood the consequences of their choices. This finding highlights the influence that contextual awareness and guided reflection can have on EQ and self-control, reinforcing the role of adult modelling (social learning theory) and mediation for SEL initiatives. Ideal SEL outcomes require adults who can model strong SES suggesting that strong social and emotional intelligence is not fixed and can be developed over time. These studies highlight key aspects, benefits and recommendations for the teaching of SEL and EQ development. Cognitive control, or the ability to delay gratification, is a key benefit to the development of EQ (Goleman, 2020). Cognitive control is developed by using external cues and guided decision making to help tamariki cultivate self-control and understand the impact of their choices. SEL and EQ interventions can also influence outcomes for minority and marginalised groups.

A failure to identify a deviation to the expected trajectory of social-emotional development can lead to mental and emotional health problems remaining undetected and unaddressed. Malik and Marwaha (2022) argue that screening for child development, understanding family dysfunction, and supporting families in establishing healthy, nurturing environments is vital. Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) include growing up in poverty, experiencing food and home insecurity, racism, family illness, and detention or incarceration of a family member, which can result in poor connection to health and education outcomes, increased absenteeism in school, and changes in school performance. ACEs can affect a student's ability to maintain sustained and focused attention (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018). It is crucial to provide care

and guidance at home and school, and wrap-around services for the whānau and child as early as possible (Malik & Marwaha, 2022). Development is malleable and new skills can be attained from birth into adulthood, allowing SES to be learnt at any stage of life. Human relationships are the catalyst to healthy development and learning. Darling-Hammond and Cook-Harvey (2018) found that a stable relationship with at least one committed adult can protect against the potential negative effects of serious adversity. Responsive, supportive relationships between kaiako and students can provide protective effects as kaiako nurture emotional security through consistent, empathetic communication, modelling productive social behaviours, and responding to the child's needs.

Equity in all determinants of health and the development and implementation of SEL programmes during a child's early years are crucial mechanisms to counteract the negative impacts on those experiencing inequality, negative SDOH, and ACEs (Maessen et al., 2023; Goleman, 2020). Safe, secure, enriching environments, typified by positive relationships, promote SEL skill development and buffer against the effects of stress and trauma (Osher et al., 2020). Not only do strong, positive relationships help create a supportive environment towards SEL, but they also help facilitate self-regulation, an essential fundamental skill related to other SEL domains (Eisenberg et al., 2010; Sameroff, 2010). It is crucial that we provide safe spaces where kaiako have the SES needed to act as an example for tamariki to learn and model after (Maessen et al., 2023).

Ideal Implementation of SEL

Tamariki who develop higher social-emotional skills at an early age are better able to deal with life's difficulties (Martinsone et al., 2020). Parent and child relationships are the first and most important context for developing SES; however, parents are not always equipped with the depth of SES needed to provide positive modelling behaviours for their tamariki. Tamariki spend much of their day with teachers and peers at school, making these relationships important and an ideal place for SEL (Jones et al., 2021).

The recommended age for SEL intervention or skill development varies across studies. In 2016, the Education Review Office (ERO, 2016) stated that SEL research and practices in Aotearoa primary and secondary schools were glaringly insufficient. Subsequently, multiple SEL programmes have been developed and implemented in Aotearoa that focus on different ages and audiences. Martinsone et al. (2020) and Cavioni et al. (2020) advise that the preschool years are the optimal time for tamariki to engage with SEL interventions and skills. This stage is a time of rapid development when tamariki are learning to engage with others outside of the family home. Goodman (2021) suggests that SEL intervention during primary school and ages five to eleven is the crucial age to introduce SEL, and that programmes should continue through to the end of secondary school. Jones and Doolittle (2017) advise flexibility in the introduction time frame, arguing that SEL interventions are most effective when the programme content and delivery method are developmentally aligned. They note that, ideally, tamariki

should begin SEL as soon as they can be engaged in a programme that suits their developmental needs. Social and emotional skill sets develop over time, with some skills providing a foundation for developing later skills. As a child grows, they are exposed to different environments outside the home, and friends, teachers and other adults become more influential than those in the home environment. These developmental milestones must be taken into consideration when determining when to implement SEL and what type to employ (Jones and Doolittle, 2017).

The CASEL 5 Framework

The CASEL framework, termed the CASEL 5, promotes five sets of cognitive, affective, and behavioural competencies essential to SEL: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making (CASEL, 2012). These competencies are crucial to a child's wellbeing and development (Denston et al., 2022) and are described in the CASEL literature in the following ways:

CASEL (2012) defines self-awareness as the ability to recognise your strengths and weaknesses but doing so with purpose and confidence to know yourself better. Self-management is the ability to manage emotions, thoughts, and behaviour to persevere until the goal is achieved. Responsible decision making includes the ability to consider the advantages and disadvantages of their actions and the impact their decisions will have on their personal, social, and communal wellbeing. Relationship skills include being able to cooperate, work collaboratively, problem solve, negotiate conflicts and navigate different situations. Social awareness describes the ability to

understand other people's perspectives, allowing one to empathise and work with others from diverse backgrounds, cultures, and contexts (CASEL, 2023).

Outcomes associated with the five competences are positive social behaviour, fewer conduct problems, less emotional distress, and academic success. The ability to learn and make responsible decisions, empathise with others, grow supportive relationships and achieve goals are further positive outcomes. These favourable outcomes create individuals who generate and coordinate flexible, adaptive responses to demands and capitalise on opportunities in their environment (CASEL, 2020; Durlak et al., 2011). The CASEL 5 Framework helps identify solutions that ensure educational equity and excellence through partnering with schools, families and communities. CASEL 5 competencies can be taught at various developmental stages from childhood to adulthood and in different cultural contexts. The framework has been used in many schools, districts and countries to develop learning standards and competencies describing what students should know and how they can achieve academic success in school, health, wellness, and career (CASEL, 2020).

The success of SEL and school-wide programmes requires high-quality implementation and support, including the kaiako's willingness to participate (Durlak et al., 2011). SEL activities can provide a platform from which schools can organise and coordinate academic, child, and youth development and prevention activities (CASEL, 2021). As SEL is implemented, a common language and coordinating framework often emerges that works across multiple programmes and teaching approaches normally

used in schools (Elias et al.,1997; Devaney et al., 2006). The CASEL 5 Framework has been critiqued as limited in its recognition and inclusion of diverse cultures and ways of thinking. In the local context of Aotearoa, the Ministry of Education (n.d.) provides SEL advice, support, and resources for teachers and educational leaders to help plan for and meet the diverse needs and wellbeing of all students in culturally fitting and relevant ways. Enacting Te Tiriti o Waitangi principles alongside programmes is essential to successful integration of SEL principles in Aotearoa schools. The principles of partnership, protection and participation are important to ensure all tamariki in Aotearoa are cared for in equitable, inclusive and supportive environments. Partnering the CASEL 5 Framework with Aotearoa-specific knowledge ensures bicultural SEL content is developed that reflects tikanga, cultural values, history, and mātauranga Māori. This is essential due to the unique premise Te Tiriti sets in Aotearoa. For example, applying a tuakana-teina approach promotes reciprocal learning, strengthens identity, and creates a sense of belonging in the classroom, school and community (Ministry of Education, n.d.-c). The Education Training Act 2020 section 10(1) states that Māori are an essential part of a school community. In pedagogy, the tuakana-teina relationship is considered a reciprocal method of learning where both tuakana and teina benefit. When working with the community, schools take on the teina role and the community the tuakana role. As teina, schools are in a position of active learning and open to being taught by whānau and the community who are experts on their tamariki (Webber, 2023). Adaptations that could be made to the CASEL 5 framework to ensure tikanga and

cultural diversity are met include kanohi-ki-te-kanohi hui to discuss and define what mental health and wellbeing look like for the community and the cultural, linguistic, and relational adaptations that could be made to the SEL curriculum and CASEL 5 framework (Hoskins and Bell, 2020). Engaging in this type of Te Tiriti-informed approach ensures Māori maintain rangatiratanga (chieftainship) over their wellbeing and are partners in developing Te Tiriti-informed relationships that strengthen the mana and relational connection with the community (Munford & Walsh-Tapiata, 2006).

Studies suggest that the cultural gap between mainstream values and Māori cultural values are one of the main causes for Māori underachievement (The Education Hub, 2022). Schools that incorporate Te Tiriti o Waitangi as a foundational approach to learning capture the essence of Kaupapa Māori research – where research is designed for Māori, by Māori, and with Māori (Bishop, 2011). Similar to Kaupapa Māori research, SEL programmes can be adapted to incorporate Māori values as central to the learning and be redesigned for Māori, by Māori, and with Māori. Consulting with local iwi can support the adaptation of SEL programmes to ensure outcomes for the programme and school are equitable for all who participate. Māori achievement is relational. A kaiako's role and their relationship to their students is pivotal to a student's education. The quality of interactions and relationships inside the classroom has been demonstrated to improve Māori student achievement levels (Bishop et al., 2009).

Teachers: A Key Component to SEL Education

Traditionally, school-based SEL initiatives have aimed to cultivate core social and emotional competencies for success in academic, professional, and interpersonal domains. However, emerging research highlights that the social-emotional competence of adults working with tamariki is equally critical in fostering effective SEL outcomes. Relationships serve as a foundation for healthy development. Requiring educators and school staff to model and coach SEL directly influences students' development of these competencies. Although parents remain integral to the development of SES, schools are the primary environment where tamariki interact with peers and non-familial adults. Kaiako and adult leaders in the school are key factors in shaping and moulding a tamaiti's SEL development (Jones et al., 2021). Many kaiako state that they have not received training or education about the importance of possessing and practising SES themselves (Zinsser et al., 2016). Further, initial teacher training should include the teaching of SEL skills to kaiako, with ongoing training provided throughout their career (Beecher et al., 2021). A kaiako's personal social and emotional competency strongly influences the school environment and students' motivation to learn. Providing kaiako tools and time to assess their own bias is part of SEL development (Gregory & Fergus, 2017). Important and central to a teacher's skill set are basic behaviour management strategies, how to promote SEL at school, and how to effectively manage peer conflicts that stem from socio-emotional related issues (Lopes et al., 2012; Kremenitzer, 2005).

Kaiako are typically time-poor and have limited opportunities to reflect on or develop their own SES ability (Greenberg et al., 2016; Jones et al., 2013). Although professional development is encouraged and provided for kaiako in Aotearoa (Ministry of Education, 2025), regular opportunities to build self-awareness and for self-reflection are limited. SEL continues to grow in popularity, yet many programmes do not include content that supports teachers' social and emotional competence. A survey of USA teachers reports that between 26% and 59% of teachers experienced excessive occupational stress (Bergin et al., 2024). In 2020, 2,415 New Zealand primary school teachers participated in *The New Zealand Teacher Occupational Health, Safety and Wellbeing Survey*. Although the average working week in New Zealand comprises 40 hours, many teachers report working in excess of these hours, with a majority reporting working 50 hours or more (Riley et al., 2021). The survey revealed that teachers experienced high job demands with few job resources, resulting in increased strain and burnout. The report also revealed that teachers were increasingly dealing with emotionally challenging situations and felt they had to frequently hide their emotions at work (Riley et al., 2021). Extensive working hours and elevated stress levels are associated with significant health and wellbeing risks (Caruso et al., 2004). Notably, heightened occupational stress among teachers has also been associated with reduced student engagement and academic achievement (Greenberg & Abenavoli, 2016).

Additionally, indigenous educators often take on added cultural responsibilities to ensure indigenous cultural groups feel connected and accepted as part of the school community. For example, Māori or Pasifika teachers often take on additional formal and informal responsibilities at the request of school leadership to support Māori and Pasifika students. These tasks often include being the 'go-to' person for all things Māori, such as Te Tiriti leadership, teaching Te Reo Māori, kapa haka (Māori performance group), karakia, pōwhiri (Māori welcoming ceremony), mihi whakatau (welcome speech), dealing with difficult Māori and/or Pasifika students, engaging with whānau, attending hui (meetings), being seen as the Māori face of the school and therefore expected to always be available (Riwai-Couch, 2023).

Professional development that supports building a teacher's SES capacity benefits the entire educational system and overall SEL efforts. Socially and emotionally competent teachers are better at managing the work and learning environment by being able to provide better support for students during their SEL journey; deliver the SEL curriculum as designed (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Jones & Doolittle, 2017); understand and manage their own and others' emotions; and have stronger relationship-building capability and higher self-efficacy (Cavioni et al., 2020; Brackett et al., 2010; CASEL, 2021). Teachers with strong SEL competency experience greater work satisfaction and reduced stress (Cavioni et al., 2020) and can model these competencies to students in the classroom (Palomera et al., 2008). Educators, schools, and other staff experience challenges when attempting to model and teach SEL skills if

they themselves have not gained competency in them (Jones & Kahn, 2017). Providing opportunities and motivation for teachers to work on their personal SES to align with school goals, values, and culture benefits the teacher, school, and students, and is essential to teacher development. Developing and practising SES when experiencing high levels of stress builds a teacher's capacity to manage further high-stress environments and situations. A teacher's personal wellbeing and the students' wellbeing improve while both teacher and student increase their SES capacity (Beecher et al., 2021). Teachers without SES to help manage their behaviour, thoughts, and emotions may respond to stressful situations in negative, reactive ways that harm relationships and undermine healthy social and emotional development, thereby creating a more stressful environment (Jones et al., 2021). Jones et al. (2018) recommend that teachers engage in at least one year of SEL before teaching SEL (Han & Weiss, 2005; Jones et al., 2018). Once a programme has been internalised and naturalised to a teacher, increased positive outcomes are delivered. Teachers who "know themselves" and "accurately understand their own well-being" are better able to promote, model, and utilise SEL in the classroom (Schonert-Reichl, 2017, p. 138).

Teachers make decisions that impact school climate, the wellbeing and learning of students, and other educators they associate with in the school (Collet et al., 2012). Students in Years 1–12 are most significantly impacted by their teacher's knowledge and skill due the length of time they spend in the classroom with kaiako each day. Classroom management and strategies are common areas where novice teachers

struggle in their first years of teaching (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Schonert-Reichl (2017) argues that teachers struggling with classroom management also fail to execute quality instruction. When schools intentionally target the ways SEL is taught, discussed, and practised, novice teachers are better able to understand the school climate, culture, and holistic needs. School leaders can support teachers by creating SEL toolkits that provide instructions, resources, and strategies to directly meet the needs of students. Further, when student teachers are provided with SEL training, their emotional competency and SES increase, supporting the transition into the classroom and the teaching profession (Beecher et al., 2021). Toolkits provide support for new teachers entering the workforce, assisting them in gaining a deeper understanding of how to integrate SEL as part of everyday teaching and learning.

A teacher's SES are tested every day in the classroom. As teachers engage with learning opportunities to develop social-emotional skills that help them to deal with the social and emotional challenges presented to them daily in the classroom, their personal wellbeing, the students' wellbeing, and the teacher's and students' SES will grow at a greater capacity (Beecher et al., 2021).

Atwell and Bridgeland (2019) found that despite increased awareness of the benefits of SEL programmes in schools, school-wide and consistent programmes remain limited, especially in rural and small-town schools. Similar to academic skills, SES are best developed when students and teachers are given opportunity to practise and master these skills and build upon them frequently and with support. To ensure the

environment for practice and honing SES is established, schools should aim for systemic, schoolwide programming that allows students' SES to grow alongside their academic abilities to create a common culture for SEL across the school (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018). Jones et al. (2018) state the successful implementation of SEL programmes requires supportive environments, including efforts that build adult social and emotional competency in the family and community. For SEL programmes to be beneficial for a child, the family and community (school or wider community) should be included as part of the SEL programme, particularly for Māori and Pasifika tamariki.

Chapter Three: Methodology

> E kore au e ngaro, he kākano i ruia mai i Rangiātea.
> [I will never be lost, for I am a seed sown in Rangiātea.]
>
> — Traditional whakataukī

This whakataukī affirms our connection to whakapapa, identity, and spiritual origins. It reminds us that every person carries inherent worth and potential, and that knowing where we come from helps us grow with confidence, purpose, and belonging. The following chapter will provide an overview of the structure and frameworks of this research. The research was conducted via semi-structured interviews with eight kaiako from eight primary schools from five towns across the North and South Island of New Zealand. The methodology chosen for this research is a Kaupapa Māori framework. The research question, the context of the setting and biography led to the methodological choices outlined in this chapter. This chapter provides insight into the objectives and methodology of this research. An overview of the aim, rationale, methodology, and method is provided, followed by details of the *Ngā Kare a Roto: The Feelings Within* research study and how it evolved. Participant recruitment and demographics are then provided, followed by information about the interview questions and the use of thematic analysis to analyse the data, including the steps of data familiarisation, data coding, and the generation of themes.

Aim and Rationale

The objectives of this research are to explore the impact the *Ngā Kare ā Roto: I Feel* series has on children's and teachers' emotional literacy and wellbeing, and the impact a teacher's SES and culture have on the delivery of SEL programmes.

Methodology

Kaupapa Māori was chosen as the methodological approach for this research. As a Māori researcher, it was important to me that the methodology acknowledged my positionality while supporting knowledge development in a culturally appropriate way, utilising tikanga and Māori values while honouring past and current realities. Historically, research with Māori has been based on Western knowledge and utilised theories that dehumanised Māori and championed Western ways of knowing, which undermined Māori worldviews and knowledge. It is therefore crucial that researchers focus on research processes and development of knowledge that will benefit those being researched (L. T. Smith, 2021).

For non-Māori researchers, Kaupapa Māori may seem wide-ranging and diverse. At times, Kaupapa Māori may focus on language, ethics, pedagogy, or law, which can present challenges to those unfamiliar with Kaupapa Māori or its fundamental principles (Mahuika, 2008). A Kaupapa Māori approach to research supports researchers, who are Māori or non-Māori, to fulfil the rigours of academia while acknowledging and supporting Māori ways of being, and it provides an avenue for

applying decolonising and empowering messages to research (Mahuika, 2008). L. T. Smith (1996) emphasises that "Kaupapa Māori research is research by Māori, for Māori and with Māori" (p. 47).

A Kaupapa Māori approach to research supports the attainment of knowledge through research methods that use values, systems of knowledge, and frameworks that are indigenous to Māori. Values such as whanaungatanga and kotahitanga are incorporated into the research process and guide the researchers' actions and methods for obtaining knowledge from others. Frameworks such as Te Whare Tapa Whā (Durie, 2011) or the tuakana-teina approach to learning (Houghton-Katipa, 2026) are examples of Māori frameworks that support the attainment of learning and knowledge through Māori methodologies. A Kaupapa Māori research approach reinforces the existence and strength of mātauranga Māori, language, and culture. Kaupapa Māori research provides an opportunity to promote research that is viable and valuable for Māori, to convince research communities of the need and benefit of more Māori research, and to develop ways to carry out research that is not limited by previous or current research approaches (L. T. Smith, 2021).

Kaupapa Māori is an instigator for excellence in research, not a rejection of Pākehā knowledge or culture. Kaupapa Māori research is a fundamental example of biculturalism, as it questions the processes of authentic expert knowledge and how that knowledge was obtained (Mahuika, 2008). Kaupapa Māori challenges the view that there is one single Western-dominant view that defines and represents humanity and

provides a mechanism for ontological and epistemological processes for qualitative and quantitative study to embody Māori values, knowledge and practices (Ormond, 2023). Nepe (as cited in Mahuika, 2008) describes Kaupapa Māori research as knowledge that dates back to the beginning of time, even to the creation of the universe. It has distinct epistemic and intangible foundations, is fundamental to Māori identity, and is interwoven with Māori language and culture. Some believe that Māori knowledge is ancient and therefore static. L. T. Smith (2021) argues that mātauranga Māori is constantly created, recreated, and transformed within indigenous communities. Durie (2012) supports this claim by stating that Kaupapa Māori carries varied meanings, depending on the context, and evolves through individual interpretations over time. Such diversity is reflective of the "Māori way of doing things" (Durie, 2012, p. 22) and is adaptable across various settings and domains. Durie (2012) posits that Māori methodology draws on mātauranga Māori, which changes with the environment and social climates.

Knowledge is forever changing, and there are multiple ways one can approach the development and attainment of knowledge. Defined as the Māori worldview, te ao Māori is grounded in whakapapa, the genealogical or ancestral tie that connects us to each other, to the natural world, and to the universe (Spelman & Dieriks, 2025). Whakapapa and relational connection are foundational to the ways Māori organise knowledge. Whakapapa is how Māori relate to the development and creation of the world: "All things, from emotions to fauna and flora were part of an organic system of

relationships that could be traced back to the primal parents – Ranginui (heavens) and Papatūānuku (earth)" (Tau, 1999, p. 116). Whakawhanaungatanga is key to establishing the whakapapa of individuals and understanding the connection and building of relationships from a Kaupapa Māori approach (Barlow, 1991).

G. H. Smith et al. (2017) explain that Kaupapa Māori has the dual purpose of Māori working towards decolonisation and tino rangatiratanga (self-determination). Pene et al. (2024) add that decolonising research requires attention to ethics and how research is directed and decided, not just the methods used. Therefore, the purpose of Kaupapa Māori research is not to deconstruct colonial paradigms (Cram, 2017), but it can be a way for one to challenge hegemonic colonial paradigms enforced on Māori and support the reclamation of Māori realities (G. H. Smith, 2012). Mātauranga Māori is the epistemology of Māori knowledge and is sacred. For this reason, specific tikanga is applied to guide how knowledge is shared, accessed and upheld within Kaupapa Māori (Tau, 1999). Mātauranga Māori is described by Hikuroa (2017) as the ūkaipo or source of knowledge in Aotearoa, and is comprised of Māori knowledge, worldview, and culture. Knowledge upholds the mana of people and is often entrusted to a tohunga (skilled person, chosen expert, priest, healer) or someone who is responsible for holding and protecting the knowledge, its sacredness, and any dissemination of the knowledge (Hikuroa, 2017). Pūrākau and maramataka are examples of mātauranga Māori; however, these knowledge systems are often ignored by the scientific community due to their origins in legends or myths. Research is the process of collection, analysis, and

interpretation of data that helps us understand or generate new knowledge or confirm knowledge for a specific question or problem (Flick, 2022). Kaupapa Māori research provides a Māori framework from which to gather data, analyse, and interpret in a way that is culturally responsive and beneficial to Māori. This study provides insightful knowledge to those interested in understanding various topics from a Māori worldview.

