Carving a pathway to wellbeing: A toi whakairo approach to mental wellbeing led by a Māori health provider

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(Ngāpuhi, Ngāti Hine, Tainui me Ngāti Maniapoto)

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Karakia Timatanga

Tēnei te ara o Ranginui, e tū ake nei

Tēnei te ara o Papatūānuku, e takato nei

Tēnei te ara o Ranginui rāua ko Papa, e takoto nei

Kia rarau te tapuwae o Tāne ki raro

Tēnei te pō, nau mai te ao

Karangatia te ao e piri

Karangatia ko Tāne,e piri, e tata

Whakamaua kia tina,tina

Hui ē! Tāiki ē!

This is the pathway of Father Sky above us

This is the pathway of Earth Mother below us

This is the pathway of Father Sky and Earth Mother before us

Allow the soles of Tāne to settle into

The path that leads us from dark to light

Beckon the light / wisdom to embrace me

Beckon Tāne the bearer of light and wisdom

To embrace and hold till it is permanent

Permanent

Gathered as One

Abstract

Māori experience persistent inequities in mental health, underscoring the need for culturally grounded, responsive approaches to care. This thesis explores how whakairo (carving), delivered through a kaupapa Māori health provider, operates as a therapeutic tool to support mental health and wellbeing. Situated within Te Kōhao Health in the Waikato region, the study examines how a toi-based approach contributes to hauora (Māori philosophy of health) within a primary healthcare context and considers implications for mental health policy and service delivery.

This rangahau (process of finding out or seeking – Māori research) is grounded in a kaupapa Māori methodology exercised through the Takarangi Framework. Ethical approval was obtained from Massey University's Human Ethics Committee (OM2 25/24). As an artist, I also engaged uku (clay) as an embodied method of inquiry, with the making of an ipu whenua (vessel used to hold and bury the placenta), which is woven throughout the thesis as a parallel creative and analytical journey. Data were gathered through hui (gatherings, meetings) and semi-structured interviews with nine storytellers, including tohunga whakairo (expert carvers), programme graduates, Te Kōhao leaders, and kura (school) representatives connected to the carving programme. Their pūrākau (talk, stories, narrative) provide lived, organisational, and facilitative perspectives on the therapeutic application of whakairo.

Findings are presented through an interpretative pūrākau structured around the metaphor of a waka (canoe) journeying along an awa (water), generating ripples of mauri ora (wellbeing and flourishing). Whakairo emerged as an interconnected system of artistic practice (the waka), kaupapa Māori (Māori way of doing) processes (the awa), and healing outcomes (the ripples of mauri ora). As an embodied art form, it fostered symbolism, reflection, coping, meaning-making and forward movement. As a kaupapa Māori approach, it was grounded in tikanga (customary system of values and practices), wairua (spirit), whakapapa (genealogy, connection), and collective responsibility. As a therapeutic pathway, it strengthened identity, resilience, whanaungatanga (connection, kinship, relationship), belonging, and mana (prestige, authority) expressed through achievement, confidence and pride. Through these forms of healing, participants were observed to move from states of mauri moe or mauri oho (compromised wellbeing) toward mauri ora—flourishing wellbeing.

This thesis contributes new insights into the therapeutic application of whakairo and highlights the need for funding, evaluation, and policy environments that better recognise Māori-led, holistic approaches to mental health and wellbeing.

Te reo has been used throughout this thesis; a glossary has been attached in Appendix 1.

Acknowledgements

I would like to first acknowledge and express my gratitude to the storytellers of this rangahau (research) who trusted me with their kōrero (talk, stories, narrative). Thank you for your time, expertise, and contributions, which are the heart of this rangahau. The stories and teachings you have shared continue to inspire me, and I will carry them forward beyond this rangahau into my own creative practice, personal life, and career.

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Figure 1.1. The unworked lump of clay. As the unworked clay marks the beginning of the ipu's formation, it reflects the early stage of this rangahau — a space of potential, intention, and unfolding possibility.

1.1 Introduction to the kaupapa

This thesis explores how toi whakairo (carving) functions as a therapeutic approach to support mental health and wellbeing. It considers the ways in which whakairo operates beyond artistic practice to be a culturally grounded pathway to healing for whānau. This chapter establishes the broader contexts within which the study is situated. It first examines the enduring inequities in Māori mental health before framing mental wellbeing through a Māori worldview, outlining the holistic lens that underpins this study. Mahi toi (Māori arts) are then introduced within the creation pūrākau (ancestral narrative form that transmits mātauranga Māori, cosmology, and cultural knowledge), showing the origins and unique worldview that shape these practices. This is explained so that the reader can better interpret whakairo (carving). Finally, this rangahau (process of finding out or seeking – Māori research) is situated within the context of kaupapa Māori health organisations, specifically Te Kōhao Health and their carving programme.

1.2 Contextualising Māori Mental Health Inequities

1.2.1 Colonisation and Ongoing Structural Impacts

Mental illness is the leading cause of disability globally (Arias et al., 2022), and Māori, like many Indigenous populations, continue to face inequitable mental health outcomes (P. Reid et al., 2019). Understanding the mental health inequities that Māori face requires consideration of the historical and contemporary contexts in which Māori mental health is situated.

The enduring impacts of colonisation continue to shape Māori experiences of wellbeing. Prior to European settlement, Māori lived collectively, enabling effective social organisation for the passing down of knowledge and values (Reweti et al., 2023). Such organisation was fundamental to upholding cultural practices like mahi toi (Brown et al., 2024). This intergenerational knowledge was inherent to identity and to understanding connections between people and the environment (Reweti et al., 2023).

Despite Māori belonging to, and being kaitiaki (guardian) of, all the land in Aotearoa, New Zealand, much of this was lost through war, confiscation, force, and purchasing. So, by 2017, Māori held only 5% of their lands (Thom & Grimes, 2022). With the loss of land also came

the loss of access to its resources, including the awa (water), ngahere (forests), and kai (food) (Thom & Grimes, 2022). The availability of resources needed to support healthy living and cultural practices declined (Brown et al., 2024). Māori were subsequently impoverished economically and spiritually (Moewaka Barnes & McCreanor, 2019).

Fundamental to Māori identity is the land, through a sense of being part of and belonging to it (Durie, 1998), which is reflected in the positioning of Māori as tangata whenua – people of the land (Brown et al., 2024; Reweti et al., 2023). Through land loss, this connection was severed, and many Māori were displaced from their whenua (land). Displacement minimised whānau (family), hapū (subtribe), and iwi (tribe) cohesion, as well as the intergenerational knowledge and support structures they enabled (Thom & Grimes, 2022; Moewaka Barnes & McCreanor, 2019). For Māori, land alienation also resulted in the loss of their mana (authority, prestige), autonomy, and freedom to govern themselves (J. Reid et al., 2017).

As the Crown assumed governance over Aotearoa, it introduced numerous legislative acts and policies that systematically disadvantaged Māori. Such policies included the Native Lands Act 1865, which perpetuated land loss; the Native Schools Act 1867, which resulted in the decline of te reo Māori (Māori language) through the emotional and physical abuse of tamariki (children) who spoke te reo (Wirihana & Smith, 2014); and the Tohunga Suppression Act 1907, which outlawed Rongoā Māori (Māori healing practices) in favour of Western-trained doctors (Came, 2012). Māori continue to face unconscious bias and racism within contemporary contexts, including mainstream mental health services (Manuel et al., 2023). Through these cumulative colonial impacts, Māori have been exposed to complex and intergenerational trauma, contributing to ongoing inequities and challenges to mental wellbeing across generations (Wirihana & Smith, 2014).

To fully understand the scale of this disruption, it is important to recognise the strength and sophistication of Māori health systems prior to colonisation. Māori maintained a well-developed public health system grounded in balance between people, place, and spirit through tapu (sacred, restriction) and noa (ordinary, free from restriction) (Came et al., 2020b; Durie, 1998; Waitangi Tribunal, 2011). Where illness was present, treatment was provided by tohunga rongoā (Māori healers), who addressed breaches of tapu to remedy the symptoms of ill health (Waitangi Tribunal, 2011). In other words, Māori healing focused simultaneously on the root cause and the symptoms (Waitangi Tribunal, 2011). These

Indigenous health structures were later disrupted by the imposition of a Western-oriented health system (Graham & Masters-Awatere, 2020), where the individualistic and biomedical definitions of health conflict with the holistic understandings of hauora (Māori philosophy of health) held by Māori (Elers, 2014).

Mainstream health services have failed to meet Māori needs. Māori, on average, have the poorest health status of all ethnic groups in Aotearoa (Waitangi Tribunal, 2023), facing inequities in access to, quality of, and treatment outcomes in healthcare (Medical Council of New Zealand, 2019). These inequities extend to the mental health sector (Government Inquiry into Mental Health and Addictions [GIMHA], 2018) and the provision of health services (Waitangi Tribunal, 2023). Thus, historical and structural conditions have not only shaped mental health outcomes across generations but have also impeded access to culturally appropriate remedies.

1.2.2 Te Tiriti o Waitangi and Mental Health Obligations

The persistent inequities in Māori mental health outcomes and the failure of mainstream services to meet Māori needs constitute a breach of Te Tiriti o Waitangi — Aotearoa's constitutional agreement that sets out the obligations between the Crown and Māori (Came, 2014; Waitangi Tribunal, 2014). Through Article Two of Te Tiriti, Māori were guaranteed protection of their taonga (treasures), which Māori assert includes health (Durie, 1998), alongside the retention of tino rangatiratanga (self-determination) (Waitangi Tribunal, 2011). Article Three further affirms the right to equitable citizenship and therefore equal access to health and care (Waitangi Tribunal, 2023). These sustained failures to protect Māori health and ensure equitable outcomes have led to the Wai 2575 claim, the Waitangi Tribunal's Health Services and Outcomes Inquiry. Having completed phase one, which examined aspects of primary healthcare, phase two will hear claims related to Māori mental health and addictions (Came et al., 2020a; Waitangi Tribunal, n.d.). This focus underscores the urgency and priority of addressing Māori mental health inequities. For mental health solutions to be effective, they must engage with Māori understandings of illness, health, and care (Haitana et al., 2022).

1.3 Māori Understandings of Mental Wellbeing

Mental health, as defined by the World Health Organization (2022), is a state of wellbeing

that enables people to cope with life's stresses, realize their abilities, learn well, work well, and contribute to their community. It exists on a complex continuum, being experienced differently from person to person with varying levels of distress and different social and clinical outcomes (World Health Organization, 2022). For Māori, mental wellbeing is similarly concerned with balance and functioning but is understood within broader cultural and spiritual contexts.

