

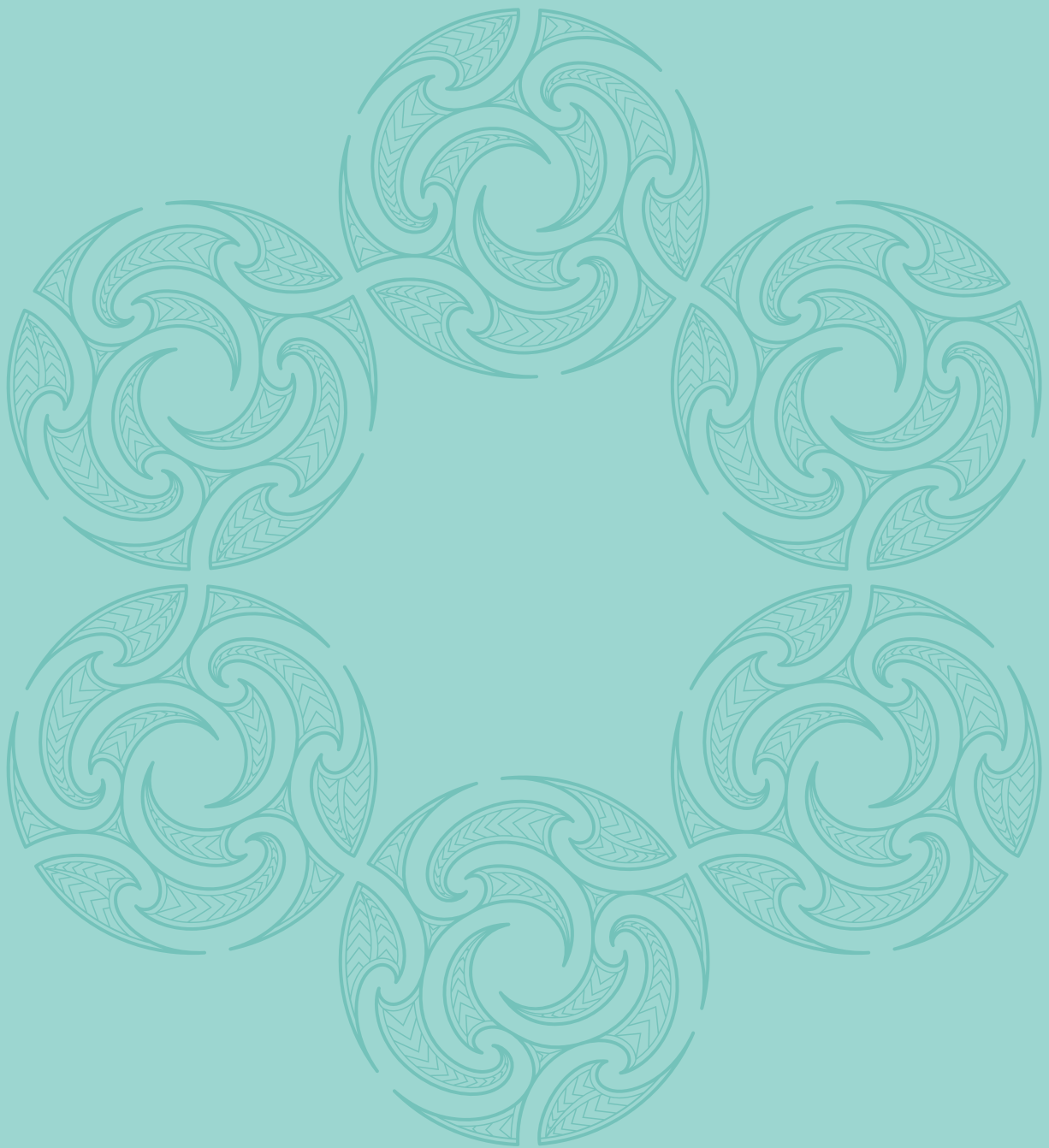


# He Matawai ki Tua

*A scan from beyond*

Summary of international research: The impact of COVID-19  
on the education of indigenous children and communities





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# Overview



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This summary is based on several research publications and articles sourced from the world-wide web. Most research findings are informed by quantitative and qualitative data. UNESCO and UNICEF publications have been major sources of information but are not the only source.

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The purpose of this summary is to provide a snapshot of the impact COVID-19 has had on the education of indigenous children and their communities in different parts of the world. This work draws on countries with vast populations, mainly India, Mexico, Canada, Hawaii, and Australia. The definition of indigenous is taken from *Indigenous Peoples in International Law* by Anaya (2004). Indigenous nations are distinctive communities with a continuity of existence and identity that links them to the communities, tribes, ancestral lands, history with distinctive cultural practices and beliefs. According to Anaya (2004, p.3) the term “indigenous” refers broadly to the living descendants of preinvasion inhabitants of lands now dominated by others. He identifies diverse Indian communities, First Nation tribes of America, nations of the Western Hemisphere, the Inuit and Aleut of the Arctic, the Aboriginal people of Australia, Māori of Aotearoa, Native Hawaiians, and other Pacific groups, including many of the non-dominant tribal peoples of Africa and Asia as indigenous.