G. H. Smith (2017) echoes Mahuika (2008) earlier sentiments by describing Kaupapa Māori research as being grounded in critical theory. Kaupapa Māori research aligns with critical theory and provides a pathway to promote Māori participation in research and a space from which Māori can challenge other research approaches (G. H. Smith, 2017). Critical theory challenges the power structures and how power impacts people. It is the idea that structure and reflexive analysis are needed to bring about the action to spark social change. Critical theory invites researchers to adopt a more positivist approach and reflexively question the biases in their worldview. Examining and taking action on such exposed biases can drive reforms in governance and education that benefit society as a whole.

A critical theory approach provides opportunities for Māori to take greater control over their lives and of the communities around them. Critical theory has also been referred to as a "liberatory philosophy" (Ryoo & McLaren, 2010, p. 348), meaning that it works to expose how knowledge is created, whose knowledge is valued, and how that knowledge determines who holds the power in society. Critical theory exposes relationships that dominate and subordinate other groups of people, such as

indigenous or minority groups. As a researcher, it is important to recognise how restricting access to knowledge can disempower individuals and communities. Critical theory seeks to challenge these power structures and prevent people from becoming constrained by the ideas and practices imposed by societal institutions.

Why are more Māori and indigenous researchers needed? L. T. Smith (2021) asks, “What happens to research when the researched become the researchers?” (p. 239). Wilson et al. (2022) respond that one of the primary benefits of Kaupapa Māori research is that it ensures research is conducted through an indigenous lens that normalises the context and what it means to be Māori from a te ao Māori perspective. It also ensures that the knowledge gained from Kaupapa Māori research goes towards liberating and providing equitable access to information that benefits Māori. Intercultural collaboration between Māori and non-Māori may occur within co-design studies, but these should be sanctioned and led by the Māori community with Māori researchers connected to the study (Ormond, 2023). Research that impacts Māori communities should ideally be led or conducted in collaboration with Māori to ensure Māori values and research design are not harmful to Māori. This research study is led by a Māori researcher and is supervised by Māori. The rigour and requirements for research to be considered Kaupapa Māori research require commitment and confirmation throughout the research to ensure the bicultural and Kaupapa Māori framework is being observed. L. T. Smith (2021) suggests that during the design and decision-making process of research, researchers should engage in a series of questions to identify who

defined the research question, who will benefit or be negatively affected by the research, and who will gain knowledge from the study.

Ensuring Māori research is responsive to Māori needs causes a researcher to relinquish their rights as the sole beneficiary of the research (Cram, 2015). L. T. Smith (2021) defines insider researchers as researchers who are of the same ethnic groups as those they are researching. L. T. Smith (2021) further identifies that the major difference for Māori researchers (or any indigenous researcher) conducting research with their own people is that indigenous researchers, their whānau, and community have to live with the ongoing consequences of their research processes.

In summary, to help reduce the incidence of negative insider research impact, this research was informed by Māori values, was carried out in a way that made sense to Māori, and the primary aim was that the research would ultimately benefit Māori. In order to do this, key principles were integrated into this study: whakapapa (sharing genealogy or history), whakawhanaungatanga (establishing relationships and identity) (Paipa et al., 2014), manaaki ki te tangata (sharing and hosting people with generosity), and aroha ki te tangata (showing respect for the people) (L. T. Smith, 2021, as cited in Pene et al., 2024). These values were reflected in my research approach, as participants determined the time, location, and terms of the interviews. Although all interviews were held via Zoom, kanohi-ki-te-kanohi interviews were offered. A koha (gift) was provided in the form of a set of the *I Feel* book series donated to each participant. Ensuring participants felt manaaki ki te tangata and aroha ki te tangata during the process is not a

rejection of Pākehā knowledge or culture, but rather guided all interactions (emails, phone calls prior to, during, and post-interview) and helped maintain the values of this research. The taonga of their time, experience, and knowledge was a gift I treasure and thank participants for.

This research study also considers Pasifika cultures, communities, and experiences as another population underrepresented in academic research in Aotearoa. Regardless of a researcher's desire to adapt or adopt, one cannot give up one's own ontology. For this reason, indigenous input or insider research is critical to the development and progress of Māori and Pasifika epistemology (Klakegg, 2015). Curtis (2016) posits that Pasifika academic research is still in its early phases and that a Kaupapa Māori lens is more closely aligned to Pasifika values than Western Eurocentric research principles. Hence, a Kaupapa Māori lens was selected for this project to ensure the use of cultural values that are embedded in both Māori and Pasifika practice and participants. This research study was conducted in ways that are safe, beneficial, and empowering to Māori and Pasifika. Over time, mātauranga Māori and Kaupapa Māori have evolved, as have Pasifika frameworks. These culturally embedded research approaches have resulted in more research and researchers contributing to the development of mātauranga Māori and Pasifika knowledge in ways that are empowering to their related communities.

Semi-structured Interviews

This qualitative research study employed semi-structured interviews to understand and explore the experiences of kaiako implementing the *I Feel* SEL resources in primary schools in Aotearoa. A qualitative research approach was chosen for its flexibility, openness, and responsiveness, qualities that align with Kaupapa Māori principles by allowing space for relational, culturally grounded inquiry.

Semi-structured interviews further support this approach by enabling whakawhanaungatanga to be included in the interview process and allowing participants to share their experiences in ways that honour their tikanga and lived realities (Busetto et al., 2020). Whakawhanaungatanga aids in the development of the participant-researcher relationship, forming bonds of trust and respect between people while fostering innovation and collaboration (Wilkinson & Macfarlane, 2024).

Semi-structured interviews are interactive and are often referred to as "a conversation with a purpose" (Burges, 1984 as cited in Ruslin et al., 2022, p. 24). Semi-structured interviews are informal and context-sensitive while allowing participants to have control over the direction of the interview, ensuring the interview remains participant-centred (Ruslin et al., 2022). The use of open-ended questions and the development of an interview schedule provide structure to guide the interview, while allowing flexibility for the interviewer and participant to explore other themes or responses (Busetto et al., 2020) and provide a point to return to after deeper discussion

has concluded (Ruslin et al., 2022). The interview schedule makes it easier to identify patterns that occur across different interviews (Ruslin et al., 2022).

Aspects of the hui process (Lacey et al., 2011) were integrated into the interview process as it helps support a Kaupapa Māori approach to interviewing and supports the establishment and strengthening of the relationship with participants beyond the role of the researcher. Mihi (greeting, introduction, and karakia), whakawhanaungatanga (establishing connections), kaupapa (attending to the purpose of the interview) and poroporoaki/whakamutunga (closing the session) were included in the interview, ensuring time was allocated for tikanga Māori to be observed. Engaging with interview participants through the process of whakawhanaungatanga as one of the main actions in the interview allowed participants time to relax into the interview setting and establish a sense of trust and comfort before we attended to the heavier discussions in the interview. Participants were able to learn about me, the researcher, and I learned about them and how we connect. Across interviews, connections were formed through whakapapa, a passion for educating children, and the importance of the topic being researched. As researcher, I employed the principles of titiro, whakarongo . . . korero (look, listen . . . speak) (L. T. Smith, 2021), which aims to help participants freely share their experience without interruption or judgement.

Manaaki ki te tangata was applied to ensure the relationships with participants were managed in the interview setting to ensure the participants were cared for generously before, during, and after the interview. Participants were invited to share

their whakapapa, and non-Māori participants were invited to engage in a similar process where they shared details about themselves. Using semi-structured interviews grounded in Kaupapa Māori allowed me to keep the participant at the centre of the interaction while allowing both flexibility and structure to ensure multiple aspects of the participants' experiences were addressed.

Method

About the Ngā Kare ā Roto: The Feelings Within SEL Resource Series

The study explored how the *Ngā Kare ā Roto: The Feelings Within* resource series supports SEL and development in the classroom for tauira and kaiako. For consistency, the terms *Ngā Kare ā Roto: The Feelings Within* resource series and the *I Feel SEL resources* are used interchangeably throughout this thesis and refer to the same set of social and emotional learning resources. The books utilised in the study (see Figure 1) were: *I Feel Angry; I Feel Panic; I Feel Anxious; You Can Do It: Have a Go!; and Don't Give Up: You Can Be Resilient*.

Figure 1

Ngā Kare ā Roto: The Feelings Within Resource Series



Note. Book covers reproduced from *Ngā Kare ā Roto: The Feelings Within*, by A. Tutagalevao & R Mariner-Solomon, 2024, Culturalhubb Ltd. Copyright 2024 by Culturalhubb Ltd.

Eight kaiako from eight schools across Aotearoa New Zealand volunteered to participate in the *Ngā Kare a Roto: The Feelings Within* qualitative study. The study focuses on the impact the *I Feel* series had on tauira and kaiako emotional literacy and wellbeing, and the importance of cultural responsiveness in SEL.

Ethics

Ethics approval was sought prior to data collection commencing. This project was approved by the Massey University Ethics Committee on 24 June, 2024 and is considered low risk. The ethics notification number is: 4000029009.

All research activities were conducted in accordance with ethical guidelines. Participation in the study was voluntary and informed consent was obtained prior to

participants becoming involved in the research. An information sheet was sent to participants prior to their involvement. The information sheet provided information about their involvement and their right to withdraw from the study at any time and to refuse to answer any questions should they choose to do so, without any penalty.

The research project was clearly outlined to the participants prior to their agreeing to participate in this study. Confidentiality and anonymity have been carefully maintained and monitored to ensure participants' information and identity are protected. Data was stored in the assigned Massey University digital database provided. Cultural and ethical considerations were observed throughout this study to ensure cultural and religious safety is observed.

Participants

An invitation was sent to kaiako through the Cultural Hubb Limited primary schools teachers network, inviting them to be a research participant in the study. Participants emailed Renee Mariner-Solomon, the researcher, if they were interested in participating. It took approximately two to three months to recruit participants for this study. The sample size was small, with eight participants in total. A small sample size meant that rather than obtaining generalised findings during interviews, it was possible to explore participants' experiences in more depth and detail (Subedi, 2021) while supporting my ability to establish close relationships with participants so that in-depth and rich information could be elicited from interviews. Focus was then given to understanding the cultural and social contexts that cannot be achieved through larger

sampling (Subedi, 2021) and the ability to allow the necessary length of time and processes involved to complete the study. For example, interviewing, transcribing, and ensuring cultural responsivity was adhered to by ensuring whakawhanaungatanga was given the time required, relationships and trust were formed, and other Kaupapa Māori values were implemented, as previously discussed. This rich commentary and detail required for a robust study may be difficult to obtain if the processes of whakawhanaungatanga and the values expected of insider researchers to uphold cultural and social safety are observed and maintained (L. T. Smith, 2021).

Ten kaiako volunteered; however, two were unable to participate in the study for personal reasons later communicated. Eight participants from five different towns in New Zealand volunteered. Eligible participants were required to have taught the *Ngā Kare ā Roto: The Feelings Within* SEL resources in their classrooms. They needed to have 50% or more teaching contact time with the students and be willing to speak about their experience and answer a 10-question survey.

A study information sheet was emailed to participants once they indicated they wanted to be part of the study and included information about the participant's rights, information about the researcher, and the email and phone number of the researcher. Once participation was confirmed, all participants chose to be interviewed via Zoom, despite offers to meet via the preferred Kaupapa Māori method for interviewing of kanohi-ki-te-kanohi.

Participant Demographics

Table 1 describes the eight participants' demographics along with the pseudonyms used for the study.

Table 1

Summary of Participants and Demographics

Pseudonym	Gender	Years working in education	Location	Rural/Urban
Aroha	Female	3	Wellington	Urban
Mereana	Female	15	Auckland	Urban
Anahera	Female	15	Palmerston North	Rural
Kiri	Female	7	Wellington	Urban
Moana	Female	12	Auckland	Urban
Hinemoa	Female	20+	Wellington	Urban
Leilani	Female	5	Whakatane	Rural
Talia	Female	30+	Dunedin	Rural

Interview Structure

Whakawhanaungatanga serves to strengthen all who participate in the interaction and supports a reciprocal relationship of friendship and kinship (Rewi, 2014). As discussed earlier, whakawhanaungatanga and the hui process were employed when meeting with participants and guided by the four key stages: mihi (which may include karakia), whakawhanaungatanga (developing connections), kaupapa (attending to the purpose of the session), and, finally, whakamutunga (closing) (Lacey et al., 2011). Establishing relationships in a te ao Māori context allowed a balance of control and power to be addressed throughout the interview, ensuring participants dictated the

terms of the researcher-participant relationship and allowing space for sensitive discussions to occur (Bishop, 2011).

Due to all hui being conducted via Zoom, sharing of kai at the conclusion of the interviews was not included. A set of books was given as a koha. Interviews took approximately 1.5 hours and were video and audio recorded via the researcher's private Zoom account. Permission was gained from participants to use Zoom to record, transcribe, and save the interview for research purposes. Semi-structured interviews ensured qualitative data was collected via open-ended questions (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). Days, times, mode (online or kanohi-ki-te-kanohi), and location/venue were determined by participants, thereby following the Māori value of aroha ki te tangata (a respect for people) (Cram et al., 2018).

Participants were informed that the interview would be guided by 10 semi-structured interview questions and that the interview would take approximately 1 to 1.5 hours. Participants were sent a copy of the interview schedule one week prior to the interview. It was reiterated that the interview would be participant-led and that the interview schedule provided was only a guide to the discussion. See interview schedule (Appendix 1).

Attending to the kaupapa of the hui, I provided an overview of the research and the participants' rights, use and storage of the data collected, and a reminder that the interview questions provided were only a guide.

Analysis

Data was analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (RTA). RTA is a "method not a methodology" (Terry & Hayfield, 2021, p. 5) and is used to analyse qualitative data by identifying and recording patterns found in data that requires further interpretation to obtain meaning (Naeem et al., 2023). RTA recognises the researcher is an "analytic resource" (Braun & Clarke, 2020, p. 330), who brings their experience, culture, and positionality as valued mechanisms to obtain and interpret theory and data gained from participants (Braun & Clarke, 2020). From a Kaupapa Māori perspective, this highlights the impact a researchers' positionality has on research analysis and findings. Kaupapa Māori research recognises that knowledge is socially, historically, and culturally bound and preferences Māori mātauranga. RTA acknowledges that data analysis and interpretation is shaped by the researcher's positionality and subjective engagement with the data, identifying that the two approaches are aligned.

RTA was chosen as the preferred method of analysis because it offers a flexible approach to analysing qualitative data, rather than serving as a distinct research technique (Braun & Clarke, 2012). As such, RTA uniquely supports principles of Kaupapa Māori research (Braun & Clarke, 2020), as it is flexible and accessible, making it a popular method for analysing qualitative data sets (Braun & Clarke, 2012). RTA provides researchers with a way to systematically identify, organise, and present insights, themes, and patterns across data sets (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

The rigorous engagement with the data sets is a measure of reliability in RTA (Terry & Hayfield, 2021). The six steps support depth of analysis as data is rigorously analysed, rather than simply organised and summarised (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Terry and Hayfield (2021 p.9) identify the six phases as a way to engage with the data sets as, phase 1: Familiarization, Familiarizing yourself with the data. Phase 2: Generating initial codes. Phase 3: Searching for themes. Phase 4: Reviewing potential themes. Phase 5: Defining and naming themes. Phase 6: Producing the report.

The six steps of RTA used to analyse the data obtained through semi-structured interviews with participants is provided below.

Phase One: Data Familiarisation

The data obtained from the eight interviews were captured using the transcribe function in Zoom. Transcripts were cleaned and then reviewed along with the audio content captured by Zoom. This process was undertaken twice to ensure accuracy (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I identified four topics in this initial phase: *Manaaki the Moment: SEL Strategies for Calm, Connected Classrooms*; *Te Ngākau Mārama: Learning the Language of Emotions*; Tūrangawaewae and Fa'avae: Standing Strong in Cultural Identity and Connection; and *The SELf-Aware Kaiako: Growing Hearts and Minds at Kura and Kāinga*. As Terry & Hayfield (2021) suggest, it is important for researchers to take time to thoroughly familiarise themselves with the data, so that by the end of Phase

One, the researcher feels fully acquainted with the data and ready to move onto Phase Two, coding.

Phase Two: Data Coding

Phase Two involved the systematic coding of data. This process requires time to fully engage with and analyse the data at a deep level, and to separate data into easier-to-manage sections relevant to the research aim. Data coding is a way of "labelling or naming a chunk of data" (Terry & Hayfield, 2021, p. 35), involving interpreting, adding meaning, and assigning a code to a section of text. The coding phase is the precursor to assigning themes and is foundational to the development of the themes (Braun & Clarke, 2020).

For this phase of analysis, I re-read each of the transcripts and coded relevant contributions. I continued reading until the next significant comment or data point was found, and then considered if it was related to a previous code, or if a new code should be generated. When selecting code labels, Terry & Hayfield (2021) suggest using a short phrase that captures what that data extract is about. Each data point was manually coded and entered into an Excel spreadsheet. Manually coding the data ensured the data was systematically and thoroughly reviewed (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

Phase Three: Generating Initial Themes From Coded and Collated Data

Analysts must generate themes from the data through crafting and organising raw data into clear and systematic themes (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 63). Phase Three requires the researcher to review the list of codes created in Phase Two and combine

codes that are related or have a pattern to them that answers the research question (Terry & Hayfield, 2021).

Terry and Hayfield (2021) suggest that there are two main steps to develop themes from codes: clustering or promoting. Clustering involves identifying relationships between the codes by organising the codes into clusters that reflect patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I clustered similar or related codes together and began the next step of promoting: the process of taking the clustered codes, looking for the pattern in the cluster, and crafting themes from the dataset. There were 26 codes identified, and from this, four prototype themes were generated that evolved into the four final themes (see Figure 2). The prototype themes were: *Emotional Wellbeing and Regulation are Essential to Learning*; *SEL: The Foundation of Empowerment and Confidence*; *Culture as a Catalyst: Shaping Learning and Shifting Systems*; and *Personal and Professional Growth*.

Figure 2

Final Thematic Map



Note. The initial thematic map shows the four themes in yellow with subthemes in black.

Phase Four: Developing and Reviewing Themes

The main purpose of Phase Four is quality control, or checking that the themes chosen accurately reflect the data extracts (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Once a group of themes have been identified as possible overarching themes, Phase Four can begin. When done well, Phase Four allows the researcher to connect initial themes to collated data and wider data sets to ensure the story is being told and has not shifted too far beyond what is evident in the data (Terry & Hayfield, 2021).

Phase Four requires a review of the themes on two levels – the coded data and overall data sets (Terry & Hayfield, 2021). The coded data level requires reviewing the coded data extracts in each theme and evaluating if the data extracts align and reveal a pattern (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Data that falls outside of the "pattern" may need to be removed from the theme and relocated or re-coded. Additionally, themes may need to be combined or discarded; however, it is important to note that the data should not be forced to conform to a theme (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

Codes were again reviewed and data extracts re-read to ensure the overall sense and essence of the data was captured. Ideally, the data set and analysis resulted in the identification and certification of the most relevant, important and meaningful data (Braun & Clarke, 2012). The four themes that were initially crafted remained the same throughout the four phases, and the data codes were reduced from 26 to 19.

Phase Five: Naming and Defining Themes

Phase Five involves two key processes: developing thematic definitions and naming themes (Terry & Hayfield, 2021). Maguire and Delahunt (2017) describe this phase as the "final refinement of the themes" (p. 33511). At this stage, themes are clearly defined, distinct from one another, and connected to the overall story emerging from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

Developing thematic definitions helps clarify what each theme captures and excludes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Terry and Hayfield (2021) describe these definitions as extended explanations of a theme's central organising concept. This process helps determine whether sufficient data support each theme and often contributes to chapter summaries used to introduce or synthesise findings.

Brief descriptions were written to define each theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A spreadsheet containing four tabs, one for each theme, was used to organise data extracts. Relevant extracts were selected from the coded data spreadsheet and participant interview spreadsheets, then grouped under the appropriate theme. These extracts were used to identify compelling examples that connected the research objectives with the analytic narrative. Theme names were refined to be engaging, informative, and reflective of the concepts represented within each theme (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

Phase Six: Writing the Report

The sixth and final phase of TA is to write and produce a report that is a "compelling story" that creates a strong argument that goes deeper than describing the data but provides deep insights into the substantial elements of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 69). The report for this study is presented in the next chapter.

Chapter Four: Results

> I te pō anake, ka kitea ngā whetū.
> [Only in the darkness can the stars be seen.]
>
> — Traditional whakataukī

I te pō anake ka kitea ngā whetū reminds us that it is only in darkness that the stars can be seen. It teaches that during times of struggle, uncertainty, and hardship, hope and guidance can emerge. Like the stars that guided our ancestors, the wisdom of our tīpuna, the strength of pūrākau, and the connections of whakapapa can help light the way forward. This whakataukī encourages us to trust that even in our darkest moments, there is always a path toward hope and renewal.

The purpose of this study is to explore the impact that the *Ngā Kare ā Roto: The Feelings Within* SEL resources had on primary schools in Aotearoa New Zealand. The chapter summarises the findings from the interviews held with eight kaiako who used the *I Feel* books in their classrooms. The data gathered provided a wealth of information and valuable insights of SEL and the *Ngā Kare ā Roto: I Feel* SEL resource books with specific reference to the use of the five books in the *Ngā Kare ā Roto: I Feel* series –

I Feel Angry; I Feel Panic; I Feel Anxious; You Can Do It: Have a Go!; and Don't Give Up: You Can Be Resilient.