1.3.1 Pōrangi and Matakite

While there is no one Māori way of understanding mental distress and psychosis (Taitimu et al., 2018), it is important to note the distinct cultural perspectives of causation and framing of mental illness through a Māori worldview. Through a te ao Māori (Māori worldview) perspective, Māori who experience what is now defined as mental illness were thought to be suffering a spiritual affliction (Gassin, 2019). One such affliction is known as pōrangi, meaning "dark night" (Taitimu et al., 2018), the origin of which lies within the creation pūrākau. As the world moved through its states of existence - Te Kore (the void), Te Pō (the night) and Te Ao Mārama (the world of light) - each phase signified different states of being, consciousness, and ability. Te Ao Mārama is where we currently exist in light and being (Marsden & Royal, 2003). Pōrangi understands mental illness as a regression of the mind back to a state of Te Pō. In this state of darkness and disconnect, one loses a sense of time, space, and self, becoming withdrawn, disconnected, and hearing and seeing things that are not physically present (Randal et al., 2019; Taitimu et al., 2018). Glavish (2000, as cited in Randal et al., 2019) offers a similar definition where Te Pō represents being lost in total despair, while Rangi signifies an out-of-reach sky or day that one is trying to grasp. Such cosmic understandings have also been reflected by Piripi and Body (2010) in their mental health assessment tool, Tihei-wa Mauri Ora.

In contrast to regression, one could also be or experience Matakite (Taitimu et al., 2018).

"Matakite. That's what we call it. Sometimes it's a blessing, sometimes a warning." – Mihiwira Jakeman (as cited in McClure, 2017).

This quote was extracted from an interview with Vice about my mother's experiences with mental illness. It was a whakaaro (understanding), shared by my Toops (nickname meaning

tupuna and grandmother), Mihiwira Jakeman, who was a great holder of mātauranga (Māori knowledge) and whakapapa (genealogy, connection) (Jakeman, 2019).

Matakite are able to see and perceive the world in ways others cannot (Ngata, 2014). While the phenomenon is understood in a range of ways, it generally denotes a perception beyond the five senses (Ngata, 2014). Matakite are often considered seers with foresight and awareness of actions and activities in other places (Taitimu et al., 2018). While being multisensory, it is also a multidimensional intuition. The physical, psychic, and cosmic worlds are traversed all the way back to Te Kore, the realm of creative potential, where the gift of matakite is derived (Ngata, 2014). Again, there is recognition of Māori whakapapa and cosmology within this understanding of psychological experience.

Both pōrangi and matakite highlight the centrality of wairua (spirit) and culture in understanding Māori mental health. Indeed, these spiritual and cultural beliefs have persisted into contemporary Aotearoa despite colonisation and the imposition of a Western health system (Randal et al., 2019).

1.3.2 Holistic Understanding of Mental Health: Te Whare Tapa Whā

From a te ao Māori perspective, mental health is understood holistically, being dependent on cultural, spiritual, physical, and social wellbeing (Durie, 1998). Many Māori frameworks have emerged that express such understandings of hauora, including Te Pae Māhutonga (Durie, 2004), Te Wheke (Pere & Nicholson, 1991) and Te Whare Tapa Whā (Durie, 1998). While each of these models offers valuable insight, this thesis draws on Te Whare Tapa Whā as a widely recognised and accessible framework through which to present and engage with mental wellbeing from a te ao Māori perspective. Te Whare Tapa Whā was developed by psychiatrist Sir Mason Durie in 1982 during a training session for fieldworkers of the Māori Women's Welfare League. Drawing together key themes discussed at the workshop, Durie used the metaphor of a wharenui (meeting house) to articulate a distinctly Māori conception of health (Durie, 1998). He related each of the four walls of the wharenui to a different dimension of wellbeing: taha tinana (physical), taha hinengaro (mental and emotional), taha wairua (spiritual) and taha whānau (family and social) (Durie, 1998). Each wall is essential to the strength of the whare, symbolising the person; if one dimension is weakened, the stability of the whole is compromised. The symbolic representation of this

model as a wharenui (meeting house), where Māori stories are etched upon its surfaces through whakairo, offers a meaningful and relevant lens for this thesis.

Taha tinana is the physical or bodily element, commonly understood in Western conceptions of health; however, within te ao Māori, there is a distinction between tapu and noa. Certain parts of the body are considered tapu, such as the head, particularly important when considering mental health. Bodily functions such as sleeping, eating, and defecation have their own significance and require different rituals to respect restrictions and maintain health. Illness is thought to occur when there is an imbalance of tapu and noa (Durie, 1998).

Taha hinengaro concerns the expression of both thoughts and feelings, which derive from the same source within the individual. Thinking for Māori is holistic in nature, seeking explanations through synthesis into wider contexts rather than divination into smaller parts (Durie, 1998). A person who can embrace this holistic thinking and join ideas together through integrative understandings exhibits a level of wellness admired in Māoridom (Durie, 1985).

Taha wairua is a capacity for faith and understanding the connections between human situation and the environment. Wairua is evident in a belief in the atua (primary energy sources, gods) and through relationships with the environment. The natural environment is fundamental to identity and wellbeing. An individual is more prone to illness or misfortune if they lack spiritual awareness, mauri (spirit, life force) (Durie, 1998), and mana (prestige or state of spiritual authority conferred by the gods) (Durie, 1985).

Taha whānau acknowledges the importance of whānau and the social element of health. Whānau is a key support system for Māori. They provide care physically but also culturally and emotionally and give space to identity and one's sense of purpose (Durie, 1998).

All four pillars are needed to achieve wellbeing. When one dimension is compromised, the stability of the whole whare is affected. Therefore, while this thesis focuses on mental wellbeing, it does so through a kaupapa Māori lens, where mental health is inseparable from physical, social, spiritual, cultural, and environmental wellbeing. The holistic understanding of hauora and mental health highlights the necessity of Māori-led approaches to healthcare, such as mahi toi and whakairo.

1.4 Mahi Toi as Epistemology and Practice

1.4.1 Creation Pūrākau and Cosmological Foundations

In this thesis, pūrākau are not used as metaphor alone, but as epistemological foundations that ground understanding of toi, healing, and te ao Māori. For this reason, the creation pūrākau is revisited in brief here to highlight the cosmological framework from which mahi toi emerges. One of the foundational pūrākau is that of the creation of the world, from which the cosmological states of Te Kore, Te Pō, and Te Ao Mārama emerge. Māori arts, or mahi toi, begin in darkness before the separation of our primordial parents (Brown et al., 2024). The creation of the Māori world begins with absolute nothingness, absolute darkness and unlimited potential known as Te Kore, the void (Rangiwai, 2018; Kereopa-Woon & Waitoki, 2017). As a place of absolute potentiality, Te Kore has been likened to the source of creativity (Makereti, 2018). From Te Kore came Te Pō, the night, and a state of becoming (Marsden & Royal, 2003). Then emerged our earth mother, Papatūānuku, and sky father Ranginui, who lay together in marital embrace, preventing light from entering the world. From Rangi and Papa descended the many atua (gods) including Tāne Mahuta (god of the forests), Tangaroa (god of the sea) and Tāwhirimatea (god of wind and storms). No longer wanting to remain confined in the darkness between their parents, many of the atua agreed upon their separation. It was Tāne who separated the pairing, allowing light to penetrate the world, moving us into the third state of existence, Te Ao Mārama – The World of Light (Rangiwai, 2018; Kereopa-Woon & Waitoki, 2017).

These three states of existence, each imbued with creative and generative potential, remain ever-present, as time within te ao Māori is understood to be non-linear. Thus, the ability to remember, create, reimagine and recreate remains with us (Nicholson, 2020). Indeed, the stories that descend from the separation of our primordial parents onwards form the basis for the emergence and practice of the different forms of mahi toi (Brown et al., 2024). There are many examples of toi, including whakairo, uku (clay), weaving, tā moko (tattoo), construction, adornments, textiles, kapa haka (Māori performing arts), kōwhaiwhai (Māori patterns), painting, and pūrākau. This thesis explores whakairo within the wider ecosystem of mahi toi, using uku (the toi that I practice) to connect with the creative energy fundamental to this research kaupapa.

1.4.2 Whakairo

There are several stories associated with the origins of whakairo. The carving programme that is the focus of this thesis references the East Coast legend of Tangaroa, Ruatepukepuke, and Manuruhi (Te Kōhao, 2024a). In this pūrākau, woodcarving came from Tangaroa and was discovered by his grandson Ruatepukepuke. Ruatepukepuke's son Manuruhi had an insatiable appetite for kai moana (seafood), so Ruatepukepuke made an exquisite fishing lure. He warned his son to be careful and not to use the hook without him. In his impatience, Manuruhi did not pay heed to his father and caught a massive kai moana. However, Manuruhi did not follow the ritual rites of offering the first fish back to the moana, affronting Tangaroa. Tangaroa punished him by taking his human form and turning him into a birdlike tekoteko (carved figure), which he placed in front of his house, Huiteananui (the underwater house of Tangaroa). Ruatepukepuke journeyed into the ocean in search of him. When he found Huiteananui, he was amazed by the carvings that covered the whare. He heard the poupou (carved posts) talking to each other and inquired as to his son's whereabouts. One poupou informed him that the birdlike tekoteko was his son. Ruatepupuke planned his revenge, setting fire to Huiteananui. He only had time to rescue the tekoteko (his son) and four silent poupou before swimming back to his village. Thus, the first carvings came into the world (B. Graham, 2017; Mead, 2017; Te Kōhao, 2024a). Ruatepukepuke's koha (gift) of the silent poupou became the model for whakairo (Te Kōhao, 2024a; Mead, 2017), and this pūrākau underpins the protocols and tikanga (customary system of values and practices) of its practice.

Whakairo works are commonly done on wood, bone, and stone, and range from waka (canoe) to rākai (adornments) to pātaka (storehouses) and whare (houses) (Brown et al., 2024). Through the medium of wood, whakairo is also closely linked to the atua of the forests, Tāne Mahuta, and the practice was considered to be within the domain of men (Brown et al., 2024; B. Graham, 2017). However, these gender boundaries have been challenged and evolved over the decades leading to increased wāhine participation in whakairo. Te Kohao Health has innovated and expanded their whakairo programme to ensure the participation of females. For hundreds of years, carving was a normal part of our ancestors' surroundings and Aotearoa's visual landscape. It is an integral part of who we are as Māori, and its traditions have shaped what we know as Māori art (Brown et al., 2024).

Through carving, kaiwhakairo (carvers) depict our ancestors and origins, giving faces to history and connections to the past (Mead, 2017). In an exploration of Māori practice and hauora, I felt it was important to be not just an observer but immersed within the kaupapa of the rangahau.

1.4.3 Uku and Embodied Inquiry

I consider uku (clay) not as a practice that is separate from whakairo, but rather a part of its legacy. While Tāne is an atua for whakairo through the medium of wood, he was also the first sculptor (Brown et al., 2024; Riddell & Heke, 2023). After the separation of Rangi and Papa, Tāne was tasked with finding the female element. The atua of the ngahere subsequently travelled to Kurawaka, where he sculpted Hineahuone, the first woman, from clay. It was through the gifts of the many atua and Tāne's hau ora (breath of life) that Hineahuone sneezed - Tīhei mauri ora - let there be life, and it was from this life that humankind came into existence (Rangiwai, 2018; Riddell & Heke, 2023). For me, engaging with uku is not a departure from whakairo but a continuation of the same creative whakapapa. It offers a means to better understand and engage in this rangahau in a creative and tikanga-consistent way.