## Impact of COVID-19

As the COVID-19 crisis continues to develop, communities around the world find themselves living in new and uncertain times. Because of this, governments around the world have taken measures to control the pandemic by temporarily closing schools, among other public institutions. UNESCO (2020) calculates that these closures are impacting over 72% of the students around the world (Sanchez Cruz, Masinire and Enrique Vez Lopez, 2021). This translates globally to 188 country-wide closures that impact on the schooling of 1.5 billion children (Kanungo, 2021)

There is a direct correlation between children's wellbeing and educational success. Waddell et al. (2020) comment on the health and wellbeing of children from British Columbia, Canada who are suffering economic difficulty. COVID-19 created significant challenges for children in their restrictions to other family members, economic hardship experienced because of substantial work closures and job losses and the loss of crucial support services. Waddell et.al not only identify the impact COVID 19 has been having on the mental health of children but also see this as an opportunity to act:

“ Failing to address children's mental health now will lead to greater costs in the future if mental health problems can persist into adulthood. COVID-19 is an unprecedented public health crisis. Yet it also presents an unprecedented opportunity – to make BC a place where the social and emotional wellbeing of all children is highly valued and where children are the focus of sustained collective efforts to ensure their healthy development (p.4). ”

The current pandemic is having an overwhelming impact, not only on people's health, but also on how they learn, work and live. Among the most significant challenges created by COVID-19 is how to adapt a system of education that is primarily built around attendance at physical schools. Measures have been taken globally to shut down schools at all levels and move education to the online arena. This entails a strong dependence on access to the internet and electronic gadgets which has pressured developed countries to act swiftly to provide better online learning platforms to their school children.

### COVID-19 and digital inequities

Developed countries have established strategies to narrow down the digital divide with help and efforts extended by stakeholders. Global leaders are exerting their collaborative efforts to facilitate learning and prevent an educational crisis. However, not all children have the privilege of having access to technological devices. These children are under threat of exclusion and being educationally deprived.

According to UNESCO and UNICEF, the sudden and compulsory closure of schools has more

severely affected indigenous children globally. The fact that some countries do not have information systems to identify the number of students who require distance education and how these communities are being served is an enormous barrier. There is a clear digital divide in distance education in Colombia, where 66% of the population does not have internet coverage and in Paraguay, where 92% of indigenous children do not have internet access (UNICEF, 2020).

Children from indigenous communities in Odisha, India suffer educational set back because of the lack of resourcing. Kanungo (2021) states:

“...children from disadvantaged groups are away from access to essential resources (e.g., no mid-day meal, books, teacher’s assistant, e-learning materials, and lack of computer or mobile phones at home). Hence, it keeps them under the possibilities of early dropouts, vulnerable to exploitation- particularly girls and so on. Amidst all these inequalities already existing, more chances are that the ongoing pandemic will aggravate the negative impacts. (p.2). ”

While the state authorities provide resources like reading material, digital libraries, online course content, and sharing networks to supplement traditional classroom practices in India, online teaching looks unsustainable, according to Bhattacharya (2020). The reality of the education system for tribal children in Odisha is quite different. As a disadvantaged

district, Odisha is facing difficulties in bridging the gap of digital access. Families do not necessarily use phones for study purposes. Some do not have electronic resources, others do not know how to use social media and face difficulties in understanding subjects from education apps (Bedi, 2020). The research shows that the lack of necessities like electricity in schools, computer laboratories in schools and space for technological resource contributes to extreme deprivation. The data identified in this piece of research shows that 77% of schools are functioning with no electricity (OPEPA -Odisha Primary Education Programme Authority, 2016-17). This weakens the prospect of making online learning accessible to teach these children and it has certainly kept them far away from facilities beyond basic ones.

COVID-19 is a challenge for indigenous communities in Mexico. Social inequalities and limited access to services combine with historical patterns of discrimination amplify its negative impacts (Cohen and Mata-Sanchez, 2021).

The Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islanders (NHPI) hold on to bitter memories of how infectious diseases have decimated their thriving populations throughout their history. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the educational, economic, and environmental outcomes of U.S. colonization, neocapitalism, and compulsory education. These outcomes and their root issues can no longer be written off as necessary evils in the service of the “greater good” where only the Indigenous population suffer at the expense of “human progress” (Keali’i Kukahiko, 2020)

Despite the higher COVID-19 risk among Native Hawaiian Pacific Islanders (NHPI), it is important to recognize the resiliency and fortitude of these communities. Despite two centuries of colonisation, occupation, and exploitation by Western powers, NHPI communities continue to

flourish while maintaining their unique cultural values, perspectives, practices, and aspirations. The values and practices of aloha (compassion), mālama (caring), and lōkahi (unity), provide the guiding principles to overcome any challenge. Their immediate response was to care for their community and keep everyone connected by creating virtual concerts and webinar series. NHPI hold indigenous wisdom and perspectives to overcome adversity and thrive. UNESCO stated:

“Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, UNESCO took initiatives to support Member States in their efforts to mitigate the immediate impact of school closures, particularly for vulnerable and disadvantaged communities. School closures widen learning inequalities and disproportionately impacted vulnerable children and youth, including indigenous peoples.”