Eight kaiako were interviewed to explore their experience of teaching SEL and implementing the *I Feel* books into the classroom. Four overarching themes were identified from the data. Theme One is named *Manaaki the Moment: SEL Strategies for Calm, Connected Classrooms,* exploring kaiako perceptions and observations of the influence SEL and the *Ngā Kare ā Roto: I Feel* series of books had on tauira wellbeing and engagement. Theme Two is called *Te Ngākau Mārama: Learning the Language of Emotions*, which examines the emotional learning experiences of tauira when engaging with the resources and places kaiako as a strong proponent of SEL in the classroom. Theme Three, *Tūrangawaewae and Fa'avae: Standing Strong in Cultural Identity and Connection* explores the importance of culturally responsive kaiako to SEL. Finally, Theme Four, *The SELf-Aware Teacher: Growing Hearts and Minds at Kura and Kāinga*, explores the professional and personal growth experienced by kaiako through implementing SEL and the *Ngā Kare ā Roto: I Feel* series of books, and the ways this learning influenced their teaching and relationships within kura and kāinga.

Theme One: Manaaki the Moment: SEL Strategies for Calm, Connected Classrooms

Theme One encompasses the importance of SEL as a critical foundation to classrooms that embrace strategies to facilitate emotional intelligence and connection between kaiako, tauira, and the wider classroom. Four subthemes were identified and represent the teacher's experience implementing SEL and the *Ngā Kare ā Roto: I Feel*

series of books to promote calm tauira who are ready to learn and are connected to each other. The subthemes are: *The Tone of the Classroom Sets the Tone for Learning; School Management Promotes Safe Learning Environments*; *Accessible Resources for Children and Adults;* and *Impact and Integration of SEL in the Classroom*.

The Tone of the Classroom Sets the Tone for Learning

Tauira wellbeing and SES were inextricably linked for participants; therefore, kaiako recognised that events that occur outside of the classroom can heavily impact what happens inside of the classroom. Kaiako observed that children arrive at school from different home environments and have different experiences during the school day, along with different SES to cope with challenging interactions and situations. Kaiako noticed that if the classroom environment is unsettled, it is difficult for learning to take place. Kiri shared:

> There's a lot going on during the school day, but this is important learning. If students aren't regulated . . . they can't really do the learning. So, [SEL] is just as crucial [as other learning], and you must make time for it.

Moana's sentiments resonated with Kiri when she reflected:

> It just takes one child to upset the balance of the whole class. Everyone feels it. Children are very sensitive to others' feelings and emotions. If one student isn't in a good state, everyone else starts wondering what happened and how they can help. You just can't start a lesson with all that going on.

To help students settle into the classroom at the start of the day and set the tone for learning, Moana stated that she

> did a short activity in the morning when [students] arrive. Since children come in all sorts of emotional states, it is a great way to start the day. In the *I Feel* series of books, there was a little pūrākau included, stories of someone showing resilience or overcoming something that went wrong. That was great too. Using pūrākau or even a whakataukī in the morning works really well.

Participants emphasised that supporting the development and skill level of a child's social and emotional intelligence is critical to establishing and maintaining the learning environment in the classroom. Setting appropriate developmental expectations for behaviour and learning in the classroom promotes an environment to explore emotions while providing clear pathways to deal with behaviour or emotional upset. Hinemoa discussed several practices to set the tone for the classroom:

> At the start of each term, I set the classroom tone, especially if I have new kids. I make a big effort at the beginning of the year to establish what we value in the classroom to create a positive environment. The *I Feel* resources fit in perfectly with this; they acknowledge the emotions we all feel, sometimes multiple times in a week, and help build a resilient classroom.

At times when children find it difficult to settle into learning, attention activities can help children regain their focus on preparing to learn, helping to establish a calm

and settled tone in the classroom. Mereana agreed that after reading and participating in the *I Feel* series activities:

> [The children] seemed more focused, especially during the last block of the day, which is usually hard for them. We'd usually have younger kids falling asleep on the mat, but that didn't happen as much after adding these calming activities. [The activities] emphasised the importance of spending time on emotions. When kids understand their emotions, there is less confusion, anger, and frustration, which reduces stress for everyone.

Another mechanism used to support setting the tone for the classroom involved using repetitive learning. Moana recognised that "doing something repeatedly in smaller chunks helps children remember and retain it better".

Participants reported that prioritising time for SEL was critical to establishing a classroom environment conducive to learning. When the *I Feel* resources were incorporated at the beginning of the day and in the afternoon, tauira appeared calm, more focused and better prepared to engage in learning activities. This connects to the purpose of this study, and the impact SEL and the *I Feel* SEL resources had on SEL. Overall, participants viewed SEL and the *I Feel* resources as essential components of creating resilient and supportive learning environments. Furthermore, participants emphasised that SEL should be embedded consistently through the school day, providing tauira with regular opportunities to practice and strengthen their SES and reinforce prior learning.

School Management Promotes Safe Learning Environments

Participants reported that the *I Feel* resources were universally applicable, inclusive, and flexible, so they could be tailored to individual preferences and personalities. Participants observed that this promoted personal autonomy and safe learning environments for all students. Anahera shared:

> I feel good about them. They're well suited for our age group, written well, and the children understood them. The visuals were appealing, and a lot of kids tried to relate the characters to people they knew, which helped them make connections.

Participants felt that the support of school management and leadership made implementing SEL programmes such as the *I Feel* resources easier. Anahera felt this was critical to successful student outcomes for all learners when she stated:

> It makes a huge difference [to teachers]. It's encouraging that support is there if we need it. We even have teacher aides who come in to help, even if there isn't a specific student needing one. They try to support us with kids who struggle, so we just have to ask.

Kiri also felt that school leadership and management are foundational to the wellbeing of kaiako and the school in general. Kiri stated:

> Our school is big on managing emotions. We always say we can't teach unless our kids are regulated and understand how to manage their wellbeing. The

> school is supportive of us trying new resources, so we're lucky here. Yes, [the school] are good at checking in on our well-being. We're pretty lucky.

It was observed that some of the participants are specialist teachers who provide support for SEL. In some schools, boards have established roles specifically to focus on promoting social and emotional wellbeing. Leilani, a kaiawhina at a local primary school, explained that

> it is very hard for kids to get help. They have to be at such a high level to qualify to be referred to a psychologist or get outside support, even just RTLB support. The need is so much greater than what can be offered. . . . my job was created within the school and with the kids who were identified as needing support, but not quite high enough to validate a referral, or even when we send the referrals through, getting them confirmed and the child actually being seen.

Leilani's position is unique to the school she works at. Leilani explains:

> I'm actually board-funded because it's not a position the Ministry of Education recognises. Our board is amazing; they really care about the whole needs of the kids here. It's not just about maths and English; there's a whole range of needs to meet . . . working alongside teachers is incredible. They're not just educators; they're also mothers, fathers, counsellors, the list goes on. It's amazing they still find time for the teaching part of their job as well. Our school is fortunate; the board prioritises mental health for children and staff. They see wellbeing and learning as connected; both need to be well for teaching and learning to go well.

In summary, participants felt that support from the board and senior school leadership was crucial to kaiako and tauira success. This subtheme highlighted the lack of support services, assessment funding and qualified specialists to train, assess, and support the needs of the tauira and school. This subtheme confirms that both kaiako and kaiawhina perceived that SEL and the *I Feel* resources were valuable learning tools that could be adapted to diverse student needs and classroom contexts across the participating schools. These findings suggest that SEL and the *I Feel* resources help bridge the gap between the growing need for social and emotional support and the limited availability of assessments, specialised training, and additional staffing, thereby contributing to the creation of safe and supportive learning environments for all tauira.

Accessible Resources for Children and Adults

Several participants found that the *I Feel* series was indelibly wedded to the Aotearoa context and its diverse learners. It was observed from participants' comments that the books are accessible and relatable to a variety of children, which helped tauira connect to the concepts and deepen their emotional understanding. Aroha noted that the *I Feel* resources were

> very helpful. The language is easy for the kids to understand, which makes a big difference. [Students] recognise themselves and laugh about it, which makes it more relatable. The students find the activities fun, and it opens conversation about their feelings.

Participants also found that the images were an important feature that contributed to the learning, as they reflect real children experiencing real emotions and allow children to connect with the information being shared in the books. Mereana found that

> the pictures were very engaging . . . [tamariki from other classrooms would] say things like, “My brother’s in it,” or “I want to see myself in the books”. . . . The texts are rich and meaningful, not like basic readers. They convey a solid message for the kids. I, too, had a great experience. The stories were easy for the kids to understand. . . . It was great for helping them understand their emotions and use strategies to get into the “green zone,” or “happy zone”.

Leilani shared:

> My overall view is that [the *I Feel* series of books] were amazing. I especially loved the real-people images. I’ve got other books that explain anxiety at school, but they’re picture books. Older kids get the message, but it can still feel a bit make-believe or like it only happens to the “special” character. [The *I Feel* books] present feelings as experiences everyone can have; [these feelings are] completely normal, with clear ways to work through them. . . . A sore stomach means they’re sick. It’s hard to explain to kids that it could be worry or anxiety causing the feeling. But the books, with their real-life images of kids holding their tummies, made it easier for them to relate and understand.

Leilani described that real-people images made the *I Feel* books particularly relatable and "normal" to the tauira in her class, as they supported tamariki to connect with the images and to real-life emotions they have experienced and in situations they are familiar with. This made learning accessible, fun, and engaging.

Moana agreed:

> Children don't just feel [emotions] in their head or heart; some feel it in their hands or other parts of the body, so recognising these areas can help them understand what's going on. Even before talking, helping them breathe so they can then verbalise and share what's going on without the first level of emotion taking over . . . [helps] other children understand and respect that, especially when someone is dealing with strong emotions.

Moana explained that tauira in her class did not always connect the way they felt with an emotion. Helping tauira understand that an emotion can be something we feel in our bodies enabled the tauira and others in the class to be patient and respectful while a classmate is learning to regulate their emotions.

Tauira and kaiako used the images as accessible and supportive tools to contextualise social and emotional scenarios and coping strategies. Hinemoa supported the usefulness of the images, activities, and level of information:

> I liked the activities at the back of the books. We did a few of them, like pinpointing where you feel anxiety on a body outline. They could mark it with an X or colour it in. We also did matching games where they had to match facial

> expressions with emotions. Some kids found it tricky because certain expressions looked similar, which was a good discussion point about feeling multiple emotions at once. . . . I was excited to use something new that I could tailor to what felt right for the class's pace. If they were understanding a particular emotion well, like anger, I could build on that with related activities, and they'd feel successful whether they were drawing, writing, or verbalising.

The simple text and images simplify complex emotional concepts and coping strategies into accessible content for young learners. The depth of information contained in the books, along with the learning tools and activities, was highlighted by participants as resources they would like to use to encourage students to explore their emotions.

The *I Feel* series is unique for its use of real images of children, and it is uniquely written by New Zealand authors for New Zealand children, families, and schools. This resulted in participants expressing the relevance of the *I Feel* books to local and cultural contexts. Leilani shared that "knowing the books are [written] by Kiwis for Aotearoa means immediate relevance".

Participants found the *I Feel* resources fun and engaging for tauira. Participants observed tauira being able to connect with the real images of tamariki that looked like them, in scenarios that tauira may have experienced themselves. This made the learning relatable and accessible to all tauira and opened up the opportunity for discussion and analysis of the emotions the tamariki in the books were feeling.

Furthermore, participants explained that the use of real images in real-life situations opened discussion opportunities about emotions such as anger or resilience, and how they might look and feel.

Impact and Integration of SEL in the Classroom

Participants noted that the SEL *I Feel* books used in the classroom encouraged children to explore their emotions. Kaiako commented that the *I Feel* books easily supported and supplemented other SEL programmes that were already being utilised in the classroom. Mereana noted:

> [Tauira are] being better at recognising emotions and strategies, which ties into the "zones of regulation" we teach, although we don't spend much time on it. The books added more depth, especially since some were colour-coded to align with what we teach in health class.

Hinemoa also stated:

> I was excited to see how the content aligns with our "Pause, Breathe, Smile" programme. Strategies like box breathing and having a quiet space are similar, so the kids found it familiar and less shy about practicing the breathing exercises. Initially, getting into "Pause, Breathe, Smile" took practice, but with this, they could explore their emotions a bit deeper.

Hinemoa described other SEL programmes she has already used with her class and was pleased to see how easily resources like the *I Feel* books supported the learning from other programmes. Participants could see the effect the *I Feel* SEL

resources had on tauira. The resources supported deep thinking, critical learning and engagement from tauira in class. Leilani's experience was similar to Hinemoa when she shared that her school

> incorporated the [*I Feel*] books into their programmes. Some were one-on-one sessions. We'd read the book together, then do the activities, or they'd choose one from the list. Other times, I worked with small groups of three or four, especially for the "Have a Go" activities, which worked really well as group tasks where they could make goals together. I think [the *I Feel* resources] can be implemented as part of everyday classroom practice. At our school, we do a lot of PB4L, Positive Behaviour for Learning, with plenty of talk about feelings, how to process them, and what appropriate responses look like. The books and activities fit well within that framework. . . . For me, it slotted straight into my work with existing groups and one-to-one sessions; it became an excellent resource I could bring into programmes already running.

Participants such as Hinemoa and Leilani were pleased to see that alignment between the different SEL programmes, as it allowed them to see how easy it is to build on learning from previous programmes. Participants expressed satisfaction about the ease of combining the resource with frameworks the children were already familiar with. Participants reported that the *I Fee*l resources were accessible and adaptable across a range of learning contexts. The resources were perceived to enhance engagement and deepen tauira understanding of SEL concepts. Participants identified adaptability as an

important characteristic of effective SEL resources and supporting the establishment of calm, culturally responsive, and safe learning environments. Participants felt that the *I Feel* resources aligned with existing classroom programmes, and were therefore viewed as an effective way to strengthen and deepen the development of SEL.

Specific books in the *I Feel* series were identified by participants as particularly impactful in their classrooms and to SEL. Aroha observed that the following books had the most impact on her class:

> The *I Feel Angry* and *You Can Do It: Have a Go!* books were the most popular because they address emotions the kids experience often. *Have a Go* encouraged children to try new things. It helped with confidence, especially in trying sports or new activities.

Mereana also found that:

> The book [*I Feel Angry*] made the most difference. The reason being, a lot of kids told me they felt they weren't allowed to be angry, like it's seen as a negative emotion. . . . [*You Can Do It: Have a Go!*] connected well with hauora, or Māori wellbeing, taking a holistic approach. It was a book that the students really enjoyed and was one the teachers also liked reading because it helped the children understand the message.

Some participants observed that the *I Feel Angry* and the *You Can Do It: Have a Go!* book impacted student emotions the most and encouraged tauira to try new activities. Kaiako expressed that teaching SEL using culturally responsive methods, such as those

provided in *Have a Go*, established an alternative, fun, and enjoyable way for tauira to connect with SEL.

Participants also identified *You Can Do It: Have a Go!* and *Don't Give Up: You Can Be Resilient* as having the most impact on children's SEL. Anahera stated:

> I used the *I Feel Angry* book quite a lot and did some in-depth activities on that. Some of the activities I made up myself. I have about three children who get really affected by anger; anything can set them off. Toward the end of the term, I also started using *I Feel Resilient*.

Leilani expressed:

> Personally, my favourite was the resilience book. Resilience is hard to teach in kindy and help children make the transformation from being scared to "You're fine, off you go." The book did it so well.

Talia shared:

> *You Can Do It: Have a Go!* resonated well, especially with recent experiences like camp and production. We discussed moments they were scared but pushed through.

Participants felt that the *I Feel* resources provided in-depth activities and learning insights that built upon other SEL resources previously taught in the classroom and provided holistic, culturally responsive opportunities for learning. The resources connected directly to experiences and situations tauira were experiencing every day, such as camp and production, while highlighting the appropriate and relatable content

of the books, illuminating the purpose of this study to discover the impact SEL and the *I Feel* resources have on SEL.

Participants further observed that tauira became better regulated, resulting in fewer behavioural incidents occurring. Reductions in behavioural incidents support a conducive learning tone in the classroom. Mereana shared:

> I noticed fewer incidents recorded in *Hero*, our school management system. By incidents, I mean things like anger or children being mean to each other. In Term 1, before we began the study, there were a lot more incidents. [The *I Feel* books have] had a positive impact on behaviour, with fewer incidents to report.

Anahera also noticed:

> This term, I had fewer kids needing to use the calm space I created. I think they're more understanding of their emotions and using strategies to calm down. But the space is still there if needed. Just that there weren't as many physical fights when kids got angry. They were able to stop themselves or move away if they wanted to. They could identify what was making them angry and were able to see others' emotions and strategies to connect with each other in that way.

Participants felt the *I Feel* resources offered significant value in supporting young learners to learn, develop, and practice SES, demonstrated by the observations and outcomes shared by kaiako. The overarching theme *Manaaki the Moment: SEL Strategies for Calm, Connected Classrooms* outlines the care and opportunity SEL provides to help establish a calm and supportive learning environment when the tone of

the classroom is set by tauira when they enter the classroom. Tauira directly impact the tone for learning. In this theme, participants outlined the importance of school management in promoting and supporting safe learning environments for kaiako and tauira. Participants provided evidence of effective school management providing proactive manaakitanga to kaiako and tauira through the provision of specialist teachers and classroom time to teach SEL. Participants shared their observations of the impact the SEL *I Feel* resources had on the classroom and the ease with which they were integrated and used to build upon SEL concepts previously taught to tauira. Overall, participants shared an appreciation and positive regard towards SEL in the classroom and the impact it had on tauira and the participants' own experience with the *I Feel* resources.

Theme Two: Te Ngākau Mārama: Learning the Language of Emotions

Theme Two identifies two subthemes related to tauira learning to regulate their emotions. The title of Theme Two is introduced using the words "te ngākau", meaning "the heart", and "mārama", meaning "understanding" – together meaning "the understanding heart". Kaiako identified that as tauira in their classrooms learnt more about emotions, sometimes referred to as the language of the heart, they were able to learn what the emotion feels like, name the feeling, and then work or tame the emotion. Two subthemes were identified and provide an insight into the participants' experience and observations in the classroom. The subthemes are: *E^3: Exploring and Expressing Emotion* and *Feel It. Name It. Tame It.*

E³: Exploring and Expressing Emotion

Participants discussed how the *I Feel* SEL resources encouraged learners to explore and express the emotions they feel. E³ is significant for SEL, as learning what an emotion feels like – and being able to articulate or name what the emotion is to a kaiako or friend – is evidence of SES development. As tauira explored their emotions and discussed their emotions more openly and regularly, participants reported tauira being better able to identify that what they were feeling was an emotion. Exploring and expressing emotion in this subtheme highlights participants' observations about SEL and the *I Feel* resources. Mereana shared:

> Initially, [the students] were a bit closed off with their emotions. But after we started using the resources, especially drawing activities, they began to understand different emotions and learned strategies to manage them. We even set up a quiet place in the classroom where they could sit silently or count backward if they needed a moment, which was helpful for both the tauira and the kaiako. Other tauira would often add to a peer's response, which was great. It was refreshing not to hear the same responses repeated but rather to see new ideas build off each other.

Participants noted that the content of the *I Feel* books helped tauira deepen their learning about the emotions discussed in the book. Participants further noted that the activities at the back of the books acted as a guide to reinforce learning and provide an extension to the learning discovered in the book. Anahera stated:

> When you refer to something physical, it's a lot more relevant. Sometimes [the tauira] might not understand what their body is telling them, so I'll say, "Listen to your body, what is it telling you?" Or, "Remember the book," and we'll look at the artwork they've done on the walls from the activities. They can look at their work and think, "Oh, we did that in the *I Feel Angry* book." They can also look at each other's work, which helps them understand how others feel. I had one child who wrote down what he hears when he's angry, using symbols for swear words because that's what he hears in his mind. It's his reality. And I know his family doesn't swear at him, so it's something internal. He needs to build up his self-worth.

Participants realised they are an essential part of a tauira's SEL journey and can act as a guide for tauira as they explore, learn, and practice what they have learnt in the SEL sessions and begin to translate the learning into SES development. Participants felt connected to tauira as they helped them connect SEL to real-life situations. As tauira faced challenges in their SEL journey, kaiako were able to share reminders about the SEL from the *I Feel* books.

Participants expressed that some of the books in the *I Feel* series suited some children more than others; however, they felt the *I Feel* resources were adaptable to the different needs of the tauira. Participants identified that within their class, tauira had different levels of SES and learning styles which required a tailored approach to SEL. Moana noticed:

> Certain books worked especially well. In the class I focused on, about half were quiet, deep thinkers . . . the other half, mostly boys, couldn't sit for long, . . . once I noticed I was losing them, I stopped reading every speech bubble and focused on the key points I wanted them to take away. . . . Many of [the students] were struggling emotionally, especially with anger. The *I Feel Angry* book was great; they could give lots of examples of when they felt angry. . . . The worried or shy students responded to the *Have a Go* type books. The boys connected with themes like anger and resilience and could recall times they felt really angry. It even happened during reading, with the anger book, some boys were noisy and the others couldn't hear. We used tips from the book right then by asking, "You're making us angry, what could we do?"

Participants noted that the *I Feel Angry* book was most impactful to a majority of the tauira in their classes. Participants reported the difficulty tauira felt with angry emotions. Kaiako felt they were able to provide support to their students by using the resources provided in the *I Feel* books and other SEL activities they had undertaken. Participants also felt confident to adapt the SEL resources to the learning level of the tauira in their class. Participants noted they could relate SEL to real-life, in-the-moment examples with their tauira to help reinforce learning and provide a safe environment for tauira to practice SEL skill development.