Uku is a contemporary Māori art form. The ceramic technologies possessed by our forebears were left behind in the migration between Te Moana-nui-a-Kiwa and Aotearoa (Riddell & Heke, 2023). Māori did, however, have many traditional uses for clay. For example, kōkōwai (red ochre), considered the stained blood from the separation of Rangi and Papa, was used for ritual purposes and as paint for war, waka, whakairo, and whare (meeting houses). Clay would also be used within cooking practices, and balls of baked kōkōwai were used as trade items (Riddell & Heke, 2023). It is clear Māori observed and understood the effect of fire on clay (Riddell & Heke, 2023) although beyond baked kōkōwai, there is little evidence of early fired Māori ceramics (Brown et al., 2024). Contemporary uku artists instead look to ancestral stories to create their whakapapa of practice (Brown et al., 2024). Uku was not simply a medium of choice but an ancient material that expresses connection to Papatūānuku (Riddell & Heke, 2023). It is the connection to Papa, the grounding nature and the fluid and changing nature of the material that draws me to uku.

As part of this embodied engagement, I developed an uku art piece in the form of an ipu whenua (vessel used to hold and bury the placenta) to symbolise the journey of this rangahau. Images of the developing ipu are included throughout the thesis, with each stage corresponding to a chapter. The unworked lump of clay represents the Introduction, reflecting the beginnings of both the ipu and the research. As the form begins to emerge during the scoping review, so too does the direction and shape of the rangahau. The methodology chapter is symbolised through the tools and hands actively shaping the clay, mirroring the methodological tools and ways of doing that guided the research process. The findings are represented through the carving of patterns into the ipu, echoing how the stories of the carving programme were revealed and inscribed within this study. The unfired completed form reflects the discussion, signalling completion while still holding space for potential. Finally, the transformation of the ipu whenua into a mould so that many vessels can be made from its form symbolises the conclusion. It represents the end of this rangahau but not the end of this creative journey. In this way, the creation of the uku piece is not supplementary to the thesis but integral to it, serving as a visual and material metaphor for the unfolding of the rangahau itself.

In te ao Māori, these toi are the product of a pre-existing distinct body of knowledge, insights and values known as mātauranga Māori, and are made possible through human industry and creativity (Waitangi Tribunal, 2011). Māori artists create a tapu space in the making of their works using materials from the whenua, be they clay or wood, alongside protocols set by ancestors to ensure the safety and noa of their practice. The materials drawn from the earth embody our atua, and so are rooted in whakapapa, bringing spiritual meaning to these precious resources and the taonga that are made with them. The finished taonga embody the ongoing creative energies that continue to push boundaries and extend the edges of art practices into our realms. So, the world turns, he ao hurihuri (Brown et al., 2024).

1.5 Kaupapa Māori Health Organisations

Kaupapa Māori health organisations emerged out of the need and desire for culturally appropriate Māori-led services to address the failure of mainstream care and persisting health inequities (Boulton et al., 2013; N. Sheridan et al., 2024). Māori health organisations

are by Māori for Māori, expressions of tino-rangatiratanga in healthcare that incorporate the unique perspectives and values held by Māori (Waitangi Tribunal, 2023). They have been recognised as the benchmark for the primary health sector overall, demonstrating highly successful approaches and performance (Waitangi Tribunal, 2023). The New Zealand Mental Health Commission (2007, as cited in Gassin, 2019) called the emergence of kaupapa Māori services a great achievement, one that made Aotearoa a world leader in Indigenous mental health services. This study focuses specifically on a whakairo programme run by Māori health provider, Te Kōhao Health.

1.5.1 Te Kōhao Health

Te Kōhao began in 1994 as a marae-based medical clinic at Kirikiriroa Marae to provide primary public health services throughout Waikato (Double & Walsh, 2015). Kirikiriroa was a marae built with the blessing of Māori Queen Te Arikinui Te Atairangikaahu to cater to those who had moved from their tribal areas to Hamilton City (Moxon & Smail, 2023). The name Te Kōhao means the eye of the needle, drawing on the whakatauki (proverb) of the first Māori King, Pōtatau Te Wherowhero, which says:

Kotahi anō te kōhao o te ngira. E kuhuna ai te miro ma, te miro pango, te miro whero. I muri i ahau, kia mau ki te aroha, ki te ture me te whakapono.

There is but one eye of the needle through which the white, black and red threads must pass. After I am gone, hold fast to the love, to the law, and to the faith.

It reflects that Te Kōhao is the entrance way for everyone, regardless of iwi, religion or language; all are welcome (Te Kōhao Health, n.d. a). Te Kōhao emerged out of a love for the people, with a vision of caring for and enabling whānau to take control of their wellbeing (Dame Tariana Turia, as cited in Double & Walsh, 2015). In addition to the Kirikiriroa Marae clinic, Te Kōhao now provides 35 different health, education, employment, social, justice and whānau ora services with satellite clinics operating in Enderly and Melville (Moxon & Smail, 2023). In 2023, Te Kōhao Health had an enrolled population of 8,050 patients, 80% of whom were high-needs Māori (Moxon & Smail, 2023).

The strategic vision of Te Kōhao is “Kia whakatinanatia ko te ihi, ko te wehi, ko te wana me te hauoranga ō te whānau” Living our tino rangatiratanga through strong, healthy, vibrant and

Prosperous Whānau (Te Kōhao Health, n.d. a). One of the ways they achieve this vision is through their whakairo (carving) programme.

1.5.2 The Whakairo Programme

The whakairo programme embodies Te Kōhao's vision of strengthening whānau, enhancing identity, and empowering Māori and others to realise their full potential (Te Kōhao, 2025). The carving programme is run in two streams: Tipu Ake (run by Matua Rei) and Te Pou Taurahere (run by Matua Pene). Tipu Ake, meaning to grow upwards, or to arise and flourish, caters to primary, intermediate and high school students within their schools. Te Pou Taurahere includes Te Kōhao based carving programmes and caters to AOD (alcohol and other drug) participants (Te Kōhao, 2024b; Te Kōhao, 2025), tāne, kōtiro, adults, and rangatahi (youth) not in school.

Both streams utilise whakairo as a means to explore identity, whakapapa, Māori values and wellbeing in a meaningful and transformative way (Te Kōhao, n.d. b; Te Kōhao 2024). Graduations are held at the end of each term (Tipu Ake) and each course (Te Pou Taurahere) to acknowledge the carver and their mahi (work). Graduating carvers have the opportunity to speak about their taonga and whakapapa before gifting it to a loved one (Te Kōhao, 2024b).

1.6 Outline of the Rangahau

In response to the persisting mental health inequities faced by Māori, this thesis explores the innovative and responsive toi whakairo approach to wellbeing led by Māori health organisation Te Kōhao Health. Through kaupapa Māori methodology, I explore how whakairo is utilised as a therapeutic tool to support mental wellbeing and create culturally grounded pathways to healing for whānau. Ultimately, it is hoped that the insights gained through this rangahau will contribute to culturally responsive mental health policy and service delivery by strengthening recognition of Māori-led initiatives and affirming mahi toi as a valid therapeutic approach. This inquiry is complemented by an embodied engagement with uku.

1.6.1 Structure of the Thesis

Chapter one has located this research within the wider landscape of mahi toi, mental health, kaupapa Māori health care and has introduced Te Kōhao and their whakairo programme. As

such, it has established the organisational, cultural, artistic and contextual background necessary to understand the inquiry that follows.

Chapter two details the mental health challenges faced by Māori before presenting a scoping review at the intersection of mahi toi and health. With the limited research on whakairo, the goal is to draw on broader toi literature to inform an understanding of whakairo within a wider ecosystem of wellbeing. This chapter shows the capacity for toi to work across multiple domains of health, identifies gaps in the literature and demonstrates the rationale for this research.

Chapter three outlines the kaupapa Māori approach underpinning this research. I introduce the takarangi framework developed specifically within and for the context of this research. The interconnected concepts of whakapapa, wairua, tikanga and mauri ora underpin this framework. These concepts are discussed alongside the states of Te Kore, Te Pō and Te Ao Mārama, which represent the journey of this research. The chapter then details the immersive steps taken, including recruitment, data collection, analysis and dissemination.

Chapter four presents the findings of the research through an interpretative waka, awa and ripples pūrākau, likening the carving programme to a journey. It explores the artistic, kaupapa Māori and therapeutic dimensions of whakairo through the voices of the storytellers (participants).

Chapter five discusses the findings within broader literature and considers the implications for mental health and service delivery. It also explores the strengths and limitations of this study.

Chapter six concludes this rangahau journey with a summary of this research and a reflection through uku, which holds my moemoea and intentions for this kaupapa going forward.

Chapter two: Scoping review

Figure 2.1. The emerging form. As the form of the ipu begins to take shape, so too does the direction of this rangahau through the scoping review, where contours of the literature and gaps in knowledge become clearer.

2.1 Chapter Overview

Māori experience persistent and inequitable mental health outcomes as a result of colonisation, including the disruption of traditional systems of wellbeing, loss of land and mana, inequitable distribution of social determinants, and ongoing cultural alienation (Gassin, 2019). Despite comprising only 17.3% of the population (Stats NZ, 2023), Māori represented 29.9% of high need or specialist mental health service users in 2023/24 (Te Hiringa Mahara, 2025b). However, Māori are also 30% less likely to have their mental illness diagnosed (R. Cunningham et al., 2018) and report higher levels of unmet mental health need (Te Hiringa Mahara, 2025a). Where Māori reach the mental health system, they receive a lower standard of care (Curtis et al., 2022; R. Cunningham et al., 2018; GIMHA, 2018), being subject to disproportionate use of compulsory treatment, seclusion and restraint (GIMHA, 2018). Such practices create defensive, risk-averse methods of care that diminish mana and Māori being (GIMHA, 2018).

These inequities point to systemic failures within a mental health system that is largely reactive, clinically focused, and grounded in Western models of diagnosis and treatment (Gassin, 2019; GIMHA, 2018). Preventative and maintenance-focused mental health care is often overlooked due to strict diagnostic criteria and high illness thresholds restricting access to services (GIMHA, 2018). This approach falls short in addressing the holistic and cultural needs of Māori across the continuum of mental wellbeing.

There is growing recognition of the need for responsive, holistic, community-focused and promotion-based approaches that incorporate te ao Māori understandings of health and care (GIMHA, 2018; Te Hiringa Mahara, 2023; Wharewera-Mika et al., 2023). Māori health providers have been at the forefront of these solutions, providing innovative services rooted in mātauranga Māori and tikanga (Waitangi Tribunal, 2023; GIMHA, 2018).

One such approach is mahi toi. Practices such as whakairo, raranga, kapa haka, pūrākau, and taonga pūoro (singing treasures, traditional Māori instruments) have long been central to Māori ways of being and healing, yet their role in mental wellbeing remains underexplored in the academic literature. Direct research on whakairo in particular is limited. For this reason, a scoping review was undertaken to map existing literature on mahi toi and wellbeing to situate whakairo within a wider cultural ecosystem of hauora.

A scoping review was selected as the most appropriate method given the breadth of toi practices, the diversity of contexts in which they are applied, and the limited volume of existing research specific to whakairo. Rather than seeking a narrowly defined answer, this approach allows for the mapping of key concepts, patterns, and gaps across the literature (Munn et al., 2018).