According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students face additional challenges due to their reduced interaction with Indigenous teacher assistance and to the challenges of incorporating culturally appropriate pedagogies in online resources.

Closing the Gap is a strategy that aims to improve the life outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with respect to health and wellbeing, education, employment, justice, safety, housing, land and waters, and languages. According to a report released March 2021, First Nations (Aboriginal) show one in four households has no internet connection which limits learning opportunities for indigenous students in Australia. COVID-19 has widened this gap and with school closures, aboriginal students cannot access the learning materials, teaching and support that their

class peers could access online. World Vision’s First Nations policy advisor Dr Scott Winch said the findings confirmed the educational disadvantage for First Nations students fuelled by poorer digital access — a problem that had only grown worse during the COVID-induced school closures. Affordability for digital access found the gaps between aboriginals and non-aboriginal families were only getting wider. The report states that educational outcomes for Indigenous students are already lagging the broader population, and indigenous children are twice as likely to be developmentally vulnerable. Dr Winch goes on to say:

“What is needed is a coordinated, national approach to ensure no one is left out of Australia’s digital future and that First Nations students are prioritised in all efforts to close the Digital Divide. This should involve a national strategy backed by funding, resources and a commitment to work across sectors and geographies to address the digital inclusion gap for educational equity COVID-19 and indigenous languages (p.14)”

Research conducted by the Human Rights Watch (HRW, 2021) in Australia, Canada, Colombia, Indonesia, New Zealand, and the United States on the repercussion of COVID-19 school closures on indigenous children’s right to education highlights major ongoing issues. Historical marginalisation, exclusion, racism and discrimination manifests in lower-incomes, lower levels of education within families, failure to adequately accommodate indigenous languages, and under-investment in necessary infrastructure such as the internet. The research states:

“The Covid-19 pandemic, and related school closures, has negatively affected children’s right to a quality education around the world. Indigenous children—both those living in and outside of indigenous communities—frequently faced additional barriers to distance learning alternatives. As an education official in the Pueblo of Jemez, a Native American community in the United States, said: “This pandemic has exacerbated the inequities that exist.” (p. 1).”

Many families in the Pueblo of Jemez, a Native American community in New Mexico, United States, do not have internet access, or sufficiently strong internet, to support video- or audio-based teaching (Human rights Watch 2020). To overcome this, many teachers distributed printed handouts. This created problems for some younger students, because their first language is an oral language that the tribal council has decided is not to be written. This is prominent in one school from kindergarten through to first and second grade. Sanchez-Cruz, Masinire and Lopez (2021) state:

“We’ve been conditioned to think of education as solely in English... Ever since the 2000s, we’ve been trying to address that and decolonize our education through a Jemez-based curriculum, including language and culture.”

A study carried out by the Indigenous language research partnership housed at the University of Victoria, British Columbia focused on the impact of COVID-19 on the Indigenous Language Revitalisation (ILR) efforts in Canada. This piece of work was part of a much larger research programme. The findings based on an analysis of public social media posts, dated March through July 2020, about Indigenous languages and the COVID-19 pandemic. There was a noticeable shift from in person learning and teaching to virtual spaces and creating and sharing resources on social media. As social media became more-widely used by members of different generations, indigenous and non-indigenous communities alike connected and shared experiences. Researchers observed that culturally specific forms of humour became one catalyst for building connections.

The ILR efforts have had to work tirelessly through a system and history of colonisation and marginalisation. Despite this Chew (2021) states:

“There are concerns about how the ILR space will be sustained post COVID; whether increased accessibility will increase interest and involvement in the long term; what are the issues around data sovereignty and privacy when sharing their languages on social media and how will ILR be impacted because of declining economic conditions due to COVID. Chew et al (2019, P.133)”





## Conclusion

Despite the difficult situation created by the pandemic on those countries with high percentages of indigenous population, it would be difficult to identify the true impact COVID-19 has had on many of these communities.

The research and information available on the impact of COVID-19 on the education of indigenous children is endless. It appears that the term ‘indigenous populations and vulnerability’ emerge as two halves to a whole. The link between children’s mental health and educational success is key. However, the anxiety suffered by many indigenous children during COVID-19 and other contributing factors has had a big impact on their learning. The above discussion has highlighted that access to digital and online connectivity was either very difficult or non-existent for the communities identified in this report for various reasons, including isolation, economic status, and restriction of access. Another re-occurring theme was the issue of inequities and the impact of colonisation, marginalisation and racism which eventuate in major disparities in education, economically and health statistics. There is still a lot of work to be done globally. UNICEF identifies some main challenges to the governments of the world:

- Limited access to online learning platforms for vulnerable children
- Lack of online national curriculum nor content adapted for indigenous children, refugees, migrants, and children with disabilities
- Limited knowledge and capacity of teachers to use online platforms and online teaching resources
- Limited offline initiatives to respond to educational needs of most vulnerable children without internet access

- Lack of educational material that is culturally responsive and adapted to all spoken languages
- Lack of tools to monitor and evaluate the progress of learning outcomes.

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