Participants felt that the *I Feel Angry* book facilitated deeper discussions about anger and helped a common language evolve amongst tauira, which supported closer

connection and understanding amongst students in the classroom. Talia, a deputy principal and specialist SEL teacher at her school, shared:

> *I Feel Angry* especially brought things to the surface for some kids . . . We even had a recent incident where a boy in class panicked and became violent. We talked about the strategies afterward, reinforcing the importance of going to a safe place or getting a teacher if they feel overwhelmed. . . . If I were a full-time classroom teacher, I'd be reinforcing that language consistently. The shared language helps create a sense of unity and understanding. They've encouraged my students to feel proud of who they are.

Participants remarked that tauira learned best from real-life situations and interaction. When an incident occurred, kaiako would use the situation as an SEL opportunity. Talking about emotions and the challenges all tauira experience fostered a sense of unity and belonging amongst tauira, deepening their connection and willingness to work together and support each other. Participants observed that as tauira connected with each other, it removed barriers and labels that used to exist, and it encouraged pride amongst tauira to be who they are, that negative emotions do not define them.

Observing and helping students connect with the *I Feel* resources empowered tauira to learn new SEL tools and strategies to manage their emotions. Hinemoa expressed:

> I didn't want any of them to feel like they had to say, "This is how my family does it," or that they needed to bring those comparisons into it. I kept it focused on what the resources provided and let them see these tools as something for them personally. For some of the kids, I could tell it was like a lightbulb moment; they realised they could practise these strategies independently and that it was okay to explore them. Sometimes it's empowering just to know you have the option to use these tools for yourself, without needing them to align with family norms or expectations. You were helping them build their own toolkit, so they can decide when and how to use it. . . . It would reinforce that message, especially for some of the kids who feel like one mistake defines them.
>
> Teaching resilience helps them understand that it's about bouncing back and that mistakes are a part of learning. It gives the kids something concrete to do to remind them that they're building resilience and that they're learning from each experience. For a lot of them, it's like learning to trust that they won't be punished for every little misstep; it's a really empowering shift.

Participants shared that tauira in their classes did not always understand the emotions they were feeling or how to manage them. Moana explained that it is a valuable SES to be able to recognise emotions when other people are experiencing them:

> It also helps to recognise what someone else might be feeling and either help them or give them space. I often tell children, "You can see he's getting angry; don't make it worse. Give him space." It works both ways.

Participants noted that as students were encouraged to explore their emotions, it became easier for them to identify the emotion in themselves and in others. Moana highlighted that SEL in her class includes supporting tauira to explore the emotion and for other tauira to give space to the individual to experience and then talk it through with someone if needed.

Tauira were observed to be hesitant to talk about their emotions; however, participants felt it was important to encourage tauira to explore their emotions as a critical step towards developing SES. Participants expressed a deep desire for tauira to have the autonomy to explore and use SEL tools and strategies when and how they needed them – at home, at school, with friends or parents. Importantly, supporting tauira to understand that they can have autonomy in the way they express emotion; they do not need to follow whānau, culture, or community examples. Participants also observed that tauira need reminding that they are learning from the experiences; they are not expected to be perfect, but if they keep practising and being resilient, it will help them get better at regulating their emotions.

Participants felt that the *I Feel* series encouraged students to explore the emotion they were learning about. Participants reported that the *I Feel Angry* book and *You Can Do It: Have a Go!* were the most popular books in the series. Participants

expressed that the popularity of these two books may have been because most of the tauira are dealing with concerns around these two emotions. Hinemoa explained:

> I spent quite a bit of time creating a safe space for practising breathing and such, and this was quite good since it included a lot of visuals to consolidate that. We used an activity with thumbs up and thumbs down, showing a card with a kid's facial expression and asking, "Does this look angry?" It sparked a lot of conversation. Some would say, "No, they don't look angry," or, "They could be angry but not showing it" . . . It's about looking deeper than just a "bad day" or "annoying behaviour" and instead considering what might be going on for them. The [*I Feel*] books became such a special resource in our class. I'd sometimes place one near a child and let them know it was there if they needed it. A little girl once picked up the *I Feel Panic* book on her own when she was having a tough moment. It was amazing to see her seek out that support herself.

Participants observed that SEL resources and the *I Feel* books provided activities that deepened SEL and empowered students to participate in open discussion about emotions. Tauira would share insights into emotions or ask questions to help them better understand; however, it was difficult for some students at first, as tauira felt that some emotions were not allowed to be spoken about, like anger, because they were "bad". A tauira being unwilling to speak about emotions like anger may indicate that the tauira does not know how to speak about them, because it is not something they usually do. For many cultures, anger is not something you show in certain places as it

can be deemed undesirable. As students developed the ability to identify what emotion they were feeling, the students were able to choose how they could respond and help themselves cope with the emotion. Participants found that a shared language developed amongst the tauira in their classes as they learned about their emotions, resulting in students being able to more easily identify the emotion, look at what options they have to deal with the emotion, and express how they are feeling to others. This will be discussed further in the next theme.

Participants acknowledged that the *I Feel* series is a catalyst for a collaborative education partnership between kaiako and tauira. The books in the *I Feel* SEL series encouraged children to improve their emotional literacy by learning about anger, anxiety, panic, and resilience; however, the kaiako was the mechanism to engage learning, as kaiako encouraged tauira to try the activities and review what they had been taught. Participants found that as tauira engaged with the learning, their confidence and their ability to communicate and articulate their emotions with teachers, peers, and parents facilitated deeper interpersonal relationships. Kiri felt that:

> The kids got better at understanding emotions like “anxious” and “resilience”. They could already name basic feelings, but after using the resources, they started using these more complex terms. They could also identify strategies to help them get back to a calmer state. Some of my high-needs students really liked the anger book. They related to it, saying, "I feel like that, and my face goes

> red when I'm angry." It was great to talk about handling anger when they were calm.

In the moment when an emotion is being experienced strongly, it can be difficult to educate or help children understand what they are feeling. Participants found that talking about emotions and SEL was more successful when tauira were calm, and the tone of the classroom was conducive to learning. Participants found that a key learning for tauira was to help them understand that emotions can appear and feel different to everyone, such as having red, flushed cheeks when experiencing anger. After reading the *I Feel Angry* book with her class, Mereana shared:

> We'd ask, "What does angry look like?" and they'd look at each other's faces. It was interesting because some just sit there with a straight face. To them, that's what anger looks like, even if it's more internal.

Participant experiences such as that expressed by Mereana above highlight the importance and effectiveness of a kaiako-tauira collaborative approach to learning, as designed in the SEL *I Feel* resources. Participants felt that the SEL books and activities in the *I Feel* resources encouraged questions, provided real-life examples and images of tamariki experiencing those emotions, and promoted discussion amongst the class, making it easier to engage with in-depth SEL conversations with tauira.

Participants also noticed that tamariki from various ethnic backgrounds experienced and expressed emotions differently to other ethnicities. When children shared their emotional experiences in class, other students offered to help or support,

thereby building stronger peer and interpersonal relationships. For example, Moana shared that during one classroom discussion:

> One boy, Indian, shared an experience. I've noticed many Indian students at my school don't do as much gymnastics or sport. He said he was too scared to climb the ladder on the playground. I was on duty once; he asked me to help. He was anxious and shaky; he really related to [*I Feel Anxious*] and also [*You Can Do It: Have a Go!*]. We talked about what he could do and used some of the tips [from the *I Feel* books]. He suggested asking an adult; I was there, so we tried just the first step. Then one more, and so on, until his confidence ran out. When we shared it in class, a friend offered to help him next time.

Participants observed that some tamariki from various ethnic backgrounds find some emotions more challenging than others. Moana shared that she was able to use learning from *You Can Do It! Have a Go* to help the tauira explore the emotion and to remind, encourage, and provide real-life implementation and SES development of that tauira. This connects with the study purpose of identifying the impact SEL has on tauira.

It was also noted that a collaborative learning and support approach developed between kaiako and tauira and amongst the peers in the classroom as SEL and SES developed. Participants found that the *I Feel* activities and discussions from the back of the books supported the implementation of SEL in real-life situations where tauira were faced with SEL challenges in real-time, a significant impact of SEL exploration. It was also observed that the SEL learning style promoted in the *I Feel* resources supported a

collaborative teaching-learning style in the classroom amongst kaiako and tauira and between tauira. Participants found that SEL and SES development worked best in real-time situations rather than during classroom SEL sessions. Participants encouraged tauira to explore their emotions and used the resources to help promote discussion and provide visual prompts and easy SEL reminders to support tauira throughout the day. Participants felt the *I Feel* SEL resources needed to be adapted to the varying learning needs of tauira in the classroom. A key learning was that everyone experiences the same emotion differently, for example tauira A will experience anxiety in different ways to tauira B. As participants were consistent with their use of the *I Feel* SEL resources, tauira became more willing to explore their emotions and then more adept at expressing how they felt. Participants also noted that as tauira became better at identifying the emotion in themselves, they were better able to identify the emotion in others.

Feel It. Name It. Tame It.

This subtheme focuses on the tauira's experience with the *I Feel* SEL resources and learning to let themselves feel the emotion so they can learn to identify the emotion. As tauira learned what the emotion felt like, they became better at identifying the emotion, and, through SEL and the *I Feel* SEL books, were able to choose an SEL tool that could help them deal with the emotion. Learning how an emotion feels when it first begins and learning to regulate the emotion before it develops into a big emotion is a key learning in this section and demonstrates the impact SEL has on tauira.

Participants noticed that tauira would consistently refer to language from the *I Feel* books for support in learning to identify and regulate their emotions and navigate the SEL learning space. Hinemoa shared:

> [The *I Feel* SEL resources] encouraged them to think a bit deeper about emotions. Our school doesn't use PB4L, but many of my teacher friends do at their schools. . . . This initiative has worked well . . . Five-year-olds were learning to identify their own facial expressions. Even the hidden aspects of feelings can surface through these discussions. The resources helped students more easily and quickly identify their emotions. . . . I noticed they were able to recognise facial expressions and feelings, thanks to how well these were described in the resources.
>
> There were relatable scenarios, too, like waiting in line or someone smashing their blocks, which happens a lot in class! They resonated with these, leading to some "Aha!" moments as we read through. We'd stop and discuss each scenario, and I'd ask if anyone wanted to share. Some would say, "Oh, that happened to me at lunchtime!" It was great because it created a safe space for sharing. With younger students, they're beginning to identify their feelings and learning strategies to manage them. They can say, "I feel . . ." and then try techniques to help themselves. It's different with older kids who might find it harder to express.

Participants reported observing tauira as young as five years old learning that even if someone is feeling the same emotion, the emotion can look different and have different levels of intensity for everyone. It was also observed that the more detailed the resource was about the emotion – using facial expressions, body positioning and even relatable situations – the better tauira were able to identify and learn new information about emotions. Further, participants felt that the *I Feel* SEL resources supported in-depth discussions and curiosity about emotion and why people react the way they do in particular situations. Kaiako noted that the classroom became a safe space where tauira could share their vulnerable feelings and realise that other tauira had similar emotions to themselves, providing a place of emotional connection between tauira. The activities in the *I Feel* SEL resources contributed to robust class discussions that solidified the learning material and made SEL concepts relatable to real-life situations. Participants reported that tauira came away from these SEL discussions with ideas on how they could help themselves the next time they experience the emotions discussed.

Participants noticed that teaching tauira about SEL introduced new words and definitions to their vocabulary. As a result, the children's SEL vocabulary improved, and this also impacted the way the children interacted with peers and kaiako. Leilani shared:

> What I noticed was the language helped kids who [come to] see me without a clear problem. Previously, I'd guide them to identify the emotion and how to work through it. After [reading and completing activities in] the books, they could often

identify it themselves; it gave them more autonomy. I'd say, "We've been working on these books; can you identify a feeling linked to one of them?" If they said "angry" or "anxious", I'd ask, "Do you remember what the book suggested? How might that feeling show up in your body?" They'd respond with things like, "My tummy hurt; I thought I was sick, maybe I was worried." Then we'd choose a strategy together. It put them in charge of their experience.

The sore tummy one comes up at least five times a day, every day. Kids don't always understand that a feeling can be about mental health or worry. The stomach pain is real to them, so they think they're sick. That's why I love the books' photos of real kids showing those feelings. I can explain the mind-body link, but when they see a real child holding their tummy and describing the same experience, it lands better. It normalises it: "This boy or girl looks like me and feels like I do." That's easier to understand than an adult saying, "It's worry; it will go away." The visuals help bridge that gap while the pain feels physical and real.

Participants observed a new SEL language evolving amongst tauira that supported tauira in identifying what they were feeling and being able to name the emotion. Kaiako prompts support tauira to connect the conceptual learning in the book with real-life situations and scenarios, bringing SEL into reality. Participants confirmed that the *I Feel* resources made education about the mind-body concept easy and relatable, as tauira could see images of real children experiencing physical pain from an emotion. This new learning helped tauira understand that a sore tummy might be an indication of anxiety

or panic. A remarkable impact of the participants' observation of the *I Feel* resources was that it put tauira in charge of their learning experience, giving them autonomy and the ability to govern their emotional experience.

Participants identified the impact the *I Feel* SEL resources had on emotional regulation and behavioural change. Anahera shared:

> One of my kids last term would get angry if anything happened to him. A lot of the time, he'd end up throwing things, pushing tables, getting in people's faces. I'd send him out to the bathroom, and I could hear him kicking the wall a lot. But since reading these books, he's started to identify when he's getting angry. I'm also more in tune with him now, too. When I can hear him starting to get heightened by other people's comments, I'm like, "Hey, remember that," trying to prompt him to use the tools he's learned, like getting a drink of water or going for a walk, before he gets too upset. . . He's starting to identify it himself now. He'll come over and say, "I need to go for a walk," or "I need to sit in the room." He'll go and sit in there, and I'll know that's what he's doing. Other times, depending on how he comes in during the day, he won't throw anything or kick anything—he'll just use words when he's angry. For him, that's a huge step".

Moana shared that as she utilised the *I Feel* resources in her class, tauira were more willing to explore their emotions and how they manifest in their bodies. Moana shared:

> It was interesting children feel it in different places. Not just the head or heart; some feel it in their hands, etc. You can look at different parts of the body, not just the face. Those other body cues help you realise what's going on. Even before talking; breathe, help them breathe. Then they can verbalise and share what's going on without that first surge of emotion.

Participants noticed that after using the *I Feel* SEL resources, kaiako felt better engaged and knowledgeable about tauira emotional needs. By observing tauira body language, kaiako became better at reading emotion in the body, which gave kaiako an insight into a tauira's wellbeing.

Participants noted that the *I Feel* SEL resources empowered students to choose alternate responses in situations that would normally cause them to become angry. Anahera shared:

> I have one student who tends to say things just to irritate others, and for him, I think this helped others understand that what he says is just his opinion. It might affect them one day, but not another. So he doesn't have the power to upset them as easily anymore. Before we used these resources, he'd say things that would always rile up a particular child. Now, that child understands the strategies and just moves away, and others who aren't as affected have also learned to move away, leaving [that child] by himself when he acts that way. He's starting to realise that his behaviour impacts others. It's given the other kids the power to make that change. He's a big kid in my class and can come across as

> intimidating, but these kids aren't silly. They know they can move away if they don't like it, and it gives them the power to make that choice.
>
> Before using the resources, some kids would swear, throw things, push tables or chairs over, and even go outside to kick walls. It would take them a long time to calm down, and sometimes I'd have to send them to the office because I had the rest of the class to manage. After using the resources, they were able to identify their emotions and knew what strategies to use to work through them. Sometimes it worked really well, sometimes it didn't, but most of the time, they managed. If they couldn't, I'd set the class on an activity and walk through it with them.

Anahera highlights through this example that tauira learned autonomy to move away from unsettling situations rather than to default to their typical angry response. The *I Feel* SEL resources empowered tauira to understand that their actions impact others and that other tauira have the choice to remove themselves from the situation. Participants felt the SEL in the *I Feel* books supported tauira in learning alternative ways to respond to situations, and although SEL calming activities did not work every time, participants saw progress and evidence of SES development in the tauira's ability to name and tame their emotions.

Participants noticed that there were gender differences between the way boys and girls engaged with SEL. Hinemoa shares:

> Among the girls, especially, I noticed they became better at expressing themselves without escalating. They'd use phrases like, "I'm feeling upset because . . ." instead of just reacting. It was like they had the language to articulate their emotions, and I think it improved their relationships. They were able to discuss their feelings rather than letting things build up into bigger conflicts.
>
> With the boys, it was a bit different, but they still benefited. They were generally less verbal at first, but over time, they started using phrases they'd learned, like "I'm frustrated" or "I need a break." One of my boys who'd usually bottle things up began talking to me directly when he was upset, which was a big shift. The resources really helped foster that connection and openness. It brought a whole new level of communication and understanding. It really strengthened the classroom as a community.

Participants noticed that the girls began expressing themselves openly with others rather than allowing their emotions to escalate. The boys seemed to initially take time to become familiar and confident with the learning. As the SEL continued, tauira began to use new SEL phrases and words to express themselves and invite conversation with other tauira, resulting in connection and openness in the classroom.

While the *I Feel* resources are targeted at children aged 4–8 years old, some teachers used them with older children. Leilani shared that she used the resources with a boy in Year 6 who was 10 years old:

> We played a game first, so he could regulate, then I read the book. He said it seemed “a bit babyish”, so we used the discussion questions instead. He didn’t want to talk at first, but the questions opened him up . . . we were able to unpack the sequence and identify better choices. When he arrived, he only wanted to calm down; the questions helped him express what happened.

Participants, including Leilani, noted that the *I Feel* resources were adaptable to varying ages, gender and SES amongst tauira in their classes. Participants further noted that the adaptability of the *I Feel* resource meant kaiako-tauira collaboration and innovation supported tauira when they felt overwhelmed.

The purpose of this subtheme is to highlight the impact the *I Feel* SEL resources had on participants in regard to increasing tauira ability to feel an emotion, acknowledge what the emotion is, name it, then work to tame it using a SEL tool or strategy. Participants reported that the *I Feel* SEL resources contributed to the development of a shared SEL language in the classroom, which increased tauira understanding of the mind-body connection and the influence emotions have on wellbeing. Participants also observed improved emotional awareness and empathy, with tauira demonstrating greater recognition of others’ feelings and the importance of allowing others space to process emotions. Although some kaiako noted gender differences in engagement, the *I Feel* books were viewed as positively impactful to tauira SEL development. Overall, participants reported that as tauira improved their SES

and literacy, relationships and the sense of community within the classroom were strengthened.

Theme Three: Tūrangawaewae and Fa'avae: Standing Strong in Cultural Identity and Connection

Tūrangawaewae in te ao Māori refers to the place where one has the right to stand. A place where there is kinship or a sense of belonging. Fa'avae in Samoan culture means the foundation or base. Theme Three focuses on the importance of cultural identity and connection in SEL. A tauira's cultural identity and sense of belonging are important to the way tauira view, interact with, and understand the world, and it is a foundational aspect of SEL. Aotearoa is a multicultural nation that brings many benefits and complexities to the learning environment. Overall, gaining insight into a tauira's cultural identity provides an opportunity for kaiako to tailor teaching practices to improve learning experiences and education outcomes for Māori and Pasifika tauira. Two subthemes were identified as part of this theme and are presented as: *Connecting Culture and Classroom*, outlining the importance of the kaiako and the classroom environment being culturally safe and responsive to the needs of tauira, and *Building Relationships and Learning in the Classroom*.

Connecting Culture and Classroom

Classrooms across Aotearoa New Zealand are diverse and varied. SEL resources need to be adaptable and culturally responsive for this purpose. Participants reported

that having a kaiako who was from the same or similar culture to the students in the classroom was beneficial to SEL outcomes. Leilani explained:

> A Māori teacher might have more cultural sensitivity and better connections with the children, which strengthens the relationship. A Māori teacher may bring more cultural sensitivity and stronger connections with whānau, which strengthens relationships with tamariki. European teachers are often very responsive to students' needs, but I notice Māori teachers tend to weave whānau in more naturally, even simple habits like chatting at drop-off and pick-up.

Anahera agreed, stating:

> I think having a Māori teacher teaching Māori children creates a better connection, as they can understand where these children come from, whereas teachers from different backgrounds may not fully relate.

Furthermore, Aroha stated:

> They know I understand them because I grew up with similar experiences. They relate to me when I share stories from my own childhood. I speak to some of [the students] in Samoan, especially when it helps them understand. . . . [The books have helped] in understanding and valuing emotions differently than I was taught growing up. Before [we used the books], [the children] would often act out, but now they have tools to express themselves without aggression.

Participants emphasised that the benefits of having a kaiako with the same cultural background as tauira in their class include the possibility of shared ethnic language and

their ability to relate SEL concepts to the tauira's worldview. However, having a kaiako with a common cultural background in every class is not always possible. Anahera noted:

> It probably does help when Pasifika students have a teacher they can connect with culturally, though that's not always possible. I bring my cultural understanding to the role, which shapes how I connect with the tamariki.

Kaiako with a shared worldview as tauira in their class promote a deeper level of understanding by using indigenous knowledge, common language, and the ability to relate SEL concepts to cultural knowledge. While it is not always possible to have kaiako with the same background, Anahera highlights the ability of kaiako to engage with cultural ways of knowing to enhance their teaching practice. In the absence of kaiako with shared cultural background, Mereana shared:

> The cultural background of the teacher didn't matter, but having bilingual teachers enhanced the learning and added another dimension. . . . the use of different languages in the classroom helps students see the connections between the cultures and experiences of students: it built connections and showed the shared humanity across cultures.

For some participants such as Mereana, exposure to multiple languages and cultural ethnicities in teaching staff enhanced the learning experience for tauira in the classroom. Mereana reported diversity in the teaching staff promoted an increase in

connection and an opportunity for tauira to recognise similarities in culture and humanity regardless of cultural or ethnic identity.