Te Whare Tapa Whā was selected as the conceptual framework for this review because it reflects Māori understandings of hauora as holistic and relational. The literature will be analysed across the four interconnected taha of hinengaro, taha wairua, taha whānau and taha tinana. While whenua is often positioned within taha wairua in Durie's model (1998), it is made explicit here to acknowledge the fundamental role of land, environment, and place in Māori wellbeing and mahi toi practices. In this review, whenua is not treated as an additional taha, but as the foundation upon which the four walls of the whare stand. This framing aligns with Māori worldviews in which identity, healing, and creativity are inseparable from whenua. As outlined, this thesis, while focusing on mental wellbeing, does so through a kaupapa Māori lens, where mental health is understood as inseparable from physical, social, spiritual, cultural and environmental wellbeing.

To guide the reader, this chapter outlines the scoping review methods, presents results mapped against Te Whare Tapa Whā (including whenua as the foundation), and concludes with a discussion of the implications and gaps that inform the focus of this thesis on whakairo as a therapeutic practice.

2.2 Scoping Review Methods

This scoping review was undertaken to map how mahi toi contributes to hauora across mental, physical, social, spiritual, and environmental dimensions, and to inform an understanding of whakairo within a wider cultural ecosystem of wellbeing. Guided by Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) scoping review principles, the review drew on both peer-reviewed literature and grey literature. Full details of the search strategy, including databases searched, search terms, and date ranges, are provided in Appendix 2.

2.2.1 Search Strategy

The search strategy for this scoping review followed the three-step recommendation from the Joanna Briggs Institute (2024) and was developed in consultation with university librarians. Preliminary independent research was undertaken to refine search concepts, particularly the forms of mahi toi for inclusion. The search strategy was then developed with two experienced university librarians. Titles, abstracts, and indexes were screened to expand the search strategy and ensure depth of concepts. The final search strategy was run in Massey University's Discover search platform, which returned results from 28 databases, including Scopus, CINAHL and Medline. This produced 328 results, which was reduced to 161 after duplicate removal. The reference lists of selected articles were screened for additional sources, and two further sources were identified.

In recognition of the limited peer-reviewed literature on whakairo and other forms of mahi toi, a grey literature search was also undertaken. The grey literature search was designed with university librarians and included input from a mahi toi practitioner. The search was run in the Google search engine using the tags "mahi toi", "maori art", "Māori art", "mental health" and "site:govt.nz". This returned approximately 1,080 results. Consistent with pragmatic scoping approaches, the first 100 results (ranked by relevance) were screened for potentially eligible material. This search returned seven relevant sources. To better capture Māori-led perspectives beyond government sources, additional manual searches were conducted across Māori health and arts organisation websites. This included Te Pūtahitanga o Te Waipounamu, Te Atinga, and Toi Māori Aotearoa, which returned one additional source. This process ensured both breadth of coverage and relevance to Māori-led and culturally grounded toi practices.

2.2.2 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To be included in this review, the literature had to explore a form of mahi toi and mental health or wellbeing. For the purpose of this review, mahi toi included:

- Whakairo - carving
- Raranga – weaving, tukutuku (lattice panels)
- Taonga pūoro

- Kapa haka (Māori performing arts)
- Pūrākau – storytelling
- Uku - clay
- Tā Moko – tattoo
- Kōwhaiwhai (Māori designs)
- Peitatanga – painting

These well-known forms of mahi toi were selected to maximise the availability of relevant literature and inform an understanding of whakairo within a broader mahi toi and wellbeing context. Furthermore, the toi had to be utilised as a practice rather than a concept or framework. Consistent with te ao Māori understandings of Hauora, mental health was not required to be the sole focus of included sources. It was only required that mental wellbeing be present within the source, including in holistic terms such as emotional or spiritual enhancement. Additionally, due to the limited research available and because mental wellbeing exists on a complex continuum, sources were not required to be situated in a health setting or delivered by a health provider. All other sources were excluded. Determining inclusion or exclusion involved screening of titles and abstracts; however, details were often unclear and required access to full texts. This process identified twelve peer-reviewed articles and eight grey literature sources for inclusion.

2.2.3 Data Extraction and Analysis

The literature was analysed through Te Whare Tapa Whā on the foundation of whenua in order to demonstrate how forms of mahi toi connect across different dimensions of wellbeing. This framework provided the lens used for analysing, interpreting, and organising findings within the literature. Initial data extraction involved inductive identification of themes outlining the interaction between toi and wellbeing. These themes were subsequently interpreted and organised deductively through Te Whare Tapa Whā to maintain alignment with Māori understandings of hauora.

The data was thematically organised and mapped across taha tinana, taha hinengaro, taha wairua, taha whānau (Durie, 1998), and the foundation of whenua. Themes are therefore presented under a corresponding taha or foundation. However, many themes intersect

across more than one dimension, consistent with the interconnected nature of hauora and Te Whare Tapa Whā. Accordingly, the presentation of findings does not suggest themes belong exclusively to a single dimension; rather, mapping provides a clear structure while retaining the multidimensional nature of wellbeing through a te ao Māori lens.

Results

A total of twelve articles were included in this review. There was substantive variation in the context through which mahi toi practices were utilised. Six articles examined mahi toi within mental health contexts (Cherrington, 2023; Hodgson, 2018; Hollands et al., 2015; Kirkwood, 2015; Rangihuna et al., 2018; Standing & Kahu, 2021) while the remaining six were situated in wider settings including health more generally (Rollo, 2013), workplace productivity (Pio et al., 2020), sport (Hapeta et al., 2019), addressing climate change (McMeeking et al., 2025), responses to COVID-19 (Waitoki & McLachlan, 2022), and connection to the natural world (Lowe & Fraser, 2018). All included articles were qualitative and involved relatively small sample sizes, which is common in research involving Indigenous communities and culturally grounded practices (Etz & Arroyo, 2015).

In terms of the mahi toi represented, pūrākau was the focus of five articles (Cherrington, 2003; Hapeta et al., 2019; McMeeking et al., 2025; Rangihuna et al., 2018; Standing & Kahu, 2021), taonga pūoro of three (Hodgson, 2018; Lowe & Fraser, 2018; Rollo, 2013), kapa haka of two (Hollands et al., 2015; Pio et al., 2020), raranga of one (Kirkwood, 2015), and one article explored a range of creative practices including raranga, whakairo, waiata (song), and pūrākau (Waitoki & McLachlan, 2022). Uku, kōwhaiwhai, and tā moko were not identified in the peer-reviewed literature. The literature varied in the depth to which it contributed to the domains of Te Whare Tapa Whā, from brief thematic references to in-depth explorations. All contributions have been included in the mapping of the literature. When mapped against Te Whare Tapa Whā with whenua as the foundation, all twelve articles contributed to taha hinengaro (Cherrington, 2003; Hapeta et al., 2019; Hodgson, 2018; Hollands et al., 2015; Kirkwood, 2015; Lowe & Fraser, 2018; McMeeking et al., 2025; Pio et al., 2020; Rangihuna et al., 2018; Rollo, 2013; Standing & Kahu, 2021; Waitoki & McLachlan, 2022), eleven to taha wairua (Cherrington, 2003; Hodgson, 2018; Hollands et al., 2015; Kirkwood, 2015; Lowe & Fraser, 2018; McMeeking et al., 2025; Pio et al., 2020; Rangihuna et al., 2018; Rollo, 2013;

Standing & Kahu, 2021; Waitoki & McLachlan, 2022), six to whenua (Cherrington, 2003; Hapeta et al., 2019; Hodgson, 2018; Kirkwood, 2015; Lowe & Fraser, 2018; Rollo, 2013), nine to taha whānau (Cherrington, 2003; Hapeta et al., 2019; Hodgson, 2018; Hollands et al., 2015; Kirkwood, 2015; McMeeking et al., 2025; Pio et al., 2020; Rangihuna et al., 2018; Waitoki & McLachlan, 2022) and six to taha tinana (Hapeta et al., 2019; Hodgson, 2018; Hollands et al., 2015; Kirkwood, 2015; Pio et al., 2020; Rollo, 2013).

2.3.1 Taha Hinengaro

The influence of toi on taha hinengaro was evident across all included articles. Collectively, the literature suggests mahi toi supports mental and emotional wellbeing through (1) emotional expression and regulation, (2) strengthened resilience and confidence, and (3) cultural learning that affirms identity.

While toi stimulates the mind and utilises one's memory (Hodgson, 2018), it can also evoke memories and positive associations of people and place (Hollands et al., 2015; Lowe, 2018). Toi was described as drawing on emotions and being capable of evoking distinct emotional states (Pio et al., 2020). Hollands et al. (2015) concluded that emotion and culture are embodied phenomena which may be intentionally evoked through particular elements of, in this case, kapa haka. Across the literature, engagement in toi was associated with feelings of calm, pride, courage, awe, respect, and hope (Hollands et al., 2015; Kirkwood, 2015; Rollo, 2013; Standing & Kahu, 2021). Beyond evoking positive emotion, toi was associated with resilience through enhanced self-awareness (Hodgson, 2018; Kirkwood, 2015; Pio et al., 2020), self-esteem, and confidence (Hodgson, 2018; Hollands et al., 2015; Kirkwood, 2015). As Kirkwood (2015) describes, toi is a means to increase individuals' abilities to nurture oneself, cope with strong emotions, and find a way forwards.

Mahi toi was also repeatedly positioned as a "vehicle for cultural learning" (Hollands et al., 2015). To learn the toi itself is to learn new knowledge and skills (Pio et al., 2020), but beyond this, it is a way of transmitting knowledge, history and tradition across generations (Waitoki & McLachlan, 2022). It can educate the practitioner on cultural practices and expectations (Standing & Kahu, 2021), myths, legends, important events, tribal history and whakapapa (Rollo, 2013). Disconnection from whakapapa can cause displacement of self,

which for Māori is a vital component in hauora (Kirkwood, 2015). Opportunities for cultural learning enabled through mahi toi are inherently identity-affirming (Hollands et al., 2015).

Identity was a recurring theme, referenced in eight of the twelve articles. Toi was shown to enhance identity through direct expression of cultural identity (Cherrington, 2003; Pio et al., 2020) and through strengthened connection to whakapapa (Kirkwood, 2015), ancestry (Cherrington, 2003), whānau, hapū, and iwi (Hollands et al., 2015). Standing and Kahu (2021) note that in the context of Māori invisibility within mainstream mental health systems, acknowledging Māori identity within health spaces is inherently validating and healing. When provided with identity-affirming, Indigenous and strength-focused scaffolding, Māori can be positioned as leaders of agency and action (McMeeking et al., 2025).

2.3.2 Taha Wairua

Across the literature, mahi toi emerged as a practice that enables the "exploration of wairua" (Kirkwood, 2015) through enhancing mauri, mana, and connection to atua. Toi was described as holding the essence of the spiritual values held by Māori (Kirkwood, 2015). Eleven of the twelve articles referenced wairua-related themes, highlighting its centrality to toi practices.

Atua were mentioned in eight of the included articles. Toi was described as supporting connection to atua (Rollo, 2013) and expressing these connections through the whakapapa of the materials used within practices (Lowe & Fraser, 2018; Hodgson, 2018). As practices grounded in wairua and whakapapa, there was also mention of karakia (ritual chant, prayer) within sessions (Kirkwood, 2015). Karakia remains an important part of Māori society, drawing on atua for support across pursuits, including healing (Rollo, 2013). Atua also underpinned pūrākau approaches used in mental health contexts. As descendants of atua, Māori therefore reflect characteristics associated with the different atua (Cherrington, 2003). This provides a framework for exploring dysfunction, resilience, and resolution as a pathway forward (Cherrington, 2003; Rangihuna et al., 2018; Standing & Kahu, 2021).

In Māori cosmology, Io-matua-te-kore (the supreme god) gifted the inhabitants of the world the power of mauri, which maintains connections to the gods, universe, earth, and all its inhabitants (Rollo, 2013). While mauri was explicitly referenced in three articles, it remains a

foundational concept as it represents the essence of life that unifies and animates being across the physical and spiritual realms (Hodgson, 2018). Mauri was evident in both the toi itself and in those engaging in the creative practice. The toi, whether it be taonga pūoro or kapa haka, required intention, purpose, and active engagement for mauri to be apparent. As Pio et al. (2020) state, it is necessary to believe in the purpose of the haka (traditional Māori dance) or waiata to channel the mauri of the kaupapa. Similarly, Hodgson (2018) saw the movement of individuals from a state of mauri moe to mauri ora through the invigoration and engagement in taonga pūoro. Mauri plays an important role in healing as it is required to connect a person to the atua and spiritual realm for spiritual intervention (Rollo, 2013).

Toi was also described as portraying or strengthening mana (Hollands et al., 2015; Pio et al., 2020) through creativity, unique talent, and proficiency in the practice (Hodgson, 2018). This is particularly significant when considering the mana-diminishing impacts of mental distress, including self-sabotage, self-harm, negative feelings, lethargy, and an inability to speak (Hodgson, 2018), alongside the broader failure of mainstream mental health systems to respond effectively to Māori needs (GIMHA, 2018). Because toi is meaningful to Māori, from our tūpuna and grounded in wairua, it also enhances mana, particularly in comparison to Western-based treatments (Cherrington, 2003).

2.3.3 Whenua: The Foundation Beneath the Whare

Mahi toi enabled exploration of the whenua and the environment (Kirkwood, 2015). The natural world and atua were interconnected; however, this section draws attention to the land. Many forms of mahi toi are created with materials sourced from the land and sea, and these environments are understood as embodied by atua (Hodgson, 2018; Kirkwood, 2015; Lowe & Fraser, 2018).

For example, materials included shells from the domain of Tangaroa, wood from the domain of Tāne Mahuta (Lowe & Fraser, 2018), and harakeke under the protection of Haumia-tiketike (God of fernroot and uncultivated food) (Hodgson, 2018) within the domain of Papatūānuku (Kirkwood, 2015). Through this whakapapa, mahi toi can support connection to whenua (Hodgson, 2018; Lowe & Fraser, 2018; Rollo, 2013), and these connections can be expressed through the use of and engagement with natural materials (Hodgson, 2018; Lowe & Fraser, 2018).

Even in the case of pūrākau, a spoken form of toi, whenua remained significant. Pūrākau frequently reference environments and therefore provide reminders of the trees, land, wind, rain, and mist (Cherrington, 2003). One study drew on a pūrākau that explicitly captured the significance of the environment for health (Hapeta et al., 2019). As Lowe and Fraser (2018) note, the natural world is a reference point for all things within te ao Māori; to enter the natural world is to enter the Māori world.

2.3.4 Taha Whānau

Nine of the included articles described the impacts of toi on the social domain of health. Taha whānau was upheld through; (1) creating or strengthening social connection and (2) shaping interaction and communication.

Toi was described as a vehicle for communication that holds and conveys Māori knowledge, language, and culture (Hollands et al., 2015; Kirkwood, 2015) with the capacity to guide social behaviour (Cherrington, 2003). Engagement in toi was reported to shape social interaction; for example, Hodgson (2018) described how rangatahi presenting as non-verbal were able to express themselves and interact with others through taonga pūoro. Similarly, Hollands et al. (2015) noted participants became more focused and attentive in interactions with others, and Hapeta et al. (2019) described increased consciousness of social integration.

The creation and strengthening of social connections were evident across seven articles. Toi was commonly conducted in group settings, providing a foundation for social engagement. The collective nature of toi generated an immediate sense of connection (Hollands et al., 2015), including a sense of whānau (Hodgson, 2018; Kirkwood, 2015) and brotherhood (Hapeta et al., 2019). Even where collective engagement was restricted, such as during COVID-19, toi was described as connecting people through a shared interest and purpose (Waitoki & McLachlan, 2022). Collective engagement in common purpose was associated with unity, shared embodiment, and togetherness (Hollands et al., 2015; Kirkwood, 2015), including experiences of kotahitanga (unity, togetherness) and whanaungatanga (connection, kinship, relationship) (Hodgson, 2018). Rangihuna et al. (2018) position whānau as the foundation for a culturally safe exploration of healing.

2.3.5 Taha Tinana

Taha tinana was the least represented domain, with only six articles describing the physical dimensions of mahi toi. This likely reflects the search focus on mental wellbeing and the dominance of pūrākau within the included literature. Physicality was more prominent in articles relating to kapa haka, although relevant insights were identified across toi as embodied practices. The key themes were use of the body in toi, shifts in states of energy, and physical benefits.

Toi are manual skills that make use of the body and all the senses (Kirkwood, 2015) while also impacting states of energy in the body. For example, oriori (lullabies) can calm infants or support sleep (Rollo, 2013), and raranga was described as potentially tiring but comforting and calming mahi (Kirkwood, 2015). On the other hand, haka, with its voracity can be used to achieve an alert physical state of being (Hollands et al., 2015). Pio et al. (2020) reported amplified workplace performance following haka, suggesting toi may influence productivity and performance. Similarly, one study described a rugby team moving from consecutive bottom rankings to making the finals following the introduction of a pūrākau-based model (Hapeta et al., 2019).

Physical benefits of toi described in the literature included easing pain, arthritis, labour, and migraines in the context of taonga pūoro (Rollo, 2013). There was also note of improved bodily attunement (Hollands et al., 2015), dexterity, and hand–eye coordination in relation to kapa haka (Hodgson, 2018). Mahi toi was positioned as a tangible, embodied expression of hauora. Toi is both felt and expressed through the body (Hollands et al., 2015), and we physically embody the relationships of wairua, whānau, environment, heritage, and mauri through toi (Hodgson, 2018).

2.3.6 Insights from Grey Literature

In addition to the peer-reviewed articles, a review of grey literature was also undertaken. Of the eight included sources, five referred to toi practices collectively and focused on their contributions to society. These included three district strategic plans (Whakatāne District Council, 2023; Far North District Council, 2024; Creative Waikato, 2024), an investment guideline (Te Taumata Toi-a-Iwi, 2024), and an annual report (Te Manatū Taonga, 2024). All three strategic creative plans were the first of their kind for their respective districts and

were published in 2023 and 2024, suggesting growing recognition of toi at a regional level. The remaining sources included an article on an NCEA exhibition featuring whakairo (Education Gazette, 2019), a scoping project on the benefits of kapa haka (Te Manatū Taonga & Te Matatini, 2014), and an evaluation report incorporating case studies of toi initiatives, including tā moko, whakairo, and raranga (Te Pūtahitanga, 2014).

The grey literature was similarly mapped across Te Whare Tapa Whā. Notably, none of the grey literature sources made reference to atua, a foundational element of wairua. As a result, contributions to taha wairua were comparatively low. Across the eight grey literature sources, all eight contributed to taha hinengaro (Creative Waikato, 2024; Education Gazette, 2019; Far North District Council, 2024; Te Manatū Taonga, 2024; Te Manatū Taonga & Te Matatini, 2014; Te Pūtahitanga, 2014; Te Taumata Toi-a-Iwi, 2024; Whakatāne District Council, 2023), three to taha wairua (Far North District Council, 2024; Te Manatū Taonga & Te Matatini, 2014; Te Pūtahitanga, 2014), five to the foundation of whenua (Creative Waikato, 2024; Far North District Council, 2024; Te Pūtahitanga, 2014; Te Taumata Toi-a-Iwi, 2024; Whakatāne District Council, 2023), seven to taha whānau (Creative Waikato, 2024; Education Gazette, 2019; Far North District Council, 2024; Te Manatū Taonga & Te Matatini, 2014; Te Pūtahitanga, 2014; Te Taumata Toi-a-Iwi, 2024; Whakatāne District Council, 2023) and five to taha tinana (Creative Waikato, 2024; Far North District Council, 2024; Te Manatū Taonga & Te Matatini, 2014; Te Pūtahitanga, 2014; Te Taumata Toi-a-Iwi, 2024) . Overall, the grey literature largely affirmed patterns identified in the peer-reviewed articles while extending several themes through a macro-level perspective. The grey literature also discussed built environments, economic benefits, the constraints on arts approaches, and contributed insights on whakairo and tā moko that were largely absent from the peer-reviewed articles.

The findings on whakairo and tā moko were broadly consistent with themes identified in the academic literature for the other forms of toi. Whakairo was described as a way for artists to connect to their culture, whenua, identity, whānau, history, and whakapapa (Education Gazette, 2019; Te Pūtahitanga, 2014). It was also described as an outlet, an important way to express oneself and a way of telling stories (Education Gazette, 2019). Positive effects were seen in people's mental health through the safe space created, whānau connection, sense of belonging, increased confidence and self-belief (Te Pūtahitanga, 2014). In contrast, Te

Pūtahitanga (2014) noted that tā moko is a way to physically represent where people are from, where they are now, where they are going, and the next generation. In one example, it supported whānau cultural reclamation becoming more than a tattoo to be a whānau experience.

Through a macro-level perspective, the grey literature extended the themes of cultural learning and identity (under taha hinengaro). Beyond recognising toi as a cultural learning tool, the grey literature also emphasised the role of mahi toi in the revitalisation of culture and language (Te Manatū Taonga, 2024; Te Manatū Taonga & Te Matatini, 2014). Te Manatū Taonga (2024) reported that 49% of New Zealanders and 66% of Māori learn about culture through toi. The grey literature also extended the theme of identity beyond the individual, positioning toi as identity-affirming at community, regional, and national levels (Creative Waikato, 2024; Far North District Council, 2024; Te Manatū Taonga, 2024; Te Manatū Taonga & Te Matatini, 2014; Te Taumata Toi-a-Iwi, 2024; Whakatāne District Council, 2023). Te Manatū Taonga (2024) found that 75% of Māori and 59% of all New Zealanders consider mahi toi defines who we are as New Zealanders. The Far North District Council (2024) further positions mahi toi as Aotearoa's unique voice that distinguishes us from any other country.