While Mereana reported diversity in teaching staff and tauira being beneficial for intercultural learning and exchange, participants recognised ongoing concerns regarding the challenging social circumstances many Māori and Pasifika tauira face on a daily basis. As stated in the literature review and as evidenced by participants, social circumstances experienced by these groups can impact learning. Anahera shared that, in her experience:

> Teaching Māori tamariki, many of whom come from low socioeconomic backgrounds, is challenging because they often start on the back foot. They're dealing with low self-esteem, resilience issues, and anger, and we're trying to prepare them to take on a world governed by sectors that often don't consider their backgrounds or culture.

While participants taught across various age groups, some also teach in te reo Māori or Pasifika bilingual units. Participants expressed unique concerns regarding the lived experience of some of the Māori and Pasifika tauira they teach. Impacts of colonisation, intergenerational trauma and systems designed without consideration for their cultural context can present barriers to navigating services for support. Participants expressed the increasing need for kaiako to be builders of mana, resilience and confidence in children as well as the normal everyday educational curriculum. To help mitigate the effects of socioeconomic disadvantage and other factors that

negatively impact a tauira's ability to learn, it can be helpful to provide an example of an adult of the same culture who utilises the SEL tools. Kaiako therefore play a critical role in a tauira's life if the adults in their home are unregulated. Hinemoa suggests:

> Seeing someone who shares similar cultural values and respects their background gives them that extra layer of comfort. It also gives their families peace of mind knowing there's someone who understands their unique perspectives.

For the majority of the participants, the *I Feel* resources assisted teachers from varying backgrounds and cultural groups to cultivate and strengthen connections with students in culturally relevant and appropriate ways, promoting positive learning environments for tamariki Māori and their peers. Talia shared that culture has perhaps indirectly impacted her teaching and how she related to tauira: "Many of our most challenging tauira are Māori and Pasifika, who often face generational trauma. I think these resources resonate deeply with them".

Kaiako recognised the many challenges their Māori and Pasifika students faced outside of school and acknowledged the ways this impacted them. The *I Feel* resources provided a means by which to develop tools for students to cope with the challenges they are facing outside and inside the classroom. "Challenging tauira", as termed by Talia, being of Māori and Pasifika heritage, highlights the challenge some kaiako experience when dealing with Māori and Pasifika in the classroom. The *I Feel* resources provide a multicultural resource for children of any ethnicity, as they deal directly with

SEL challenges and provide tools for kaiako and tauira to use in real-life contexts, supporting the scaffolding of SES development as tauira learn and build SEL literacy. The resources also feature Māori and Pasifika tauira in the images, which is a unique feature of the *I Feel* SEL resources.

Participants reported that SEL resources, such as the *I Feel* series, were accessible, adaptable, and relatable for classroom teaching and supported the development of resilience. The *I Feel* resources were reported to be mana-enhancing and nurtured interpersonal relationships with peers, kaiako, and whānau. The provision of these resources that reflect the lived experiences of Māori and Pasifika children and their families is an important milestone in ensuring that all learners are provided opportunities to connect to the concepts being taught. Participants explained that teaching Māori tauira requires more effort and connection to establish a successful learning environment and relationship. Anahera explained:

> I ended up translating what I knew into Māori, so they could understand it better and connect it to their worldview. [The students] could connect more, especially when we talked about Ranginui and Papatūānuku, for example. We also brought in stories like Tūmatauenga, the god of war, relating him to challenges. They could connect better with those references. When we talked about feelings, for example, I had them translate the English words into Māori as well, so they could understand and relate to it more deeply. It gave more depth to the kōrero . . .

> It's not just about teaching; it's about rebuilding mana and ensuring they feel seen and understood. Ideally, these resources would also be bilingual, making an even deeper impact in connecting with the children from a behavioural management standpoint; there is a unique complexity in supporting our Māori students. [Some teachers] don't fully grasp the Māori worldview that many of us Māori teachers understand and bring to our teaching.

As expressed by Anahera, the *I Feel* resources were adapted to provide an avenue for tauira Māori to connect SEL concepts within a Māori worldview, and they used Māori pūrākau to help tauira deepen their understanding and learning of the SEL concepts being taught. Engaging tauira to help translate the emotion words into te reo Māori engaged them in the learning further and deepened their understanding so the terminology became accessible and relatable to them from a te ao Māori lens.

Kaiako Māori stated that in their classrooms, their Māori worldview informs how they prepare and run their classes. Anahera shared:

> I loved the inclusiveness and the message that if it's a negative emotion, it won't last forever; here's what we can do. If teachers have the time, focusing on one emotion each week lets kids really feel it, name it, and learn from it. I'd probably say again it connects to my knowledge – the cultural understanding I bring in – and shapes how I teach and relate. I see it in the study and across school life. Māori and Pasifika children often already carry tikanga and pūrākau within their upbringing, so it can feel familiar. The strongest eagerness to learn about Māori

> culture and tikanga often shows up in non-Māori students, including Indian and Asian students, who join kapa haka or choose Māori history/local events for inquiry projects. I love that Māori culture is for everyone; you don't have to be Māori to value tikanga Māori.

Participants commented that te ao Māori themes were reflected in the *I Feel* SEL resources. Kaiako expressed that it is necessary to adjust the learning environment to meet the needs of tauira, rather than expecting tauira to adjust to the space and teaching styles. The benefits of basing learning on a te ao Māori worldview apply to non-Māori as well. Kaiako discussed the enrichment tauira experience when kaiako of varying cultures are present in the classroom.

Participants identified the difference when viewing SEL resources from a Māori or Pasifika worldview and that cultural norms dictate the way children respond to and communicate their emotions. Hinemoa shared:

> In our [Pasifika] culture, we often don't show our emotions openly. It's something we've learned to suppress or hide . . . I could see that suppressing emotions was something ingrained, maybe a learned behaviour. For some, there's this notion of "you don't show it", whether happy or sad.

Leilani noted that Māori students express their emotions in different ways to other tauira in her class:

> Every child is different, but overall I notice many Māori children have lower emotional vocabulary; they tend to show feelings more than talk them out. . . .

> I also see some whakamā around talking about feelings; it can feel "uncool". [Pākehā tauira] can talk for themselves, stand up for themselves, articulate their feelings, and move on. I see that's a bit more of a struggle in some of our Māori and Pacific kids. Or even the culture sometimes, it's embarrassing to talk about that, or it's not cool to talk about that. So I guess it's about normalising it for all, you know. It doesn't matter where you are or what culture you're from.

Participants observed that Māori and Pasifika tauira often express emotions through their actions rather than discussing them openly. It was unclear whether this reflects limited emotional vocabulary or cultural norms, such as emotions being considered tapu or feelings of whakamā. As Leilani and Hinemoa noted, Māori may be less likely to verbalise emotions, but this does not mean they experience them any less than other tauira. Rather, as highlighted in Theme Two, emotions may be experienced and expressed with differing levels of intensity.

Safe learning environments have been established as necessary for SEL. Hinemoa expressed the importance of "reminding them that school is a safe place, and we're here to support them throughout the day if they need it". Participants reiterated that tauira recognising school as a safe haven for learning is key to SES development. Providing an environment where tauira feel safe to express and practice SES in the presence of a supportive adult figure helps tauira see the classroom as a safe space for learning and being comfortable to have vulnerable conversations with trusted kaiako and peers who are also engaging in SEL.

Reflecting on the ways the *I Feel* resources support cultural connections and the inherent benefits of those connections, Talia shared the story of a boy from her school named John (pseudonym):

> Last year, John expressed a lot of shame about being Māori. Since using these books, he's taken on a lead role as Māui in our school production and even wore tā moko on stage. It was a transformative moment for him. The books have had a profound impact on this boy's self-esteem and identity.

Participants observed that the *I Feel* SEL resources connected tauira to culture while building SES, confidence and self-worth in tauira. Finding a sense of belonging and pride in who you are empowers individuals beyond their own belief. When participants supported tauira to connect with Māori culture, it was reported that cultural identity became a celebrated and nurtured concept. Each of the kaiako spoke about the value of fostering cultural connections as a deepening of the learning experience for tauira. The conversations encompassed elements such as shared ancestry, cultural heritage, history, traditions, and language, as well as shared behaviours, beliefs, values, and practices. The wider understanding of culture and cultural connection fostered respect and connection with others.

Embracing cultural diversity enabled kaiako to strengthen connections and better support tauira SEL. The *I Feel* resources helped kaiako engage with learners at their level of understanding while incorporating culturally relevant concepts in te reo Māori and te ao Māori that all tauira could relate to. Kaiako view the *I Feel* SEL resources

as comprehensive and valuable for reinforcing cultural inclusion and shared pūrākau, while building common connection, a sense of belonging, and relationships amongst tauira, reducing social and cultural barriers.

Building Relationships and Learning in the Classroom

Sharing of values was a key component to facilitating relationships and connections amongst tauira and between tauira and kaiako. Kiri stated:

> My openness and willingness to share my own experiences helped the kids connect with me. It showed them I'm also human. I have feelings and need strategies, too. . . . When I share my feelings and emotions, it puts me on their level. They see that I understand their emotions, and I have my own to manage as well. Sharing personal stories shows them that even adults experience anger or sadness, but we use strategies to manage it.

A critical observation made by participants was the importance of classroom discussion in building relationships amongst tauira. Participants reported tauira and kaiako relationships developed when vulnerable sharing and deep conversations took place during SEL discussion sessions. When kaiako shared their personal experiences, tauira expressed amazement that even adults are still learning emotional regulation. Such experiences humanised SEL.

In some classrooms, participants reported tauira being more engaged with their learning and each other. Talia shared that the *I Feel books* "seem to have contributed to happier and more engaged children, which helps with peer interactions". Participants

expressed seeing engagement and a general sense of happiness increase in the classroom after participating in the *I Feel* SEL sessions. This could be attributed to the deeper relationships and sense of trust and belonging that were established amongst tauira.

Participation in the *I Feel* resource sessions encouraged and increased participation and meaningful relationship development in classroom activities. Kiri reported:

> Teaching emotions explicitly helped the kids understand each other. For example, if someone needed to go to the calming down tent, they knew why, because it was one of the strategies we discussed. If a student feels sad or "in the blue zone", we have a strategy where they can go to the calming down tent. They understand they need to respect that space, waiting until the person there feels ready to come out, which has fostered better awareness of others' feelings.
>
> Students helped other students during learning tasks. One student, who struggles with certain letters, was encouraged by another, who said, "You're being resilient. You keep trying even though it's hard." It was a great moment, especially when the student later showed me proudly what she accomplished.

Participants reported the impact the *I Feel* SEL resources had on tauira SES development and SEL through identifying when their peer showed resilience or needed space to practice emotional regulation. Participants further explained that tauira demonstrated the increase in SEL through their actions, comments, ability to identify

emotions, and how the emotion was being shown. This example reported by participants demonstrates the impact the *I Feel* SEL resources had on the development of tauira social and emotional literacy, SES, and ability to build and strengthen positive relationships amongst the class.

In one classroom, Leilani noticed tauira thinking through SEL concepts and how to apply them in real-life situations:

> In groups I run for tamariki who lack social skills or the basics of making friends, they're always respectful to me, but in groups, each child can act like it's a one-to-one session, waiting to speak rather than listening. The books shifted that because the kōrero touched deeper feelings; students began pausing to listen to one another instead of just waiting for their turn. They began linking experiences: "I saw that happen to you: that must have made you angry. It reminds me of when someone did this to me, and I felt upset." They started talking to each other instead of only sharing with me. . . .
>
> I loved the prompt about teaching others resilience. It took the heat off the child, not "I'm being judged on my resilience," but "How would you teach someone else?" They'd suggest strategies for a friend while quietly thinking, "Maybe I could try that too." Bigger feelings sometimes surfaced during the end-of-book discussions or activities, when students shared personal experiences of anger. Not anger in the room, but stronger emotions as they remembered

> situations, especially with older siblings. That's actually ideal; it lets us use real experiences to practise strategies.

Participants noted that the *I Feel* resources changed the way tauira connected and showed respect and support to their peers. An improvement in active listening skills was reported along with the ability for tauira to relate their peers' experience to their own. Tauira were able to articulate and show empathy in the group. The *I Feel* resources also prompted them to look at further SES beyond themselves and to consider the impact they can have on others. Participants noted that the kaiako ability to support emotional discussion is an important SES to possess, as the discussions raised strong emotions and provided opportunity for teachers to work with tauira to help unpack the emotions as the emotion was experienced.

Participants noticed that relationships between kaiako, tauira and whānau were also impacted. Kiri shared:

> It helped with the kids and with parents. I shared what books we were reading each week through *Seesaw*, our communication app with whānau. One girl in my class, who's very shy, ended up reading aloud to the whole class after learning about resilience. I shared that with her parents, and they were so proud. This helped me connect with students and their families. . . . I couldn't believe she wanted to do it in front of the class, and then she asked again! It really showed her growth.

Participants reported the *I Feel* SEL resources having an impact on confidence and emotional resilience, which extended to relationships and the development of complementary values, such as self-worth and confidence, that had far-reaching effects on tauira learning and wellbeing. Participants noted that tauira developed confidence and trust in themselves, and amongst their peers, as evidenced in tauira being willing to try new tasks – demonstrating growth, trust in their peers, and SES development.

In summary, tauira sense of Tūrangawaewae (place of belonging) and Fa'avae (foundation) was reinforced. Participants reported tauira being empowered in their ability to take on new tasks and build meaningful relationships with peers, kaiako, and whānau. Participants found that the relationships within the classroom were the most important aspect needed to build safe and empowering learning environments and relationships. Participants found tauira becoming empowered and more confident was a byproduct of the building of SES and social and emotional literacy. Tauira were able to establish a robust foundation from which to learn, develop, practice and implement SEL through the use of the *I Feel* SEL resources. Facilitating the building of confidence and patience alongside empathy created a safe space for tauira to develop meaningful relationships of trust that supported growth.

Theme Four: The SELf-Aware Kaiako: Growing Hearts and Minds at Kura and Kāinga

Teachers arrive to their teaching roles from a variety of backgrounds, cultures, and lived experiences, sometimes unaware of the social and emotional literacy and SES

that will be required of them. The key question of this research was to explore the experience of kaiako implementing the *Ngā Kare ā Roto: The Feelings Within (I Feel)* SEL resources in schools across Aotearoa. This theme investigates this aspect of the study and provides analysis of the kaiako's personal experience with the *I Feel* SEL resources. Two subthemes emerged as kaiako experience was analysed. The first subtheme is titled *Kaiako Professional Growth* and reviews the professional growth kaiako experienced, and the second subtheme is titled *Kaiako Personal Growth,* which looks at the impact the *I Feel* SEL resources had on the personal lives of kaiako.

Kaiako Professional Growth

Teaching the next generation of learners is a rewarding yet challenging experience. Hinemoa summarised this process eloquently when she shared:

> It's one thing to teach resilience and emotional intelligence to the kids, but to really understand it, I find myself applying those concepts, too. It's almost like a parallel journey, where both the kids and I are unlearning and relearning together, building a different approach.

Participants expressed feeling unprepared or underprepared to teach and model social-emotional skills in the classroom. Moana articulated that in her experience:

> I don't remember being taught much about [emotional and social learning] when I was being trained to be a teacher. It's sort of come out as I began teaching, all these different programmes to help children and teachers become more aware of emotional intelligence and just knowing what's going on with our kids,

> because we are struggling in the classroom . . . It was a lot of neurodiverse things. But now there's also emotions.

Participants commented that SEL was not taught during their teacher training experience. As kaiako taught over the years, they discovered that SEL was essential to their teaching craft. Participants such as Moana felt they were struggling with behavioural issues that extended from SEL need. Today, alongside everyday learning, kaiako are expected to provide SEL support. Participants stated that teachers are having to retrain in SEL to manage traditional teaching requirements alongside the emotional needs of students and their own wellbeing. Moana shared:

> There's a lot teachers have to balance. . . . relearning what they're supposed to teach and how to teach it, as well as dealing with children who are struggling emotionally and learning different things, too. . . . It's a delicate balance of many things at the moment and teaching as well as our own well-being. And this is why I noticed some of the questions, too, about, you know, how has my knowledge grown because of these books as well. And yeah, definitely, I could say, I've learned lots too.

Participants expressed concern that the importance of SES in classrooms, workplaces, and homes is likely still filtering through our generations. The resources helped kaiako gain an increased awareness of students' emotions. Other kaiako also reported that their increased social and emotional awareness and related skills helped them to more effectively engage with and manage their students. A number of kaiako

agreed that the *I Feel* resources helped them feel confident to teach and support tauira as they explored SEL. Mereana shared:

> It helped me work on being an active listener. I want to make sure that when someone shares their feelings, I not only listen but ask questions to better understand how I can support them. . . . The resources gave me some new tools and insights, and they came with supporting materials, so I didn't have to go out and research additional resources. It made planning easier for me and the other teachers.

SES such as active listening were found to be improved with the use of the *I Feel* SEL resources. Kaiako reported gaining new skills to help them teach SEL to tauira and other teachers. Aroha also shared:

> They've taught me to be calmer and take deep breaths, which helps with handling different behaviours . . . It helps the teachers listen to the students' thoughts more, even if they have a lot of kids to manage.

The *I Feel* SEL resources provide SEL tools to support calming practices and manage the classroom. Kaiako found these activities and tools at the back of the SEL resources beneficial during teaching. Kiri supported this view when she added:

> It made my teaching around emotions more explicit because the resource was there for me to teach from. It wasn't just based on my own experiences; it had structured teaching. There are so many discussions and points where you can pause and think. . . . I'm generally a positive person, but I tend to bottle up anger

> and take it home because I need to stay calm and positive in the classroom. Using the resources made me think about modelling for my kids, too, by saying, "I'm starting to feel red, so I need to do something." We have a calming down box, so I'd use it, or we'd breathe together, showing them I have those feelings too.

Participants noticed that they were able to teach SEL at a deeper level because the resource was comprehensive and contained everything required for a lesson plan, including activities and discussion questions. The structured learning pattern made it easy for kaiako to use. Moana reiterated:

> The books gave us a way to communicate. Before, something went wrong, and they got upset. After using the resources, we had language and tools for those moments, practical things like, "Have you tried this? Counted to 10? Talked to a trusted adult?"

The *I Feel* SEL resources supported communication between kaiako and tauira. It provided kaiako with tools to use to guide students in self-directed or assisted activities. The SEL resources gave tauira something to guide them through each emotion and learn how they can help themselves with their emotions. Kaiako unanimously felt the resources were universally applicable, inclusive, and flexible enough to be tailored to individual preferences and personalities, thereby promoting personal autonomy and safe learning environments. The simplicity, inclusivity, and adaptability of the resources extended to improved job satisfaction and awareness of SEL for kaiako.

Kaiako reported recommending the I Feel SEL resources to their peers. Leilani expressed:

> The [*I Feel*] books gave me concrete references [to recommend to other teachers]: "I'm using these with students in the kaimahi room; these activities are helping; maybe try this in class." They're amazing. The [*I Feel*] books explained things to kids better than I sometimes had in the past. That meant I could go deeper: instead of staying at the surface explaining what the feeling is and how it looks, we could explore triggers, "What happened this morning that left you anxious or with a sore puku?"

The resources supported conversations with tauira at the different levels required. Kaiako were able to discuss other aspects of SEL with tauira as their knowledge and understanding had improved markedly. Participants felt that positive impacts from the *I Feel* SEL resources were that they were ready-made and contained learning resources – reducing planning time and stress experienced by kaiako – and they provided a resource to support children when other professional help is inaccessible.

Overall, kaiako felt the *I Feel* resources positively contributed to the learning, understanding and implementation of social and emotional learning in the classroom. Kaiako shared many experiences of how the resources provided a common language and bank of tools for students to use when they felt their emotions were rising. The *I Feel* resource not only contributed to the social-emotional literacy levels of the

students, it supported the development and acquisition of SEL for kaiako to use in the classroom as part of their professional expertise on SEL in the classroom.

Kaiako Personal Growth

The *I Feel* books had a secondary positive impact for kaiako in their personal lives through their experience with the *I Feel* SEL resources. CASEL (2020) defines SEL as

> the process for [individuals] to apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions, and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions.

SEL is about supporting and improving every aspect of an individual, whether professional or personal. A kaiako's personal SES are foundational to the development and improvement of education spaces that promote education equality for all tauira regardless of culture (Riwai-Couch, 2023). Personal SES must therefore exist before a kaiako enters the classroom. Kaiako reported a direct impact in their relationships with family members, parenting, goal setting, and SEL understanding and implementation in their personal lives.

Consensus amongst participants emerged confirming that utilising the SEL tools taught in the *I Feel* resources personally impacted the way they dealt with and spoke to their own children about their emotions. Kaiako expressed a stark contrast between the way they had been raised by their parents and how they talk to their tamariki about their

emotions. Kaiako report that SEL has taught them patience with their own tamariki. Kaiako learned the SEL material in the classroom with their tauira and practised implementing it through learning opportunities with the tauira in their class. Kaiako were then able to take home the skills they had learned and refined in the classroom with tauira to help support and strengthen interpersonal relationships with their whānau. Emotional control was better managed, reducing the number of "angry" incidents experienced at home.

Being aware of the emotions of others and themselves was a central learning, as noted in Moana's description of her interactions with her children:

> It really helped me as a parent with my daughter and my boys to understand how they're feeling about things. Sometimes you don't realise you're feeling something, or you don't know why – you can't remember what set it off. When I recognise the feeling and what triggered it, there's a sense of relief . . . then I can deal with it. . . . With my daughter, she often has tantrums when things don't go her way, or her brothers keep annoying her after she's said, "Stop." I'm helping her recognise she feels angry and that she can choose what to do – she can stay in the anger or choose differently, and I'm also allowing her to feel angry. Don't shove it away or take it out by punching something; just be angry and let her go through that feeling.

Moana describes the *I Feel* SEL resources as having helped her as a parent to bring the learning from the classroom into supporting her daughter to learn to regulate her

emotions. The learning also helped her personally understand her own emotions and how she processes emotions.