There was also acknowledgement in the grey literature of urbanisation and the role of toi in strengthening connection to built spaces (Creative Waikato, 2024; Far North District Council, 2024; Te Taumata Toi-a-Iwi, 2024). This concept was mapped under the foundation of whenua. While this may initially appear novel, as whenua is often associated with natural environments, this emphasis is significant given the high proportion of Māori living in urban settings. As of 2013, 84% of Māori were living in urban areas (Paul, 2015). This highlights the importance of cultural connection in urban spaces and the potential role of toi in sustaining that connection.

Several sources also highlighted the economic benefits of mahi toi (Creative Waikato, 2024; Far North District Council, 2024; Te Manatū Taonga, 2024; Te Taumata Toi-a-Iwi, 2024; Whakatāne District Council, 2023). This included boosting Aotearoa's economy and increasing employment, visitor attraction, and enrichment of tourism (Far North District Council, 2024). In 2024, the Māori arts and creative sector contributed $1.6 billion, or 0.4% of gross domestic product, to Aotearoa's total economy (Te Manatū Taonga, 2025).

While the grey literature demonstrates significant benefits of mahi toi at individual, community, and national levels, it also outlines persistent barriers and risks. Art was described as underfunded and undervalued (Whakatāne District Council, 2023). Artists, collectives, and venues were reported to receive modest funding disproportionate to the effort and value they provide (Creative Waikato, 2024; Far North District Council, 2024). As a result, some districts have identified challenges in providing accessible creative spaces for communities (Far North District Council, 2024; Whakatāne District Council, 2023), and artists face unpredictable and unsustainable conditions (Te Manatū Taonga, 2024). Te Manatū Taonga & Te Matatini (2014) found that although there is widespread agreement that kapa haka makes a valuable contribution to Aotearoa, its value is not well understood by non-Māori and government. Consequently, it is not afforded the respect or status it deserves and may be treated tokenistically (Te Manatū Taonga & Te Matatini, 2014). These observations offer insight into a broader systemic undervaluing of toi and mātauranga Māori, which can constrain the resourcing and expansion of mahi toi.

2.4 Discussion and Synthesis

The peer-reviewed articles provide in-depth explorations of the interaction between mahi toi practices and health at an individual level. In addition, the grey literature takes a broader view of toi practices collectively and their contributions to communities and to Aotearoa as a whole. The grey literature also contributed insights on tā moko and whakairo. In this way, the two bodies of literature are complementary, with each addressing limitations of the other. The peer-reviewed literature centres Māori voices and lived experience, whereas the grey literature reflects a more organisational perspective. Together, they illustrate growing recognition of toi by both Māori and non-Māori at individual, community, regional, and national levels.

Using Te Whare Tapa Whā as a framework to analyse and map the literature enabled a more nuanced exploration of the relationship between mahi toi and hauora. The findings help show the mechanisms through which mahi toi acts across physical, mental, social, spiritual and whenua dimensions of wellbeing. Across the literature, these mechanisms include identity affirmation, activation of wairua and mauri, strengthening of whanaungatanga, embodied emotional regulation, and renewed connection to whenua and atua. These

dimensions are intrinsically interconnected, much like the elements of Te Whare Tapa Whā itself. Self (body, mind, and spirit), whānau, whenua, and atua are not separate, rather they are part of an integrated whole. As Māori, we are of the land; our whakapapa is etched in the maunga and awa of our tūrangawaewae (place where one can stand, place of belonging through whakapapa), which we share with our whānau and iwi. These places, and the natural elements within them, are our atua from whom we descend. Toi provides a means to explore, express, and strengthen all these connections. Through this lens, mahi toi can be understood as offering alternative pathways to healing that are grounded in te ao Māori and therefore more likely to engage Māori in meaningful and culturally affirming ways. Without such approaches, inequities in Māori mental health will continue, to the detriment of Māori lives and wellbeing. Importantly, this synthesis provides a conceptual base from which whakairo can be understood within a wider cultural ecosystem of wellbeing and signals its potential as a culturally grounded therapeutic practice within Māori-led health contexts.

Despite the demonstrated value of mahi toi, the findings also highlight a notable lack of published research focused specifically on mahi toi and mental wellbeing. Pūrākau dominated the literature, while other forms of toi were less represented. Whakairo was mentioned only briefly, appearing as a subtheme in one peer-reviewed article and in two grey literature sources. Similarly, tā moko appeared in only one grey literature source, and insights into both practices were limited. Uku and kōwhaiwhai were not represented in any of the included sources. The underrepresentation of these forms of mahi toi not only signals a critical gap in the literature but also reinforces the relevance and necessity of the present rangahau project.

2.5 Chapter Summary and Implications for this Study

This scoping review demonstrates that mahi toi contributes to hauora across mental, physical, social, spiritual, and environmental dimensions, with effects that are inherently interconnected and grounded in te ao Māori. The mapping of the literature demonstrates that toi has the capacity to act across multiple domains of wellbeing. Toi was seen to aid in emotional expression and regulation, resilience, cultural learning, affirmation of identity, enhanced mauri, mana, connection to atua and whenua, social connection, states of energy, and physical improvement. Taken together, these mechanisms suggest that toi does not

merely complement mental health care but operates as a culturally embedded mode of healing in its own right. These findings justify the exploration of whakairo's therapeutic ability. Moreover, while pūrākau and other forms of toi are well represented in the literature, there is a notable absence of research examining whakairo as a therapeutic practice, particularly within mental health contexts.

This gap highlights the need for focused, kaupapa Māori research that explores whakairo in practice. Investigating whakairo within a kaupapa Māori health provider context therefore offers an opportunity to examine how these healing mechanisms are enacted in lived, relational, and service-based settings. Accordingly, the following chapter outlines the methodological approach used to investigate how whakairo is utilised within a kaupapa Māori health provider to support mental health and holistic wellbeing.

Chapter Three: Methodology and Methods

Figure 3.1. Tools and hands shaping the clay. This stage captures the active shaping of the ipu, mirroring the methodological tools, relationships, and processes that guided the collection and analysis of kōrero within this study.

3.1 Chapter Overview

“One day, Rata decided to build a waka, but he did not pay homage correctly to Tāne Mahuta, God of the forests, to ask permission to take one of his children. After he went home for the night, Te Tini-o-te-hakuturi –the insects and other forest creatures – returned his waka to its original tree form. This happened on several days in a row, until one night Rata pretended to leave, but hid instead and saw the creatures resurrecting the tree. At that point, he realised it was because he had not recited the appropriate karakia. The next morning, he began with the appropriate Karakia and then cut the tree, and the forest creatures helped him to complete his waka.” (Brown et al., 2024, p. 22)

The pūrākau of Rata and the tree provides epistemological grounding for this chapter and offers a powerful representation of methodology. Rather than functioning as metaphor alone, it signals how knowledge, relationship, and responsibility shape the research process. In te ao Māori, rangahau, like felling a tree, should not be a solely extractive process. Core to this rangahau are the teachings embedded within this pūrākau - whanaungatanga, collaboration, reciprocity, reflexivity, and tikanga.

Rata’s transgression was failing to adhere to the appropriate tikanga, which led to the undoing of his progress. His experience illustrates that methodology is not simply a technical pathway, but a relational and ethical practice. In an exploration of toi whakairo and hauora, tikanga is of utmost importance to ensure both the toi and the people involved are respected. Rata’s success comes from learning, adapting, and working with Te Tini-o-te-hakuturi. Te Tini-o-te-hakuturi were not just involved in Rata’s process but guided it. They, as the kaitiaki of their space who held the knowledge of their customs, taught Rata how to complete his work and helped him to do so. Much like Rata, I have been guided by those involved in this rangahau, those who are the experts and storytellers of their experiences, needs, and aspirations. To be taught, Rata had to first pause, observe, and learn before moving forward, which mirrors my own position as a researcher who is at the same time a learner. Through reflection and community engagement, an ongoing process of collaboration, adaptation, and learning has shaped the rangahau design. The methodology, therefore, has been an unfolding rather than a pre-set process.

This chapter sets out the methodological pathway of the rangahau. It situates the rangahau within a kaupapa Māori approach and introduces the takarangi framework. The methods, data collection, analysis, and dissemination processes through which the rangahau journey unfolded are then described. This chapter is intentionally structured to reflect a kaupapa Māori approach, where methodology, method, ethics, and analysis are not necessarily treated as separate stages, but as interconnected and unfolding processes. Rather than moving in a linear sequence, the chapter follows the logic of the takarangi framework, weaving together whakapapa, wairua, tikanga, and mauri ora as guiding concepts. These concepts shaped engagement, knowledge generation, and interpretation. Readers are therefore invited to understand the chapter as a relational and iterative methodological journey, rather than as a conventional step-by-step account.

3.2 Kaupapa Māori Approach

In an exploration of toi whakairo and hauora, a kaupapa Māori approach provides the most appropriate methodological foundation to bring forth the spiritual, cultural and healing dimensions of this kaupapa. As argued by L.T. Smith (2000, p. 230), Māori "have a different epistemological tradition that frames the way we see the world, the way we organise ourselves in it, the questions we ask, and the solutions we seek". As a theoretical approach, methodology, and praxis (Mahuika, 2008; G.H. Smith, 1997), Kaupapa Māori centralises and validates Māori ways of thinking, doing, and being.

Kaupapa Māori differs from conventional Western research paradigms through its grounding in te ao Māori, including the operationalisation of Māori worldviews, culture, and language; its assertion of tino rangatiratanga; and its collectivist orientation towards benefiting participants and advancing Māori aspirations (Bishop, 1998; Bishop, 2011; C. Cunningham, 2000; Pihama, 2010; G.H. Smith, 1990; L.T. Smith, 2015). It is a transformative approach that challenges dominant cultural systems, enabling research to be conducted by Māori, with Māori, for Māori (L.T. Smith, 2015).

While the term kaupapa Māori research is a relatively new academic assertion, emerging during the Indigenous resurgence of the 1970s-80s (Durie, 2012), kaupapa Māori as a practice and foundation of knowing is ancient. Nepe (1991) positions kaupapa Māori as a body of knowledge with its own distinct metaphysical basis, extending back to the creation

of the universe. Within this knowledge system, ideas about what counts as knowledge and how knowledge is validated are shaped and reshaped epistemologically (Nepe, 1991). As such, Kaupapa Māori research may take many forms; as although it grounds the researcher in a Māori worldview, this worldview is boundless (Jakeman, 2019). As L.T. Smith (2011, p. 10) states:

"If I think about Kaupapa Māori… in some kind of definitional framework I think it's really simple. It was what it was, it is what it is, and it will be what it will be… It is more than a theory and less than a theory; it is more than a paradigm and less than a paradigm; it is more than a methodology and less than a methodology. It is something much more fluid."

Consistent with this fluidity, this study adopts a kaupapa Māori approach rather than applying a singular Kaupapa Māori theory. This approach allowed the research framework to emerge through context, relationships, and collaboration, resulting in the development of the Takarangi Framework that guided this rangahau. What follows, therefore, is not the imposition of a pre-existing model, but the articulation of a framework that arose through engagement, kōrero, and shared reflection. The takarangi framework emerged as a way to represent how this rangahau moved, connected, and unfolded within a kaupapa Māori approach.

3.3 The Shape of this Rangahau: Takarangi Framework

3.3.1 Framework Origins

The following participants' kōrero inspired the takarangi framework. The kōrero captured the collaboration central to this rangahau, conceptualising it as a double spiral which has been adapted as the form of this framework.

"Because you've got two different sort of structural organisations trying to meet together to create a programme that's going to bring the kaupapa of both together and they work differently… They have similar values… but… understanding how we can bring what they want in a practical sense and value sense to what we want." (Rewarewa)

"Yeah, it's a takarangi effect in terms of the spiral and in the middle is what we want to go for, what the Kaupapa is and the spiral that goes out is who needs to be in there and how do they connect." (Matua Rei)

Similarly, the Takarangi Framework represents the coming together of different peoples, perspectives, and ways of working around the shared kaupapa of this rangahau. Figure 3.2 presents a visual representation of the takarangi framework, illustrating the non-linear journey of the rangahau and the interconnected concepts that guide it.

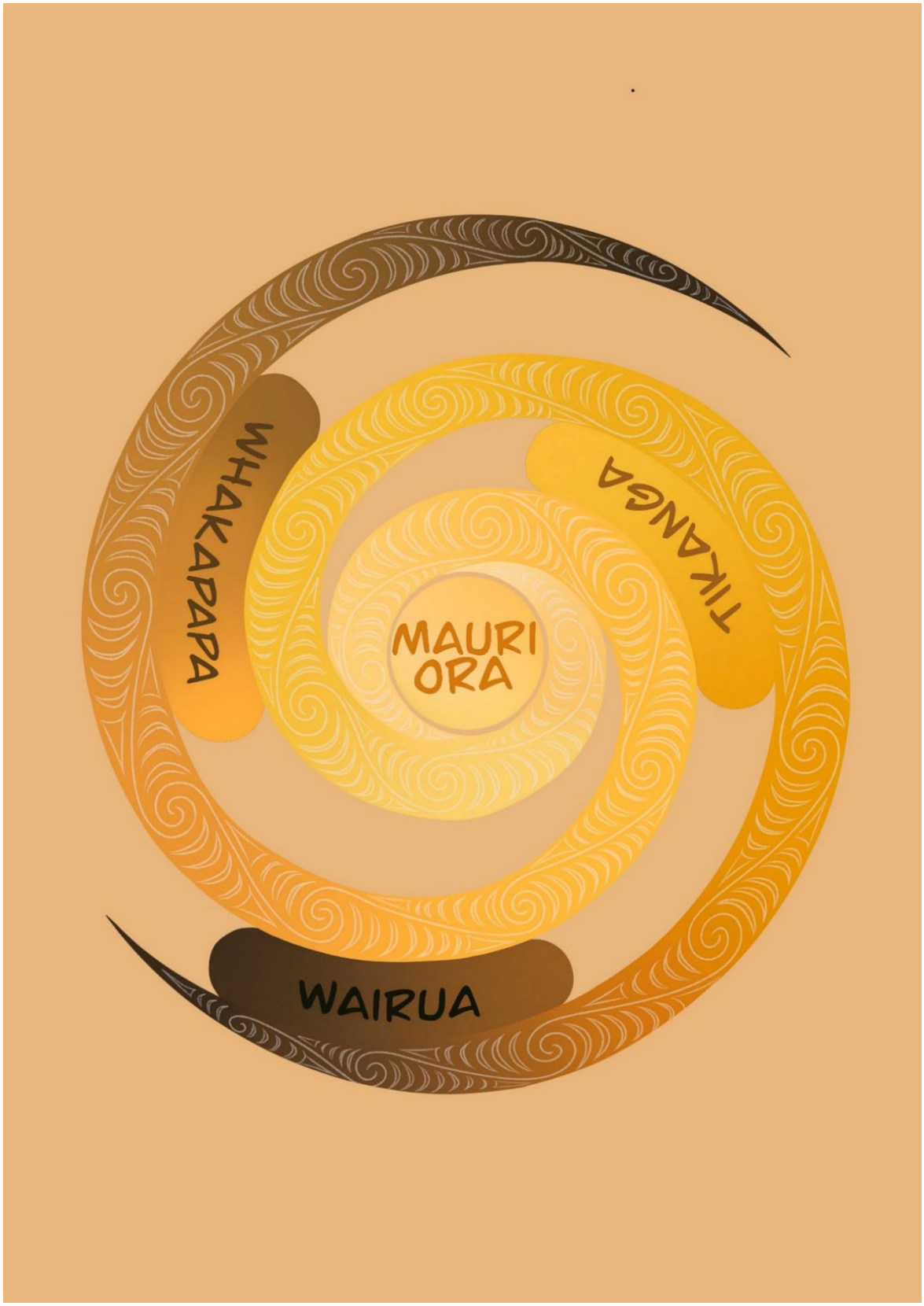

Figure 3.2. The Takarangi framework guiding this rangahau, illustrating the non-linear movement through Te Kore, Te Pō, and Te Ao Mārama, and the interconnected concepts of whakapapa, wairua, and tikanga, with mauri ora at the centre.

3.3.2 Te Kore, Te Pō, Te Ao Mārama (states of the framework)

Takarangi is a traditional double spiral design and one of its many interpretations is that of creation, growth and connection. For this framework it encompasses the coming together of different peoples over the shared kaupapa of this rangahau and the collaboration necessary for the generation of knowledge. In this rangahau, the framework is structured through the states of Te Kore, Te Pō, and Te Ao Mārama, represented visually through a movement from darkness on the outer of the spiral to light at the centre. Te Kore represents potential, individual creativity, and the diverse ways of thinking and doing that each person brings. Te Pō reflects an ongoing state of transformation as these ideas, needs, and aspirations meet and are negotiated collectively. Te Ao Mārama represents enlightenment through coming together and the generation of shared understanding.

3.3.3 Core Connections Guiding the Rangahau

The states of Te Kore, Te Pō and Te Ao Mārama reflect the journey of this rangahau, and the fluid spiral shape of the framework alludes to the non-linear nature of a kaupapa Māori approach. Rather than progressing in a linear sequence, the rangahau involved moving back and forth across these states throughout different phases of the study. What bridged these movements were 'connections' within the takarangi design, which have been incorporated here to embody the core concepts and values that guided this rangahau. These connections are whakapapa, wairua, and tikanga, with the kaupapa of mauri ora positioned at the centre. These concepts are interconnected, so working within one enhanced the others, creating a continual process of reflection within and movement across states and connections.

3.3.4 Whakapapa (Positioning and Relationships)

Whakapapa establishes the starting point of this rangahau, as it embodies both identity and connection. Whakapapa is an organised and contextualised knowledge system that spans time (J. Graham, 2005). As a genealogical narrative of all living things, descending from the atua to the present day (Barlow, 1991), whakapapa provides a way of understanding who we are and how we are connected to each other and to the land (Te Rito, 2007). In the context of this rangahau, whakapapa required me to first ask who I am, who my community is, and how we connect. Through whakapapa, the ethical and relational responsibilities necessary to uphold meaningful relationships could be understood.

Ko wai au?

Ko Motatau te Maunga
Ko Taikerau te Awa
Ko Ngatokimatawhaorua te waka
Ko Ngāpuhi te iwi
Ko Ngāti Hine te hapū
Ko Manukoroki te Marae
He pānga hoki ōku ki Tainui me Ngāti Maniapoto
Tēnā koutou katoa, ko Ngawai O'Leary tōku ingoa

I am an extension of my whānau, and I first must acknowledge them as they too have been part of this rangahau journey. I drew on the collective experience and knowledge within my own whānau base to help guide me. L.T. Smith (2021) outlines whānau as a central part of kaupapa Māori research, as they give voice to different sections of Māori communities, enable debate and reflection on research ideas, centralise Māori values, and incorporate people with particular expertise. In this study, my whānau fulfilled these roles. Those who advised me were artists practising toi, whānau members with lived experience navigating mental health and mental health systems, a Te Tiriti lawyer, and academics. While specific details were withheld to protect anonymity, my whānau have guided this rangahau from its inception through hui (gathering, meeting), discussion, tutelage, and art. They have shaped my worldview and, in turn, my positioning as a researcher.

Contrary to positivistic Western research, which assumes objectivity (Tiakiwai, 2015), my positioning is inherently relational and subjective. I am a researcher, but also a health worker, an artist, an iwi member, and a law clerk with work connected to my community. As part of the praxis component of this master's programme, I worked as a law clerk under Roimata Smail LTD, contributing to Wai 2575, the Waitangi Tribunal's Health Services and Outcomes Inquiry. I worked on the upcoming mental health phase and the hearing into the disestablishment of Te Aka Whai Ora (Māori Health Authority). This experience meant that my understanding of this rangahau project was informed by both theoretical sources and contemporary political and social contexts. It was also through this work that I first connected with Te Kōhao and learned of their carving programme, a relationship that enabled this project to emerge under a kaupapa Māori approach.

In this sense, I can be considered an insider researcher. At the same time, as a postgraduate student within a tertiary institution, and through aspects of my gender, cultural knowledge, and linguistic ability, I also occupied an outsider position (L.T. Smith, 2021). The complexity of this dual positioning meant standing between familiarity and separation, which brings both challenges and advantages (Wagner, 1993; Mackintosh, 2024). Within this between space, a sense of trust and shared understanding enhanced engagement, while moments of distance revealed the limits of my knowing and required careful reflection. I argue that this duality strengthened the rangahau process by enabling critical analysis while maintaining accountability to the people, places, and knowledge involved. Navigating this space was supported by attentiveness to wairua.

3.3.5 Wairua

Wairua helped bridge the separation within Te Kore to the transformation of Te Pō as we worked together. Wairua refers to the intangible connections that exist within the universe and is understood in te ao Māori as spirit. It is the ultimate reality for Māori, as the source of being and life (Marsden & Royal, 2003). In this rangahau, wairua functioned as a methodological guide, shaping how engagement, listening, reflection, and interpretation occurred. It involved holding space for the unknown and unseen and incorporated spiritual practices such as karakia and reflective pause.

Although I, Te Kōhao, and the storytellers came together through this rangahau, we each originated from different places, experiences, and ways of being. Holding space for the unknown required recognising that aspects of lived experience, being, and cultural knowledge were not mine to presume or control. As L.T. Smith (2021) states, in kaupapa Māori research, the researcher is not the expert; rather, it is the participants. Te Kōhao were positioned as experts, with space to guide engagement in ways that were tikanga-consistent, respectful, reciprocal, and grounded in local context. Hui were held with a Te Kōhao health leader and two tohunga whakairo (expert carvers), who could speak to the aspirations and needs of the programme and their community. These hui confirmed rangahau priorities, addressed cultural and ethical considerations, and supported the co-development of engagement strategies, communication pathways, and preferred venues. They also informed the dissemination plan to ensure findings could be returned in meaningful ways. Attentiveness to wairua also meant protecting the mana and mauri of people and their

kōrero. This was upheld through karakia and responsiveness to tone, emotion, and silence. At times, wairua also required sitting with kōrero and reflecting before moving forward. This allowed adaptation in both rangahau processes and expressions of tikanga.