Leilani conveyed that personally she felt:

> The content wasn't new; it aligned with my past experience, but reading the books with kids positively impacted my parenting with my two, six and four [year-old children]. When work and life are overwhelming, you "know" the right responses, but stress can override them. Reading the books acted as reminders: I'd notice my daughter or son showing a sign I'd just read about and think, "I should pause and try this strategy."

Leilani also shared that the *I Feel* SEL resources were reminders of learning she was familiar with that helped her find balance in her busy work and personal life. The *I Feel* SEL books were reminders of how managing emotions is a continual process.

Remarkably, other kaiako noted the impact the *I Feel* SEL resources had on their personal goals. Kiri expressed that she was inspired to implement some of the ideas expressed in the *I Feel* resources into her own life when she stated:

> The books about resilience and "having a go" inspired me to apply those ideas in my own life. Teaching kids to try new things made me want to live it out too. I actually signed up for a half marathon and a Hyrox competition next year – just trying something new and challenging myself.

Participants reported challenging themselves to take on things they had always thought about but were hesitant to try. Being an advocate for the tauira at school made participants better advocates at home with their own children or for themselves.

Moana found that the *I Feel* SEL resources were helpful to everyone:

> I didn't go into it thinking I'd get something for myself. But reading the books with students, hearing their experiences, and sharing my own [experiences], I recognised it's helpful for everyone. No matter your age, we all have feelings we need to manage and strategies to deal with them. Many adults don't do that well. I've come away feeling it's something we can use all the time. . . . It was great to realise that, as an adult or as a child, it's not just happy, sad, or angry. There are feelings for many different things. When you recognise an in-between feeling, there's a name for it, and it looks like this; you can be more specific about the help you need. By identifying the feeling, why do I feel this way, and what can I do about it? You can act. That's what I got from the books; I can identify what I'm feeling, and there's something I can do to help me move through it. I don't have to stay this way.

Unexpectedly, participants' personal SES improved through interaction with and teaching the *I Feel* SEL resources. Moana shares that even adults don't manage emotions well, so the SEL is beneficial for all; no matter the age or how good we think our strategies are, there is always room for improvement. We can all realise that there is more to emotions than just simply labelling them. Moana further described SEL as a

skill that can be continually developed over time. The more practice you get, the more you understand about yourself, and the more you learn that a person can change their life through learning to regulate their emotions.

Talia identified that two books in particular had a direct impact on her personal goals and resilience:

> Personally, the resilience book really hit home. I decided to learn the guitar this year, which has been challenging, and sharing that struggle with the kids has allowed me to reinforce resilience in a personal way. The books influenced me, especially *I Feel Panic* and *I Feel Anxious*. They've reminded me that anxiety is natural, and they've helped me handle my own nerves, like when visiting my father-in-law in hospice. These books have been unexpectedly helpful for me.

Overall, participants agreed that the *I Feel* SEL resources positively impacted their personal lives in many ways. Most commonly, kaiako who are parents found the SEL beneficial in the home when dealing with their own children. Other participants found the learning supported their ability to take on new personal goals for growth. Personal SES growth was an unexpected benefit of the *I Feel* SEL resources. Participating in the study resulted in many kaiako taking the learning from the classroom into their personal lives. Benefits were seen in health and wellness, music skill development, emotional resilience, and improved parenting skills – just some of the many areas of kaiako personal lives that were impacted by the *I Feel* SEL resources and is discussed further in the next chapter.

Chapter Five: Discussion

This study explores how the *I Feel* SEL resources impacted eight participants when implementing the *I Feel* SEL programme in their respective classrooms in Aotearoa New Zealand. Globally, over the last two decades, the demand for mental health care has increased, especially in communities where social, demographic, and economic hardship are experienced (WHO, 2022). The demand is particularly evident in tamariki and young people where mental health problems emerge for the first time (Kirkbride et al., 2024). International data further indicates that emotional and behavioural difficulties are affecting more tamariki across all communities and at increasingly younger ages (Denston et al., 2022).

Aotearoa New Zealand is a country of 5.3 million people, with one quarter of the population under 19 years old. Māori (27%) and Pasifika (15%) make up 41% of the under-19-year-old demographic (Stats NZ, 2025a; Stats NZ, 2025c). While there is a growing amount of research on the need for early social and emotional learning intervention, research indicates that tamariki who develop higher social-emotional skills at an early age are better able to deal with life's difficulties (Martinsone et al., 2020). The research described in this study contributes to the emerging body of knowledge available to support kaiako in their ability to promote SEL and SES

development. Findings from this study will be discussed in four main areas: *Wānanga Ready: Creating Conditions for Learning*; *Nāu Te Rourou, Nāku Te Rourou: Strengthening Community Through Collaboration and Rangatiratanga*; *Urutau, Whakautu, Whakamana: Adapt, Respond, Empower*; and *SELf Aware: Te Ako, Te Wetewete, Te Ako Anō: Learn, Unlearn, Relearn*.

Wānanga Ready: Creating Conditions for Learning

> Mā te huruhuru ka rere te manu.
> [Adorn the bird with feathers so it may fly.]
>
> — Traditional whakataukī

The whakataukī *Mā te huruhuru ka rere te manu* reminds us that, just as a bird needs feathers to fly, tamariki need the right support, resources, and encouragement to thrive. By nurturing their strengths and creating positive learning environments, we enable them to grow, succeed, and reach their potential. A core idea that emerged in the findings was about how participation in the *I Feel* SEL resource sessions contributed to preparing tauira and the classroom environment for learning activities. Tauira arrive at school in varying emotional states influenced by events that happened at home or on the way to school. When tamariki arrive at school in a state of distress or unhappiness, it affects the tone and feel in the classroom. Tamariki are naturally curious and want to know if others are okay, and them trying to find out what happened to make their peer feel a particular way can cause distraction in the class. Participants reported that conducting an SEL activity, such as using the pūrākau in one of the *I Feel* SEL books, helped to calm tamariki minds, bodies, and wairua. Tauira were then able to settle

themselves and could prepare for the learning day. When tauira are unregulated, they find it difficult to engage in learning (Jones et al., 2021). Tamariki spend most of their day at school under the supervision of a kaiako, which makes school the ideal place for SEL instruction and practice (Jones et al., 2021). Schools have a strong influence on the lives of tamariki, whānau, and the community. The transition and adjustment of tamariki into a new school – including moving from early childhood to primary school – has been a long-term concern for mental health professionals (Atkins et al., 2010). Creating and maintaining environments that are safe, supportive, and focused on learning for all tauira is necessary for everyday learning. These are important factors and also indicate why SEL should be implemented as everyday instruction and practice. As evidenced by the findings, the *I Feel* SEL resources supported the development of the learning environment in classrooms and are the ideal space for SEL to take place (Jones et al., 2021).

To support tauira readiness for learning, daily SEL sessions and activities were key to a constructive learning environment. As discussed in the findings, daily SEL instruction, along with repetition and the use of SES in real-life situations, helps tauira implement and retain SEL better. Participants found that competing demands and limited time are significant issues for kaiako that impede the implementation of SEL (Eisenberg, 2006; Guerra & Bradshaw, 2008; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Weissberg & Greenberg, 1998). In the subtheme *Te Ngākau Mārama: Learning the Language of Emotions; E³: Exploring and Expressing Emotion,* participants observed that tauira were

initially hesitant to talk about and share their emotions. After daily SEL sessions and using the activities supplied in the *I Feel* SEL resources, tauira began to understand different emotions and the strategies they could use to help them regulate their emotions. Discussions in class about emotions became robust, and tauira became comfortable disclosing how they felt in the discussion group with peers, showing agreement and understanding and building on what their classmate was sharing, leading to deeper conversations amongst the class.

SEL instruction is typically best done when SES are introduced and then modelled. Tauira are then able to practice and apply the SES in diverse settings throughout the day in the safety of the school environment (Jones & Doolittle, 2017). Participants expressed the ability to help tauira "unpack" their emotions in the moment, when they experience them, or reflect on the situation and how tauira could work through the situation better. This provided real-life examples for kaiako to engage in SEL discussions and reflect on the SEL they had in class. Examples such as this created a sense of unity and understanding that all tamariki experience strong emotions but that they can choose to work on managing the emotion rather than letting it control them.

A kaiako's SES is tested every day as the kaiako, supervisor, and social and emotional expert and role model in their class. Previous research has found that as kaiako engaged with SEL opportunities, their personal SES and that of their tauira grew at a greater rate (Beecher et al., 201). This links with the Jones et al. (2021) research that states that selecting an SEL resource that is compatible with the needs of learners and

is developmentally aligned with the social and emotional competencies the school seeks to develop is directly correlated with improved SEL outcomes.

SEL concepts sometimes take time to understand and grasp. As kaiako taught from and engaged tauira in activities from the *I Feel* SEL resources and demonstrated SES through classroom interactions, tauira came to understand – and were willing to be vulnerable to share with the class – their emotions. This led to an increased ability for tauira to learn to regulate their own emotions through encouraged and supported practice with peers and kaiako, supporting the development and maintenance of the learning environment and supporting tauira to be ready for learning.

Research on SEL in environments such as schools has evidenced the positive impact SEL has on tauira outcomes (Jones & Doolittle, 2017). SEL has been proven to increase resilience and engagement in learning activities, improve academic and behavioural outcomes, and develop meaningful relationships amongst peers and kaiako (Jones & Doolittle, 2017). Tauira have varying talents and academic abilities; however, SEL provides all tauira with the opportunity to develop the necessary SES to improve academic, emotional, and behavioural outcomes (Jones et al., 2015). Turning a challenging task into an opportunity for learning is not naturally ingrained in all tauira and is an area where SEL makes an impact (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018). Consistent with the themes identified in the findings, participants observed that the *I Feel* SEL resources were associated with greater engagement and focus among tauira, as well as less confusion, anger, and frustration.

Despite the benefits of SEL, including correlations with improved learning engagement, preparedness, and academic outcomes, the adoption and consistent use of SEL in schools remains limited (Atwell & Bridgeland, 2019). An example of how SEL activities were used in the school day to help settle tauira for learning is after breaks. After recess breaks, tauira returned to the classroom still energised from being with friends and playing outdoors. Kaiako used the book *Don't Give Up: You Can Be Resilient* to associate their outdoor playtime with settling them down ready for learning in the classroom. The SEL activities helped tauira focus, be less stressed, and get ready to engage with learning. When tauira understood the emotions they felt, kaiako relayed that there was less confusion, anger, and frustration, which allowed tauira to engage with the learning and follow tasks as directed. Similar to existing literature, the findings in the current study highlight the impact SEL has on supporting improved engagement and behaviour in class, with fewer incidents reported in the school management system (Atkins et al., 2010).

In summary, the literature and findings demonstrate the impact SEL and the *I Feel* SEL resources have on preparing tauira to be wānanga ready by creating the social and emotional conditions for learning. Schools are environments of learning; they are considered safe and supportive learning spaces and the ideal setting for SEL to take place (Jones et al., 2021). Rather than being an additional programme, SEL in this study was set as a foundational part of the tauira's day. The positive impact of the *I Feel* SEL resources was evidenced by the participants' comments, which reported improvements

in tauira ability to regulate emotions, improved engagement, increased resilience, and improved academic and behavioural outcomes, aligning with current literature by Jones & Doolittle (2017). The findings and literature suggest that becoming wānanga ready requires more than just cognitive preparedness; it includes emotional regulation, self-awareness, and positive relationships (Goleman, 2020).

Nāu te Rourou, Nāku te Rourou: Strengthening Community Through Positive Relationships

> Nāu te rourou, nāku te rourou, ka ora ai te iwi.
> [With your food basket and my food basket, the people will thrive.]
> — Traditional whakataukī

The whakataukī *Nāu te rourou, nāku te rourou, ka ora ai te iwi* reminds us that everyone has knowledge, strengths, and experiences that contribute to the wellbeing of others. By working together and sharing these contributions, we create the conditions for individuals, whānau, and communities to flourish.

As participants engaged with the *I Feel* SEL resources, it was clear that supportive relationships are vital to SEL. It is therefore no surprise that relationships emerged as one of the key findings in this research. Relationships are foundational in te ao Māori and in Pasifika communities. As seen in Te Whare Tapa Whā (Durie, 2011) and the Fonofale model (Pulotu-Endeman, 2001), whānau – or those considered to be family – are foundational, identified as key pou in the wellbeing of an individual. The name of this theme was taken from the whakataukī above and reflects the Māori values of manaakitanga, kotahitanga, mana orite, mahi tahi, koha, and whakamana as key to

building relationships that support the growth and development needed for people to thrive. The discussion in this section highlights the relationships between tauira and kaiako, and amongst tauira. Throughout the interviews, I noticed a pattern of interpersonal connections for participants, namely the importance of kaiako knowing the tauira in their class, as a core component for SEL adoption. Relationships and emotional processes have an important impact on how tamariki learn, and they support improved tauira outcomes (Durlak et al., 2011; Jones & Doolittle, 2017).

SEL resources strengthened the relationship between kaiako and tauira. Strong and positive relationships between kaiako and tauira developed through the establishment of positive classroom environments that invited learning. These positive environments were characterised by warmth, acceptance, and support, and they instilled self-belief and confidence in tauira. Through daily interaction with tauira, kaiako came to learn and know their tauira on an intimate level, as evidenced in the findings in the subtheme *Te Ngākau Mārama: Learning the Language of Emotions; Feel it. Name it. Tame it.* Kaiako often refer to tauira in their class as "my kids" and spoke intimately about being "in tune" with them and knowing when their emotions are starting to rise and how they are working to regulate their emotions. When participants began teaching from the *I Feel* SEL resources, some tauira felt they could not share their experiences and emotions with the class; however, over time, tauira came to trust that the classroom, the kaiako, and the other tauira were a safe space to share, learn, and practice SEL. Tauira began sharing their emotions with the class, under the supportive

and caring supervision of their kaiako. Emotional competence has been strongly correlated to the strength of the relationship between kaiako and tauira (Alzahrani et al., 2019). Participants remarked that over time tauira became more confident and were learning to support their own emotional learning and experience.

After the first few weeks of utilising the *I Feel* SEL resources, one participant remarked that a tauira chose the *I Feel Panic* book from the bookshelf in the classroom library when she felt panic. This demonstrated that the tauira could name the emotion she was feeling and was able to independently seek out a resource that could help her manage the panic she felt. Her kaiako praised her for taking the initiative to identify the emotion and for seeking help from the *I Feel Panic* book. As kaiako taught and encouraged tauira to practice the SEL they were taught in the classroom, tauira were inspired to increase their efforts to learn, practise, and praise others as well, a concept I will discuss further. When kaiako praise tauira for their efforts in the moment and provide positive feedback, supporting tauira successfully through their individual SEL journey, this stems from kaiako knowing their tauira well enough to know when to step in, when to wait, and when to push them a little further, challenging tauira while building trust and self-belief that they can manage their emotional wellbeing. When a kaiako supports and praises a tauira, and they see that their kaiako believes that they can manage their emotions, tauira self-confidence rises. Praise is a key aspect to facilitating the development of self-confidence, intrinsic motivation, and praise for others (Webster-Stratton, 2012). Social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) reinforces that learning

can occur through direct experience and through watching others. This is especially important for tauira who may have limited opportunities for emotional learning at home, resulting in relationships with adult leaders and kaiako at school being a reliable source to practice SEL skills (Brion-Meisels & Jones, 2012). This reinforces the participants' comments about the value of SEL being taught in groups where interactions with kaiako can be observed directly, with kaiako providing personalised assistance to tauira. Jones et al. (2021) suggest that the "right kind" of SEL resource – one that is developmentally appropriate, culturally responsive, and aligned with a school's intended outcomes – supports positive SEL development. The findings suggest that the *I Feel* SEL resources represented the "right kind" of SEL resource because participants found them to be culturally relevant, age-appropriate, and effective in supporting the development of SES. When partnered with supportive adult relationships and opportunities for tauira to practise SEL skills, positive outcomes are more likely to occur (Jones et al., 2021).

In Theme Three, *Tūrangawaewae and Fa'avae: Standing Strong in Cultural Identity and Connection*, it was emphasised that SEL strengthened the relationship between tauira. As tauira engaged with the *I Feel* SEL resources, they began to learn about themselves. In the *Te Ngākau Mārama: Learning the Language of Emotions; Feel it. Name it. Tame it* subtheme, group discussions provided opportunities to hear other tauira share their emotions or challenges, which echoed their own experience. Through this practice, tauira began being able to identify their own emotions and how particular emotions felt in their body. As they discussed and became curious about how the

emotions felt for themselves, tauira began to identify emotions in other tauira, as well as ways to support them, as expressed in the subtheme *Tūrangawaewae and Fa'avae: Standing Strong in Cultural Identity and Connection; Building Relationships and Learning in the Classroom*. Some tauira learned SEL concepts quicker than others, which gave them the ability to help other tauira learn about the emotion. Supporting each other in this way demonstrated an increase in SES as tauira could identify the emotion in themselves, then in others, and then help others who were experiencing the emotion, as observed and described by participants in the subtheme *Tūrangawaewae and Fa'avae: Standing Strong in Cultural Identity and Connection, Building Relationships and Learning in the Classroom*. In this environment, friends offer emotional support to their friends and classmates, which also demonstrates an increase in social skills and the ability to develop and maintain meaningful relationships. This reflects the te ao Māori concept of tuakana-teina relationships, or the concept of older or more experienced tauira supporting younger tauira or those who are still developing SES (Houghton-Katipa, 2026; Rameka & Glasgow, 2017). The tuakana-teina pedagogy is an approach to learning that reflects the Māori value of ako, the concept of learning together, learning from each other, where both leader and tauira benefit from one another (Houghton-Katipa, 2026). It prioritises whanaungatanga, which places the tuakana-teina relationship as central to teaching and learning practice, as opposed to being a cultural add-on (Royal-Tangaere, 1997).

Within the subtheme *Te Ngākau Mārama: Learning the Language of Emotions; E³: Exploring and Expressing Emotions,* it was highlighted that tauira developed greater tolerance and acceptance of themselves and their emotions while strengthening their ability to regulate emotional responses. Through their personal experience, they also learned patience and manaakitanga for other tauira, which supported strengthening relationships with each other. In the subtheme *Tūrangawaewae and Fa'avae: Standing Strong in Cultural Identity and Connection; Building Relationships and Learning in the Classroom*, one tauira offered to help another tauira in the playground after he expressed being anxious about climbing the ladder. When he shared this challenge in class, a friend offered to help him next time. Examples such as this demonstrate the supportive environment and trust that was established in the classroom. This example reflects the principles of the whakataukī shared at the beginning of this chapter, *Nāu te rourou, nāku te rourou, ka ora ai te iwi; With your food basket and my food basket, the people will thrive*. When tauira work together, everyone benefits.

A sense of belonging amongst tauira developed using the *I Feel* SEL resources that created a caring relationship between tauira, including caring for each other in ways previously not seen. Ursache et al. (2019) state that friends are the supporters of emotional development and learning in tauira, and to maintain a friendship, social skills are required. Participants expressed that teaching SEL in class helped tauira understand each other. This was evidenced in the subtheme *Tūrangawaewae and Fa'avae: Standing Strong in Cultural Identity and Connection; Building Relationships*

and Learning in the Classroom. If someone was experiencing strong emotion, other tauira knew to give that person time and space to work through the emotion. If a tauira needed to go to the calm down tent, other tauira did not make a fuss about it but afforded that tauira respect and space. Another example from the subtheme *Tūrangawaewae and Fa'avae: Standing Strong in Cultural Identity and Connection; Building Relationships and Learning in the Classroom* was when a kaiako expressed delight in hearing one tauira say to another, "You're being resilient. You keep trying even though it's hard". Participant observations demonstrated the importance of friends being the supporters of emotional development and learning in tauira.

In the subtheme *Te Ngākau Mārama: Learning the Language of Emotions; E³: Exploring and Expressing Emotions,* participants reported tauira being able to clearly articulate their feelings by saying, "I'm feeling upset because . . ." or "I'm frustrated," instead of just reacting or bottling things up. This reflects current literature by Sprenger (2020), who describes that tauira who act in accordance with SEL competence demonstrate knowledge of how they are feeling. In the subtheme *Tūrangawaewae and Fa'avae: Standing Strong in Cultural Identity and Connection; Building Relationships and Learning in the Classroom,* participants shared the example of tauira indicating their development of active listening skills. Rather than children merely waiting their turn, they were actively listening to their classmate and adding on to their experience. As kaiako increasingly provided opportunities for tauira to practice their SEL skill development, tauira learned to feel more confident to become their own problem

solvers and practised emotion regulation. This socialisation process is termed by Rameka and Glasgow (2017) as the “step back” approach that encourages kaiako to trust that tauira can learn to care, be responsible, and support others through direct experiences without them stepping in to help the tauira.

In the subtheme *Manaaki the Moment: SEL Strategies for Calm, Connected Classrooms; School Management Promotes Safe Learning Environments,* kaiako emphasised the importance of having supportive school boards and leaders who encourage teaching SEL programmes in school to support the development of positive school environments. Participants expressed that proactive school boards acknowledge the need to address the emotional and behavioural concerns teachers were facing in the classroom. One participant expressed gratitude to the school boards and school leaders who prioritise the holistic wellbeing of kaiako, creating a positive, supportive environment that strengthens the feeling of community in the school. This connects with literature from Rusticus et al. (2022), who state that positive school environments are spaces that promote personal development, facilitate supportive relationships, and provide a warm and inviting setting with a strong sense of community. CASEL (2012) and Jones et al. (2018) confirm that effective SEL occurs when optimal learning environments are the setting for that SEL. Participants shared that the development of SES in tauira is critically developed through establishing and maintaining a positive learning environment.

This connects with the research by Darling-Hammond and Cook-Harvey (2018), who state that positive emotions and relationships with kaiako open the mind to learning, improving engagement and tauira outcomes. Within the subtheme *Tūrangawaewae and Fa'avae: Standing Strong in Cultural Identity and Connection; Building Relationships and Learning in the Classroom*, participants highlighted the positive SES tauira developed from participating in the *I Feel* SEL. SES, such as being able to regulate their emotions and manage stress, ultimately improve classroom environments, relationships, and learning. The environment, as described by participants when SEL was being implemented, saw the building of confidence and patience alongside empathy. These kinds of SES created a safe space for tauira to develop meaningful relationships of trust that supported growth.

An additional example that participants used to create positive learning environments was calming tents or calming corners in classrooms, where tauira could go to calm down and have respite when experiences felt overwhelming. Displaying completed SEL activities and posters in the classroom also provided positive reinforcement of recent SEL activities and acted as a constant reminder of the SEL skill sets available for tauira to use. When the learning environment is positive, empowerment and resilience develop, and tauira feel competent and capable and have a strong sense of belonging (Thynne, 2021). Within the subtheme, *Te Ngākau Mārama: Learning the Language of Emotions; E³: Exploring and Expressing Emotion,* participants also remarked that after an incident occurred, being able to talk about the situation

helped tauira process the event and how the situation and emotions could have been managed better. This experience reinforced SEL concepts while affirming the supportive relationships developing between tauira.

Nāu te Rourou, Nāku te Rourou: Strengthening Community through Positive Relationships highlights the impact of the sharing of learning and the importance of supportive relationships in the classroom. Through strong interpersonal relationships in the classroom, tauira were able to explore and learn about their emotions in a safe and positive environment, resulting in tauira being able to focus on learning rather than worrying about managing negative peer interactions or emotional threats (Jones et al., 2021). High-quality relationships in a school environment support the tuakana-teina model, where both leader and tauira benefit from learning from one another (Houghton-Katipa, 2026). SEL in a positive, supportive learning environment provides a space for the sharing of knowledge and support and the building of relationships – enriching and strengthening community.

Urutau, Whakautu, Whakamana: Adapt, Respond, Empower

> Poipoia te kākano, kia puāwai ai.
> [Nurture the seed so that it may flourish.]
>
> — Traditional whakataukī

The whakataukī *Poipoia te kākano, kia puāwai ai* reminds us that every tamaiti has unique strengths, talents, and potential that can flourish when nurtured with care and support. By responding to their individual needs and creating the right conditions for growth, we empower tamariki to develop confidence, capability, and wellbeing.

The name for this topic was identified as a critical part of this research and illuminates the need for SEL resources to be culturally responsive. Psychologists play an integral role in SEL from researching and developing SEL resources to supporting the evaluation, training, delivery, and testing of those resources in various industries and organisations and in the classroom. Psychologists therefore have a critical interest in the use of SEL resources in schools and the favourable outcomes current research is providing (CASEL, 2020; Durlak et al., 2011).

Cultural competence is defined by the New Zealand Psychologists Board (2023) as

> having the awareness, knowledge and skills necessary to perform a myriad of psychological tasks when recognising the diverse world views and practices of oneself and of clients from different ethnic/cultural backgrounds. . . . Cultural competence includes an informed appreciation of the cultural basis of psychological theories, models and practices and a commitment to modify one's practice accordingly for individuals, their whānau/family, groups of people or communities.

Aotearoa New Zealand has a multicultural population of 5.3 million people (Stats NZ, 2026) comprising over 200 diverse ethnic groups, demonstrating the country's increasingly diverse population (Stats NZ, 2024). Almao and Ioane (2023) explain that cultural competence with every cultural group is not achievable, as cultural competence varies for each culture and is relative to the context of each interaction.

However, in Aotearoa New Zealand, specific competence frameworks exist for those working with Māori in their respective fields. In education, Tātaiako – a cultural competence resource for teachers of Māori learners – and Our Code, Our Standards are both frameworks issued by the Teaching Council of New Zealand to set expectations of teacher competency working with Māori. This study suggests that SEL resources should be adaptable and responsive to the individual or group the resource is selected for and that SEL be provided in a way that is culturally competent and responsive, to ultimately lead tauira towards feeling empowered. The ethnic diversity of Aotearoa New Zealand suggests that kaiako use culturally informed methods of teaching SEL so tauira can relate to and understand the consequences of their actions and promote SEL as it relates to their worldview (Kumst & Scarf, 2015). Tauira have varying worldviews, which requires schools and kaiako to provide culturally responsive teaching methods that use relevant cultural knowledge, references, activities, and styles of teaching that respond to the diverse cultural needs of tauira (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018).

Cultural norms often dictate the way children respond to and communicate their emotions (Cheshin, 2020). When a culture different to their own is the prevailing normative culture, learning is required to understand how to express emotion appropriately in different cultural contexts. In the theme *Tūrangawaewae and Fa'avae: Standing Strong in Cultural Identity and Connection; Connecting Culture and Classroom*, one of the kaiako observed that Māori and Pasifika tauira express emotion differently, and that this is not something openly spoken about. Emotional literacy of

tauira was initially demonstrated in the way tauira were hesitant to talk about their emotions, as though it was bad to talk about things that upset them. Kaiako noticed that some children show their feelings in their behaviours and actions, rather than talk about them, due to feeling embarrassed or whakamā. Jukes (2020) state that cultural norms, values, and wisdom in the community, alongside the skills, values, attributes, and how these behaviours are expressed, should determine what SEL programme is selected for the school. This highlights the need for kaiako and those selecting SEL programmes to know their tauira, whānau, and communities and requires close examination of the SEL programme qualities before implementation.

Within the theme *Tūrangawaewae and Fa'avae: Standing Strong in Cultural Identity and Connection; Connecting Culture and Classroom,* participants expressed that culturally responsive SEL resources are critical to ensuring SEL connects with the tauira they are being used with. This study highlighted the need for SEL teaching resources to be culturally adaptive. Culturally adaptive SEL programmes and resources require more effort and connection to develop and monitor. Monitoring is an essential assessment criterion of an SEL resource to ascertain if the resource is providing the support and SES development required for all tauira, not just mainstream dominant tauira (Highfield & Webber, 2021).

In Theme Two, *Te Ngākau Mārama: Learning the Language of Emotions*, the participants stated the I Feel SEL resources were an effective way to support participants in SEL. The books were culturally accessible, adaptable, and relatable for

classroom teaching. Stories in the SEL resources – in particular the *I Feel* SEL resource book, *You Can Do It: Have a Go!*, which contains a Māori pūrākau – strongly resonated not only with Māori tauira but the whole classes. Participants highlighted how culturally centred aspects such as this were engaging for tauira and enhanced the SEL resources. Use of this pūrākau encouraged kaiako to adapt learning materials to include different cultural aspects of the resources to enhance learning. Darling-Hammond and Cook-Harvey (2018) state that culturally responsive resources need to be intellectually demanding and require children to cognitively and emotionally connect SEL concepts across culture and language. The ability to learn, practise, and master the culturally responsive curriculum builds tauira confidence in SEL and connection to te ao Māori, by providing strategies that encourage tauira to oversee their own learning and progress. Tauira can use this confidence to excel and build their skills, which in turn supports autonomy in their learning.

This topic, *Urutau, Whakautu, Whakamana: Adapt, Respond, Empower,* highlights the need for SEL resources to be culturally responsive. Kaiako are a key resource for any classroom with their primary responsibility to facilitate tauira learning and development through thoughtful and intentional pedagogy (Ministry of Education, 2017). A kaiako's ability to adapt resources to the class is required for many teaching topics, including SEL. While participants reported the *I Feel* SEL resources as accessible and relatable to all tauira, adapting to resources and responding to the different ethnically diverse groups in the classroom made it easier for tauira to

personally connect with the SEL concepts taught in the book. Kaiako bring a different set of skills and abilities to the classroom resulting in varied ability to adapt SEL resources to what Chan and Ritchie (2019) refer to as the variability of kaiako to engage in bicultural practice. While it is not always possible to have a kaiako with the same cultural background as the tauira in each classroom, to assist in providing insight and connection between SEL and culture, it is possible for kaiako to build their cultural responsiveness as outlined by Riwai-Couch (2023). However, kaiako must be careful not to construct their own assumptions of the cultures and worldviews of tauira in their classes (Riwai-Couch, 2023).

Wiremu NiaNia is a traditional Māori healer who has worked with psychiatrist Dr Allister Bush and therapist David Epston to implement indigenous healing practices alongside Western psychiatry. NiaNia et al. (2025) describe providing emotional learning from a Western viewpoint as being detrimental to non-Western cultures. Exclusionary practices and research that only represent Western culture lack understanding and acceptance of the ethnic and spiritual beliefs of non-Western cultures. Such exclusionary practices increase the risk of isolating those who do not share the same worldview. In SEL contexts, Western framing risks alienating tauira who have different cultural backgrounds and who may not prescribe to Western worldviews. Within the subtheme *Tūrangawaewae and Fa'avae: Standing Strong in Cultural Identity and Connection; Connecting Culture and Classroom*, participants in the Māori bilingual unit shared that tauira Māori were able to connect with the pūrākau shared in the books.

Kaiako then built on this by including more pūrākau about Ranginui and Papatūānuku, and Tūmatauenga in their SEL sessions. A tauira's worldview is strongly influenced by their culture, and how they see the world is critical to defining guiding beliefs and how they interact with SEL. Participants expressed that using the *I Feel* SEL resources was helping tauira understand that it's about building mana; it's not just about teaching, it's about making sure tauira feel seen and heard.

Culturally responsive SEL resources utilising a Māori worldview are affirmative action for Māori. Tipene-Leach et al. (2019) posit that "getting it right for Māori, does in fact get it right for everyone" (p.96). Therefore, if SEL is taught in a way that works for tauira Māori, then everyone benefits. When SEL concepts are taught through a Māori cultural lens, values such as whanaungatanga, manaakitanga, and manawaroa create an inclusive and supportive learning environment for all tauira. Māori wellbeing is based on holistic paradigms, including hinengaro, wairua, tinana, and whānau (Durie, 2011). Understanding that whānau are an integral part of a tauira's experience provides increased possibilities for kaiako to appreciate tauira from different aspects, as members of whānau and part of the wider community, rather than simply as an individual.

Notably, the *He Ara Oranga: Report of the Government Inquiry into Mental Health and Addiction* (New Zealand Government, 2018) supports that holistic and Indigenous-led paradigms are beneficial for all populations when aiming for transformational change and improvements in mental health. As noted earlier, participants identified the

benefit of the *I Feel* SEL resources being adaptable and culturally responsive to tauira of different ethnicities in the classroom, which empowered kaiako and tauira with resources that could be applied across multiple ethnicities. Teaching from the resources opened conversations about feelings and created opportunities for learning and SEL practice outside of what the resources taught. In the theme *Manaaki the Moment: SEL Strategies for Calm, Connected Classrooms; Accessible Resources for Children and Adults*, participants described that the use of images of real children from Aotearoa that looked like the tauira in the class gave a point of contextual familiarity, especially for Māori and Pasifika tauira who are not used to seeing children look like them in SEL or other learning resources. This connects with the research of Fa'alogo-Lilo and Cartwright (2021), who noted that using health models unrelated to the worldview of the groups being supported can cause disconnect, disengagement and can be alienating. Culturally responsive resources support the empowerment of all tauira, not just that of the dominant culture.

Within the subtheme *Te Ngākau Mārama: Learning the Language of Emotions; E³: Exploring and Expressing Emotion*, participants noted that the SEL resources supported tauira to develop a strong sense of belonging, sense of identity, and unity amongst the class. A strong sense of identity and belonging is the foundation for mental wellbeing (Kapeli et al., 2020; Le Va, 2025). When tauira are viewed as individuals separate from their whānau and communities, this limits understandings of who they are (Kapeli, 2020). Māori and Pasifika worldviews identify individuals as part of a greater

whole, one part of a wider group. Therefore, when tauira are made to feel they are part of a greater whole in their classroom, their identity and sense of belonging are strengthened. When tauira shared their experience with emotion regulation in the class discussions, other tauira would often build on their conversation and offer support and help to their classmate. When tauira are supported and have close interpersonal relationships, communication, and a strong sense of belonging, academic achievement improves (Wang & Degol, 2016).

In the subtheme *Tūrangawaewae and Fa'avae: Standing Strong in Cultural Identity and Connection; Building Relationships and Learning in the Classroom,* participants noticed that the *I Feel* SEL resources inspired tauira to be proud of who they are and their culture. Multiple stories were shared by participants of tauira whose courage and resilience grew and was evidenced by the new activities or challenges tauira were willing to try. Kaiako engaged learners through incorporating effective and enjoyable learning activities that reflected Māori and Pasifika practices. These approaches supported Māori learners to succeed as Māori, and Pasifika learners as Pasifika, by catering to their learning styles and cultural contexts (Ministry of Education, 2024). Such approaches to educational transformation promote collective action and improved learning conditions that benefit not only Māori, but all tauira (Bishop et al., 2009; Highfield & Webber, 2021).

In the subtheme, *Te Ngākau Mārama: Learning the Language of Emotions; Feel it. Name it. Tame it,* participants noticed that as tauira engaged with the *I Feel* SEL

resources, their vocabulary increased. In the current study, kaiako described a “new emotions language” that empowered tauira to identify and communicate their emotions. *Urutau, Whakautu, Whakamana: Adapt, Respond, Empower* brings to light the necessary adaptations and responses required to ensure SEL resources are applicable across culturally diverse contexts. Tauira previously used basic feelings words to describe how they felt, such as sad, angry, or mad. A new emotions language is an increase in the range of emotional vocabulary and skill that improves the ability to articulate feelings and emotions. Sprenger (2020) explains that the more social and emotional words tauira possess to express themselves, the better they can understand themselves and help others understand them.

In this study, new emotion words and definitions were introduced in the *I Feel* SEL resources, from kaiako or through open discussion with the class. To understand the complexity of emotions, an increase in vocabulary was required. Šimić et al. (2021), state that when an emotion is labelled, this simple action can reduce the activation of the amygdala, the part of the brain that contributes to emotional processing, while activating the prefrontal cortex, helping people to regulate emotions. As SEL conversations occurred in class, kaiako would ask what emotion tauira were experiencing. Tauira began to easily identify emotions and how to work through them when they experienced them. The new emotions vocabulary put tauira in charge of their emotions. This builds on the research of Elias et al. (1997) and Devaney et al. (2006),

who found that the use of SEL results in a common language emerging amongst the class.

In the subtheme *Te Ngākau Mārama: Learning the Language of Emotions; Feel it. Name it. Tame it*, participants observed tauira learned alternate ways to manage situations that would previously make them angry. This boosted tauira confidence and supported their autonomy in managing their emotions. Autonomy with emotions also improves tauira sense of self-worth and builds on their ability to self-determine what actions they could take to help themselves through an emotion. SEL and the building of emotional intelligence facilitate increased tauira self-worth, self-awareness, and self-determination. In te ao Māori, the mana of tauira is increased as tauira learn that they can oversee their experience and their emotions. Denston (2022) endorses self-awareness, self-management, and responsible decision making as crucial to a child's wellbeing and development, and this can also be related to the importance of self-determination in te ao Māori. NiaNia et al. (2017) posit that emotional learning programmes and practices that assert one's self-determination (ability and power to decide for oneself), affirm their Māori and Pasifika identity, strengthen mana, and are central to maintaining and restoring health and wellbeing (NiaNia et al., 2017). Empowering tauira with increased vocabulary to identify, name, and tame emotions (Siegel & Bryson, 2012) provides tauira with a framework and platform from which to build further SEL competency.

Urutau, Whakautu, Whakamana: Adapt, Respond, Empower emphasises the adaptability required for materials to stay relevant and culturally responsive. This study demonstrated that engaging with the *I Feel* SEL resources positively impacted tauira, kaiako, and the classroom as a community. New learning concepts were introduced to tauira, enhancing and improving tauira ability to understand SEL concepts. A new vocabulary term that was introduced to tauira during their SEL sessions was the concept of the mind-body connection. It is well-documented in research that anxiety is experienced in the body, in the nervous system and endocrine system and manifests in the body as tight muscles, clenched fists, and an upset stomach, yet it is instigated intrinsically in their minds (Vaughan et al., 2023). Connections to Māori and Pasifika wellbeing frameworks support tauira learning and understanding through the use of Te Whare Tapa Whā (Durie, 2011) and the Fonofale model (Pulotu-Endeman, 2001). The two indigenous frameworks highlight the holistic connections between the hinengaro, tinana, wairua, and whānau. This connection is referred to as the "mind-body connection", where the physical sensation, such as a sore tummy, could reflect underlying anxiety. An understanding of the holistic wellbeing models Te Whare Tapa Whā and Fonofale can help kaiako and tauira recognise that emotional, mental, physical, spiritual, and social dimensions of wellbeing are interconnected. These frameworks provide culturally grounded ways of understanding wellbeing and emotional experiences, which is particularly important for Māori and Pasifika learners.

The importance of culturally grounded approaches is highlighted by limitations within the bio-psycho-social model used in many New Zealand mental health practices. While this model acknowledges biological, psychological, and social influences on wellbeing, it does not fully encompass the spiritual dimensions and worldviews that are central to many Māori and Pasifika understandings of health and wellbeing. NiaNia et al. (2025) explain that recognising cultural and ethnic worldviews supports positive emotional learning outcomes, while Greaves et al. (2023) confirm that cultural principles, cultural connectedness, and active cultural engagement contribute to enhanced wellbeing. Together, these findings suggest that culturally responsive frameworks can strengthen social and emotional learning by reflecting the values, identities and lived experiences of Māori and Pasifika learners.

This topic highlighted the need for SEL resources to be adaptive, responsive and empowering. Kaiako are key to creating culturally responsive classrooms and adapting SEL resources to the needs of the tauira. However, as stated by Tipene-Leach et al. (2019), “getting it right for Māori, does in fact get it right for everyone” (p. 96). Teaching SEL from a Māori worldview then benefits everyone and supports the SEL through a te ao Māori lens, with values such as whanaungatanga, manaakitanga, and manawaroa at its core. As a new vocabulary emerged, the concept of the mind-body connection was taught to tauira, emphasising the indigenous frameworks of Te Whare Tapa Whā and the Fonofale model as guides to enhance mana and wellbeing of all tauira.

SELf Aware: Te Ako, Te Wetewete, Te Ako Anō: Learn, Unlearn, Relearn

> Ko te manu e kai ana i te mātauranga, nōna te ao.
> [The bird that partakes of knowledge gains the world.]
>
> — Traditional whakataukī

The whakataukī *Ko te manu e kai ana i te mātauranga, nōna te ao* reminds us that knowledge opens pathways to growth, understanding, and opportunity. By encouraging engagement in knowledge, we learn, reflect, and apply the learning, and we are empowered to participate confidently in the world and realise our potential.

This topic is inspired by the learning journey described by participants as a journey into themselves to becoming "SELf-Aware"; a play on the SEL acronym and the necessary introspective journey a kaiako must make to learn, unlearn, and relearn. Toffler (1970) suggests that future educational success would depend on an individual's ability to continuously learn, unlearn, and relearn in response to changing circumstances. Kaiako are the teachers of our future leaders, and their ability to learn, unlearn, relearn, and then teach tamariki demonstrates the need for kaiako to possess high-level SES and resilience. Schonert-Reichl (2017) affirm that kaiako who "know themselves" can better teach, promote, model, and utilise SEL in the classroom.

New learning requires intentionality and a support system that provides the opportunity to practice and receive feedback (Moss-Zobel, 2025). Knowing yourself is a personal concept; however, the ability to learn, unlearn, and relearn is critical to personal and professional growth. An unexpected finding was that teaching the *I Feel* SEL resources contributed to the development of kaiako social and emotional skills,

benefiting them in both their personal and professional lives. Being immersed in SEL resources and conversations targeted at tauira supported kaiako to delve into the *I Feel* SEL resources and implement and understand the activities and learning on a personal and professional level. This study demonstrates that engaging with the *I Feel* SEL resources promoted kaiako SEL competence. The insights, learning, unlearning, and relearning will be discussed further, first the changes observed by kaiako in their profession, followed by the changes observed by kaiako in their personal lives. Observations in both the professional and personal aspects will be highlighted and compared to those seen in literature.

SEL supports the professional development of kaiako. Unexpected to the outcomes of the resources was the added benefit of personal and professional development. In the subtheme *The SELf-Aware Kaiako: Growing Hearts and Minds at Kura and Kāinga; Kaiako Professional Growth,* participants exclaimed that teaching SEL was a parallel journey for tauira and kaiako. Engaging with the *I Feel* SEL resources in-depth meant tauira and kaiako who were engaging with the learning unlearned and relearned many SEL concepts they thought they had already mastered. Participants confirmed that teacher training does not include training on SEL or the importance of having strong SES. In today's learning environment, SEL is an important and necessary part of teaching. Beecher et al., (2021) state that SEL training should be provided to kaiako and then maintained throughout their career. As such, professional development that supports the building and development of a kaiako's SES benefits the educational

system and all SEL efforts. Kaiako with strong SES tend to manage the workload and learning environment and provide the necessary support for tauira with SEL (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Jones & Doolittle, 2017). Jones and Kahn (2017) explain that kaiako or those who try to teach SEL, who have not yet gained the SES or social and emotional competency, will find it difficult to teach and model SEL to tauira.

In the subtheme *The SELf-Aware Kaiako: Growing Hearts and Minds at Kura and Kāinga; Kaiako Personal Growth* participants explained that a kaiako's personal SES are essential to providing education spaces that promote education equality for all tauira regardless of culture. The stronger SES a kaiako possess, the stronger the social and emotional skill set built over time. This is critical to tauira SES development (Goleman, 2020). It has been suggested that kaiako engage in a minimum of one year of SEL prior to teaching SEL and SES in the classroom. However, this may be impractical, and on-the-job learning may be the best solution for now.

SEL has become popular and highly anticipated as part of the daily teaching curriculum to help kaiako manage in the classroom. Within the subtheme *The SELf-Aware Kaiako: Growing Hearts and Minds at Kura and Kāinga; Kaiako Professional Growth,* participants in the *I Feel* SEL sessions found multiple opportunities for kaiako to develop their professional SES. Kaiako developed skills such as being an active listener; supporting tauira with clear, calming activities related specifically to an emotion; how to ask the right questions; supporting confidence-building activities; and managing their own SEL development while strengthening relationships in the

classroom. Supportive teaching relationships amongst kaiako are also strongly linked to children's development. Building positive team relationships supports kaiako in their work, as it supports engagement in learning and professional development (Rodd, 2013). Team connections support the use and promotion of SEL, and create a supportive environment for kaiako to practice collaborative SEL study and prosocial behaviour (Duley, 2016). The links between increasing participants' own SES, working collaboratively, and reducing work stress could lead to findings that could assist kaiako. Overwhelm, staff shortages, burnout, and emotional distress are causes of additional stress that intensifies over time (Riley et al., 2021). When considered alongside research that shows it is important for kaiako to be able to regulate their own emotions to support children to do the same, a concerning picture emerges. If kaiako are experiencing high levels of stress, they are less likely to be able to support tamariki in building emotional competence (Greenberg & Abenavoli, 2016). The findings from this study indicate that participants were able to learn about themselves through engaging with the *I Feel* SEL resources; however, there is a lot of progress that needs to be made towards mitigating the increased stressors in the teaching profession.

Kaiako are tasked to be culturally responsive to the needs and culture of the tauira in their class. For SEL to be successful, culturally connected, competent kaiako are needed (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018). Each kaiako represents a trusted adult who advocates for tauira SEL and wellbeing. Understanding and managing their own emotions results in kaiako who have stronger relationship-building capability and

have higher self-efficacy (Cavioni et al., 2020; Brackett et al., 2010; CASEL, 2012). It is therefore important for kaiako to utilise the learn, unlearn, and relearn approach to the teaching profession, especially when it comes to SEL. Riwai-Couch (2023) invites kaiako to understand their own biases, to be critically conscious about race and power, and to address their own biases that influence decision making and kaiako interactions with others. Cavioni et al. (2020) state that through supporting the growth of kaiako SES, kaiako should experience better work satisfaction and reduced stress. The overall consensus from participants was that the simplicity, inclusivity, and adaptability of the resources extended to improved job satisfaction and awareness of SEL for kaiako.

In the subtheme *The SELf-Aware Kaiako: Growing Hearts and Minds at Kura and Kāinga; Kaiako Personal Growth*, participants observed that SEL supports kaiako personal growth and relationships outside of the classroom (Riwai-Couch, 2023). Consensus amongst kaiako emerged confirming that utilising the SEL tools taught in the *I Feel* SEL resources impacted their relationships at home and outside of the classroom. Although the SEL content was not new, some of the terms and the way the SEL content was presented provided a new insight into emotions. This new perspective on emotions shifted how kaiako approached managing emotions at home. Kaiako found themselves dealing with emotions at home with their own tamariki in similar ways to the classroom. The process of identifying the emotion, naming it, and then working to tame the emotion became regular practice on how kaiako deal with emotions in the classroom and at home as parents. Situations that used to cause upset no longer

caused upset, and kaiako were able to deal with the situations with a much calmer approach.

Within the subtheme *The SELf-Aware Kaiako: Growing Hearts and Minds at Kura and Kāinga; Kaiako Professional Growth,* participants commented that it was one thing to teach resilience and emotional intelligence to tauira, but to truly understand it, one has to apply the concepts in their own life. Within the subtheme *The SELf-Aware Kaiako: Growing Hearts and Minds at Kura and Kāinga; Kaiako Personal Growth,* a participant remarked on an increased sense of patience with situations at home that she previously found challenging, and that situations would arise at home that made her pause and think to try strategies from the books. This links to the study by Jones et al. (2015), who state that SES protects against the effects of negative life events, such as chronic stressors, and supports physical and mental health across all ages. As kaiako are able to apply SEL to their professional and personal lives, they are better able to deal with the chronic everyday stressors of managing the classroom, home, and family.

SEL is a skill that, once obtained, can be implemented in all facets of life, at home and in the classroom. Evidence of SES development in kaiako was acknowledged through new challenges kaiako chose to undertake in their personal lives. Within the subtheme *The SELf-Aware Kaiako: Growing Hearts and Minds at Kura and Kāinga; Kaiako Personal Growth,* participants found confidence to sign up for a half marathon, enter a Hyrox (fitness) competition, and start guitar lessons.

The empowering environment in the classroom flowed into the lives of kaiako. This links with the research by Thynne (2021), who stipulates that an empowering environment builds trust and resilience, which was demonstrated in tauira and kaiako who engaged in new challenges at home and in the personal challenges they chose to adopt.

Morkel and McLaughlin (2015) demonstrated that a positive environment is a foundation for social and emotional competence. In the subtheme *Manaaki the Moment: SEL Strategies for Calm, Connected Classrooms; School Management Promotes Safe Learning Environments*, participants found that when a positive environment is created and maintained, tauira and kaiako have the support they need to promote SEL. Just as tauira need to feel empowered and have a strong sense of belonging, participants felt that a strong sense of belonging to the school as a capable and appreciated professional was required to perform the job well. This study highlights the important role the school leadership, including principals, board of trustee members, and senior leadership, play in establishing a supportive environment for kaiako. Previous literature highlights the importance of a supportive school environment. In contrast, heightened levels of kaiako stress have been associated with lower tauira engagement and reduced academic achievement (Greenberg & Abenavoli, 2016).

The *I Feel* SEL resources gave tauira a sense of control over their own learning (Thynne, 2021). SEL is education that continues throughout the lifespan through new

challenges, past and present, causing new and old emotions to resurface, requiring us to learn, unlearn, and relearn throughout our lives.

An unexpected finding of this study was the impact of SEL on kaiako themselves. Participants reported both personal and professional growth through the development of their own social and emotional skills, reinforcing the view that SEL must first be understood and practised before it can be effectively taught. This growth enhanced kaiako confidence in modelling and teaching these skills, while contributing to stronger relationships, better communication, and a greater sense of belonging within the learning environment (Wang & Degol, 2016).

Implications

Supporting the development of a kaiako's SES increases wellbeing and positively impacts tauira achievements, motivation, sense of belonging at school, and mental health. Kaiako with strong SES are better able to regulate and recognise their own emotions, especially when experiencing stress and anxiety; can better collaborate with others; show empathy; and know when they need to reach out for support (Bergin et al., 2024). As has been demonstrated throughout this research, a kaiako who possesses competent SES has a significant advantage and understands the power SEL has over classroom management. Research clearly demonstrates the benefits SES produces for tauira outcomes, making a strong case for SEL to be embedded into the Aotearoa New Zealand education system and fostered and nourished through all year levels and for all kaiako (Schonert-Reichl, 2017).

A further implication of this research relates to kaiako wellbeing and burnout. Participants highlighted the increasing pressures faced by kaiako, including growing behavioural and learning support needs among tauira, limited resources, and the broader challenges associated with staff shortages and workforce retention. Kaiako shortages are a growing concern internationally, with declining enrolments in kaiako education programmes contributing to workforce pressures (Beecher et al., 2021). These challenges may increase the risk of kaiako burnout and attrition, potentially affecting both educator wellbeing and tauira outcomes. The findings of this study suggest that SEL may not only benefit tauira but also provide support for kaiako by creating positive classroom environments, strengthening relationships, and enhancing wellbeing. Consequently, there are important implications for educational leaders and policymakers to consider how adequate resourcing, professional support, and investment in kaiako wellbeing can contribute to a sustainable teaching workforce and positive outcomes for future generations.

Strengths and Limitations

While measures were taken to minimise potential sources of bias and enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, these limitations could not be entirely eliminated. The findings related to tauira outcomes were based solely on kaiako observations and perceptions rather than direct accounts from tauira themselves. As such, the study provides valuable insight into educator perspectives but does not capture the lived experiences of tauira participating in the SEL programme. Future research could

address this limitation by incorporating tauira voice to gain a more comprehensive understanding of learner experiences and outcomes.

A further limitation relates to the sample size and scope of the study. Eight kaiako from eight primary schools from five towns in Aotearoa New Zealand participated in the research. While this represents a relatively robust sample for a qualitative master's study and provides geographically diverse perspectives, the findings remain context-specific. Including a larger number of participants from a broader range of regions and school settings may have enhanced the breadth of perspectives captured and strengthened the transferability of the findings. As a result, findings should be interpreted as providing in-depth insight into the experiences of the participating kaiako rather than being generalisable to all primary school contexts in Aotearoa New Zealand.

A further consideration relates to the researcher's position as both researcher and one of the authors of the *I Feel* SEL resources. While this insider position provided a deep understanding of the programme and its intended application, it also introduced the potential for researcher bias during collection and interpretation. Recognising this possibility, several steps were taken to minimise its influence. Reflexive practice was utilised throughout the process, with ongoing consideration given to the personal experiences and assumptions that might shape the study. Prior to each interview, participants were informed of the purpose of the research and the interview process and were encouraged to share their experiences openly and honestly. Particular

emphasis was placed on communicating that both positive and negative feedback was valuable to the meaningful evaluation of the *I Feel* SEL resources. These strategies helped to reduce, although not entirely eliminate, potential concerns associated with insider research.

Consideration was given to the demands placed on kaiako who often manage significant teaching and professional responsibilities. Efforts were made to ensure the research was respectful of the participants' time and workload while still providing opportunities for meaningful discussion. Finally, although learner outcomes were not direct measures of tauira outcomes, they suggest that participation in the *I Feel* SEL programme may contribute to the development of emotional competence, positive relationships, and classroom engagement.

Why Is This Research Needed?

There is limited evidence-based research examining SEL implementation and outcomes in Aotearoa New Zealand that show how SEL programmes are experienced in a culturally diverse school setting for Māori and Pasifika learners. Although international research exists, the diversity and complexity of Aotearoa New Zealand's environment require a specific approach to ensuring cultural competence is observed. Little research has been conducted into the social and emotional skills of kaiako in an Aotearoa New Zealand setting, therefore highlighting the opportunity to investigate the importance of educating the educators about social and emotional competence. SEL is a potential aid to remove barriers to education and opportunity. Increasing the number

of Māori and Pasifika researchers, clinicians, practitioners, teachers, and policymakers working in mental health care who enact culturally competent care and whānau-based practice is one way to reduce the barriers to care access and stigma around mental distress (Faleafa et al., 2019; Ellison-Loschmann et al., 2024; Kapeli et al., 2020).

Opportunities for Future Research

While this research found that engagement with the *I Feel* SEL resources supported the development of social and emotional learning (SEL) and social-emotional skills (SES) among both tauira and kaiako, several avenues for future research have been identified. Future studies incorporating direct measures of tauira experiences and outcomes would provide a stronger evidence base for understanding the programme's impact. Research focusing specifically on Māori tauira, and likewise on Pasifika tauira, could provide deeper insight into the lived experiences of these groups within Aotearoa New Zealand schools and further explore culturally responsive approaches to SEL.

Additional research examining the lives of tauira beyond the classroom would be valuable in understanding how SEL knowledge and skills acquired at school influence home environments and other social contexts in which tauira participate. Further investigation into how *I Feel* SEL resources are implemented across different school settings could also contribute to the growing body of SEL literature and improve understanding of factors that support effective implementation.

This study also highlights opportunities to explore the impact of SEL on kaiako, including how SEL knowledge and practices may influence their personal wellbeing and relationships beyond the classroom. Research examining SEL programmes designed *by Māori, for Māori, and with Māori* may provide valuable insights into indigenous approaches to social and emotional learning. Similarly, studies utilising Pasifika methodologies could contribute important cultural perspectives and enhance understanding of SEL within Pasifika contexts.

A longitudinal study tracking outcomes for tauira who participate in SEL programmes across early childhood, primary, and secondary education would provide valuable insight into the long-term effects of SEL development. Further research could also explore the influence of SEL on gender-related differences in emotional regulation and wellbeing. Finally, investigating the impact of comprehensive SEL professional learning, such as a structured programme providing a minimum of one year of SEL training for kaiako, may offer important evidence regarding the role of educator preparation in successful SEL implementation and outcomes.

Conclusion

Empowering kaiako empowers tauira. As kaiako engaged with the *I Feel* SEL resources a clearer understanding of the role kaiako play in supporting the social and emotional development of tauira emerged. The SEL knowledge and activities tauira and kaiako participated in supported a calm and positive learning environment, enabling tauira to be prepared for learning. Relationships, in their various forms, play a

foundational role in successful adoption of SEL and SES. Culturally adaptive resources, combined with the ability of the kaiako to be culturally responsive, are critical to empowering tauira to connect with SEL using activities and teaching approaches that resonate with their experiences and identities. Through involvement with the *I Feel* SEL resources, tauira were empowered through the development of a stronger sense of identity, formation of meaningful and supportive relationships, access to culturally appropriate and relatable SEL resources, improved SEL vocabulary, and an enhanced sense of belonging. By engaging with the *I Feel* SEL resources, kaiako were able to promote SEL and SES effectively, creating a positive change in the lives of tauira and themselves.

The purpose of this study was to explore the impact of the *Ngā Kare ā Roto: I Feel* SEL resources on the emotional literacy and wellbeing of children and kaiako in eight primary schools across Aotearoa New Zealand. While SEL is an emerging area of research in Aotearoa New Zealand, notable gaps remain, particularly in relation to Māori and Pasifika tauira. This study sought to contribute to addressing this gap in the literature.

To investigate this topic, the research was guided by a Kaupapa Māori methodology grounded in te ao Māori values. A qualitative research approach was employed, with data collected through semi-structured interviews. Interviews were conducted following the implementation of the *I Feel* SEL resources by kaiako within their classrooms. Due to the geographical distance between participants and the

researcher, interviews were conducted online via Zoom. Throughout the research process, te ao Māori values remained central to the study's design, implementation, and interpretation.

Data was analysed using thematic analysis, resulting in the identification of four key themes: *Manaaki the Moment: SEL Strategies for Calm, Connected Classrooms; Te Ngākau Mārama: Learning the Language of Emotions; Tūrangawaewae and Fa'avae: Standing Strong in Cultural Identity and Connection*; and *The SELf-Aware Kaiako: Growing Hearts and Minds at Kura and Kāinga*. These findings were subsequently discussed in relation to the existing literature and broader understandings of SEL within the Aotearoa New Zealand context. The findings provide evidence that the *I Feel* SEL resources can support the development of social and emotional learning and social-emotional skills among both kaiako and tauira in primary school settings. The study highlights the potential of culturally responsive SEL resources to foster emotional literacy, wellbeing, belonging, and positive learning environments. Through engagement with the *I Feel* resources, kaiako were able to promote SEL and support the social and emotional development of their tauira in meaningful and contextually relevant ways.

This study explored kaiako experience delivering the I Feel SEL resources and highlighted some of the impacts SEL had in classrooms in Aotearoa New Zealand. The implications of the findings provides evidence of positive learning outcomes for tauira and kaiako as a result of the I Feel SEL resources and identifies opportunities for further research. Collectively, the findings contribute to the growing body of SEL research in

Aotearoa New Zealand and provide insight into the role of culturally responsive SEL resources in supporting positive outcomes for both kaiako and tauira.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Participant Information Sheet

TE KUNENGA KI PŪREHUROA | MASSEY UNIVERSITY
UNIVERSITY OF NEW ZEALAND

Ngā kare ā-roto. Exploring teachers experience delivering "I Feel"; a social-emotional intervention for children in New Zealand primary schools.

INFORMATION SHEET

Kia Ora. My name is Renee Mariner-Solomon. I am a postgraduate student studying at Massey University completing a Master of Arts in Psychology. I am a Māori/Pasifika researcher undertaking a qualitative bicultural research project that aims to find out how the CulturalHubb social-emotional intervention delivered in primary schools in Aotearoa, New Zealand has impacted teachers and children's emotions, in particular, anxiety and resilience.

This is an invitation to participate in Ngā kare ā roto and provides further information about the project, including what participant involvement would entail.

Project Description
Teachers participating in the CulturalHubb research project are invited to participate in this research. This project aims to collect information and the lived experience of seven teachers participating in the CulturalHubb study carried out during term 3, 2024 in schools in Aotearoa, New Zealand. Participants are invited to be interviewed at the conclusion of the CulturalHubb study to provide insight into their experience delivering social emotional resources to children.

Who can participate?

Teachers who are part of the CulturalHubb research are invited to participate in this research. A small number of people (seven) will be selected to participate, to allow for in-depth exploration of each person's experiences, thoughts, and feelings. Teachers who were born and/or raised in countries other than Aotearoa, New Zealand are not able to participate.

To acknowledge participation, copies of the Anxiety and Resilience books (*I Feel Anxious; I Feel Panic; You Can Do It: Have a Go!; Don't Give Up: You Can Be Resilient*) will be provided to participants as a koha.

Project Procedures
- Participants will be contacted to confirm their participation via email after which, Renee (the researcher) will contact them to arrange an interview date and time. A question schedule will be emailed to participants prior to the interview to allow participants time to prepare their thoughts and any aspects of the research they wish to talk about.
- It is anticipated that interviews will require one interview session of no longer than 1.5 hours.
- It is not anticipated that participants will experience any adverse physical or psychological risks while participating in this research, however, should any adverse experiences arise please contact your senior support teachers at your school for support.

Data Management

- The interview material data and participant information obtained in this research will be used for the purposes of the research only.

Massey University
Te Kunenga ki Pūrehuroa
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- All data will be stored securely in a confidential database, accessible only by Renee. Any information obtained during the research process remains confidential and will be de-identified when presented in the Masters thesis.
- Data will he held securely for up to a maximum of 2 years, after which it will be deleted and securely destroyed.
- A summary of the research findings and a copy of the completed Masters thesis will be sent to participants, if they indicate they would like this.

Participant's Rights
You are under no obligation to accept this invitation. If you decide to participate, you have the right to:

- decline to answer any particular question.
- withdraw from the study at any time.
- ask any questions about the study at any time during participation.
- provide information on the understanding that your name will not be used unless you give permission to the researcher.
- be given access to a summary of the project findings when it is concluded.
- ask for the recorder to be turned off at any time during the interview.

Project Contacts
Should you have any questions about the project, please contact:

Renee Mariner-Solomon
Researcher
Phone: [redacted]
Email: Renee.Mariner-Solomon.1@uni.massey.ac.nz

Elle Brittain
Research Supervisor
Phone: 0800 627 739 ext. 63624
Email: E.Brittain@massey.ac.nz

Other information:

Renee has dual roles as both a researcher and a writer for the *I Feel* series of books. As a researcher, her primary focus is to collect and analyze feedback from participants in an unbiased and ethical manner. This role is distinct from her role as a writer, where she creates content to support children's social and emotional well-being. No financial or other benefit will be received from your involvement in this research, and your feedback should be honest and impartial.

This project has been evaluated by peer review and judged to be low risk. Consequently, it has not been reviewed by one of the University's Human Ethics Committees. The researcher(s) named above are responsible for the ethical conduct of this research.

If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research that you wish to raise with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact Prof Craig Johnson, Director, Research Ethics, telephone 06 356 9099 ext. 85271, email humanethics@massey.ac.nz.

Appendix B: Interview Schedule

INTERVIEW GUIDE
Time expectation: 1.5 hours per interview

Below are a list of questions and discussion points developed by the researcher to guide the interview. The questions are used as a guide only and the conversation will be allowed to flow in the direction that participants dictate.

Research Questions to Guide the Discussion:

	Discussion Point 1: Whakawhanaungatana
1.	Tell me about yourself. Who are you? Where do you come from? What made you want to be a teacher? *This point allows us to whakawhanaungatanga with each other and explore ethnic identity, connection to family, friends and the school community, teaching experience, personal passion and interests, position in the wider community and any other important aspects the participants choose to share about themselves. This helps to set a foundation from which we can progress and discuss things of a more sensitive/deeper nature.*
	Discussion Point 2: Experience implementing
2.	Tell me about your experience using the *I Feel* resources? How many I Feel sessions did you hold per week? • 1-2, • 2-3, • 3-4, • 4-5 To make a difference to the children and teachers implementing the resource, how many sessions per week would you recommend? • Minimum – • Maximum –

	What books and resources made the most difference for your class? (can be more than one) why? What other recommendations would you make to the use or implementation of the resource so it makes an impact on participants and teachers learning? What were some challenges or difficulties you experienced when implementing the I Feel resources?
3.	What thoughts, images or feelings come to mind when you think about the *I Feel* resources?
Discussion Point 3: How did the *I Feel* intervention impact your personally?	
4.	Thinking about your class and your students, how did the *I Feel* resources impact the way you taught, interacted with, and helped children manage their emotions?
5.	Thinking about yourself, how did the *I Feel* resources influence you? - Did they influence your relationships? i.e. teachers, friends, home? - Did they help you to understand yourself and others? - Did they help you regulate and understand your own emotions? - Did they help you to improve your teaching ability, or your ability to connect with and relate to others?
6.	Did the *I Feel* resources increase your feelings of job satisfaction and decrease your feelings of stress and burnout?
Discussion Point 4: Your observations of the intervention on the children	
7.	**Before** using the *I Feel* resources, how did the children communicate their emotions, feelings or wellbeing to you and/or others?
8.	**After** using the I Feel resources, what changed in the way the children communicated their emotions, feelings or wellbeing to you and/or others?
9.	How did using the *I Feel* resources support learning and relationships individually, and amongst children in your class?
Discussion Point 5: Cultural Implications	

10.	In your opinion, did your culture or ethnicity influence the way you connected to, interpreted, understood, or engaged with the resources?
11.	In your opinion, did your culture or ethnicity influence the way that you taught or related to children in the classroom during the *I Feel* programme?
12.	Did the *I Feel* resources help you connect with your culture?
	Final Question
13.	Is there anything else you would like to add about your experience or observations during the study and using the *I Feel* resources?