3.3.6 Tikanga: Ethics and Enactment of Māori Worldview

Tikanga bridges the transformation in Te Pō to the enlightenment in Te Ao Mārama, moving the rangahau from collective thinking to collective action. Within the takarangi framework, tikanga represents the enactment of the Māori worldview through concrete practices and decisions. Tikanga also carries an ethical dimension, grounded in the concept of tika — that which is right and appropriate.

Ethical approval was one of the first steps taken to ensure the rangahau was conducted in a manner that was tika. However, ethical accountability extended beyond institutional requirements and involved balancing the university ethics process with what was right and appropriate for the community under a kaupapa Māori approach. This rangahau is accountable to the people, places, and knowledge it draws upon. While I have drawn on institutional principles and frameworks such as Te Ara Tika (Hudson et al., 2010), the expression of tikanga in this study is tailored to the context, space, and the people of this mahi. Discussions on ethical considerations for this project were undertaken with my whānau base (in general terms), my supervisors, and most importantly, the community themselves. These considerations included informed consent, power dynamics, cultural safety, tikanga, Māori data sovereignty, confidentiality, sensitivity, reciprocity and dissemination. Ethical approval was obtained from Massey University's Human Ethics Committee (OM2 25/24). Beginning from a position of tika enabled the practical methods of this rangahau to unfold, including immersion in Te Kōhao's processes, wānanga, pūrākau, and an embodied inquiry through uku (discussed in methods).

3.3.7 Mauri Ora: Centre of the Framework

Within the takarangi framework, mauri ora functions as the central kaupapa that anchors and integrates the methods used in this rangahau. The term mauri ora is used in acknowledgement of the creative whakapapa and the connection between whakairo, uku and wellbeing through Tāne Mahuta and Hineahuone. In the context of Tāne and Hineahuone, tīhei mauri ora signalled the creation of life. Mauri ora in this framework

means strengthening creative wellness. It reflects in part the ideals of the carving programme and the inquiry of this rangahau - toi and hauora. It grounds me and reminds me to keep the question of this rangahau at the centre. It also encompasses and positions whakairo (the toi being researched), uku (the toi I practice) and pūrākau (the toi and method of expressing and gathering knowledge) as essential to health and this rangahau. As a study that sits at the intersection of hauora and toi, upholding, highlighting, and enhancing creativity and wellbeing is the aspiration of this rangahau.

3.4 Methods

Grounded in the Takarangi Framework and guided by the principles of whakapapa, wairua, tikanga, and mauri ora, the methods employed in this rangahau were relational, immersive, and creative. Rather than separating methodology from method, the rangahau practices emerged as expressions of the outlined kaupapa Māori approach. Immersion, wānanga, pūrākau, and uku were interconnected methods that enabled knowledge to be gathered, understood, honoured, and ultimately returned in ways that were consistent with the values and aspirations of the community.

3.4.1 Immersion and Hui

Te Kōhao welcomed me into their space and into aspects of their organisation and programme-specific processes. This included being introduced to the board, visiting the carving studio, meeting the carving team, attending morning karakia and waiata where I was introduced to the wider health team, and attending a carving graduation. This immersion provided a deeper understanding and appreciation of who Te Kōhao are, their mahi, and the mechanisms of the phenomena being explored. Much of the engagement with Te Kōhao occurred through hui. Through face-to-face interaction, hui created space for kōrero, listening, learning, and mahi tahi (working together). These processes were essential for community guidance of the rangahau and for the gathering of pūrākau.

3.4.2 Pūrākau

Building on this immersion and relational engagement, pūrākau was the primary method through which knowledge was gathered in this study. Pūrākau is a Māori form of narrative inquiry (Lee, 2009). Oral tradition or storytelling was the primary source of knowledge transmission in Māori culture (Lee, 2009). Lee (2005) positions pūrākau not as mere tales,

myths or legends but rather as preserved ancestral knowledge that extends beyond traditional stories to include storying in contemporary contexts. Pūrākau are as important to contemporary Māori practices as they were in traditional Māori society (Mikahere-Hall, 2017). They contain worldviews, philosophical thought, cultural codes, and epistemological constructs which are fundamental to our identity (Lee, 2009).

It is a versatile and distinct form of narrative which enables contemporary Māori to express ourselves as we relate to the world around us (Mikahere-Hall, 2017). Like Lee (2009), I made methodological space for pūrākau as a culturally responsive narrative approach because it offers legitimate ways of talking, researching, and representing our stories. In the context of this rangahau, it is a way to empower people to tell their stories in their own ways. It transforms "participants" into storytellers. I did not feel that the term participants reflected the mana of those sharing their kōrero, nor did it encompass the relationships made or their dynamics under a kaupapa Māori approach. Hence, the term storyteller has been used to mean participant throughout this thesis. Traditionally, pūrākau were a platform for all Māori but were the domain of tohunga (experts) and Rangatira (chiefs) - those who were highly skilled (Mead, 2016). I acknowledge and position the storytellers involved in this study as experts - experts of whakairo, healing, and contemporary Māori realities. In telling their stories, they are gifting taonga which must be collected and portrayed appropriately.

A pūrākau method is also aligned with the kaupapa and creative foundations of this rangahau topic. Pūrākau is an art form in and of itself, one which is communicated through whakairo (Mikahere-Hall, 2017). Throughout our history, carvers maintained a role as articulators of the past, present and future, telling stories across time and space through their works (Brown et al., 2024). In this way, pūrākau is not only a method of rangahau but a way to recognise and acknowledge the foundations of whakairo.

3.4.3 Uku as Embodied Inquiry

Uku was employed as an embodied and reflective method to better connect, engage and understand both whakairo and this research. I again drew on the expertise of my whānau, practising uku under the tutelage of my aunty, Noelle Jakeman. Together, we have collaborated on clay pieces, shows, and have co-facilitated ipu whenua workshops. As Wilson (2017, p.22) states, "when the mahi toi practitioner is also the researcher and vice

versa, the vernaculars in both circles enrich and give structure to each other." Much like my health-law praxis, practising uku has helped me step beyond a theoretical understanding of toi. Instead, I have held the earth in my hands, shaped it, carved it, connected to te ao Māori through it and felt its wairua, and healing.

Art-based research emphasises non-conventional ways of meaning-making and embodied responses to the world, enabling space for creative presentation of research processes and outputs (Byrne et al., 2018). Practising uku has helped me to maintain creative thinking and navigate the trials of research. It offered a creative outlook, a space of reflection and thinking, grounding, a lens for problem solving, a sense of achievement and relief. It is also a way to uphold reciprocity, as the work created is to be gifted to those involved in the rangahau. Uku overall was a fundamental part of my exploration of the healing potential of whakairo and drew me closer to the kaupapa of this rangahau.

3.4.4 Data Collection

Building on the relational, immersive, and kaupapa Māori methods outlined above, this section details how pūrākau were gathered, analysed, and returned. Data collection and analysis were guided by whanaungatanga and the takarangi framework, ensuring that knowledge was generated in ways that were ethically grounded, relationally accountable, and aligned with the kaupapa of mauri ora.

Storytellers - Recruitment and Inclusion

Whanaungatanga was central to the identification and engagement of storytellers. Given the specific focus of this rangahau, purposive selection through Te Kōhao's existing networks was used to invite individuals with recent or ongoing involvement in the carving programme. While such an approach can raise concerns about power dynamics, I argue that this relational process supported storytellers to feel more comfortable, connected, and supported throughout the rangahau. Te Kōhao operates differently from mainstream health services. As a kaupapa Māori organisation, they are closely integrated within and highly knowledgeable about their communities (Mauriora ki te Ao, 2009). Through their manakitanga, Te Kōhao uplifted me, the storytellers, and the rangahau process. Their facilitation also helped bridge the researcher-participant divide.

An early wānanga with Te Kōhao identified that multiple perspectives were needed to speak meaningfully to the carving programme, including its mahi with tamariki. As ethical approval had been obtained only for participants aged 18 years and over, individuals who could speak to the programme's work with tamariki were included. The storytellers, therefore, comprised of Matua Rei, who runs Tipu Ake, Matua Pene, who runs Te Pou Taurahere, two adults who completed the programme, three educators involved in delivering the programme within their school, a project leader from Te Kōhao, and a Te Kōhao health leader. This group represented a diverse range of perspectives and reflected both the collective priorities of the community and the aims of this rangahau.

All storytellers were introduced to me kanohi ki te kanohi (face to face) by someone they knew and respected within the Te Kōhao network, establishing trust and familiarity. These initial encounters often transitioned naturally into interviews. There was general enthusiasm from the storytellers to share their stories and experiences with the programme. Prior to data collection, informed consent was obtained through information sheets (Appendix 3), consent forms (Appendix 4 and Appendix 5), kōrero, and pātai. In total, nine storytellers shared their pūrākau.

Storytelling interviews - Process and Context

In alignment with a kaupapa Māori pūrākau approach, data was collected kanohi ki te kanohi through semi-structured interviews. While semi-structured interviews are guided by a pre-determined protocol, they allow flexibility and discovery as participants' insights emerge through kōrero (Shackelford & Ziegler-Hill, 2020). Although interviews were approached with a guiding framework, discussions were largely storyteller-led.

Many storytellers expressed a preference to kōrero in groups due to existing relationships within their spaces or connections formed through the programme. This resulted in two individual interviews and two group interviews. For group interviews, a confidentiality agreement (Appendix 6) was also discussed and provided. It was acknowledged that the kōrero shared belonged to the storytellers and might be drawn on within their own lives and mahi. The intent was not to restrict the use of their insights, but to protect personal disclosures and ensure that storytellers could share freely, confidently, and safely.

Given the diversity of storytellers and interview contexts, no fixed interview format was imposed. Instead, questions served as prompts to initiate kōrero, rather than as a prescribed sequence. In many instances, questions could be set aside as storytellers shared their experiences in ways that addressed the rangahau aims more cohesively and authentically. Questions were also adapted, and new questions introduced, in response to storytellers' roles, identities, and involvement in the programme, allowing for a richer flow of kōrero.

One group interview was conducted at a school, while the remaining interviews were held at Te Kōhao venues that were familiar, comfortable, and accessible to participants. Many interviews began and ended with karakia, sometimes led by me and other times by the storytellers. Interviews ranged from 42 minutes to one hour and 48 minutes and were often followed by further whakawhanaungatanga (relationship building) through informal kōrero and kai. Petrol vouchers and kai were offered as koha. At the conclusion of the rangahau, uku taonga were gifted to acknowledge the time, knowledge, and care shared by storytellers and facilitators.

Transcription and Storyteller Review

With consent, interviews were audio-recorded using a digital recorder and phone. Recordings were transcribed and returned to storytellers alongside a summary letter outlining key learnings and quotations from their kōrero. Storytellers were given one month to review, edit, or withdraw their contributions.

3.4.5 Analysis

Analysis of the pūrākau was undertaken within the Takarangi Framework and guided by cycles of engagement rather than a single analytic lens. The first stage involved achieving familiarity through repeated listening and reading of each pūrākau. Transcription and the preparation of summary letters supported this process.

As familiarity developed, analysis became more intentional and was initially guided by wairua. This involved listening attentively to understand meaning without immediate pressure to extract findings or categorise data. Holding space for the unknown and unseen was essential, allowing the mauri and meanings of each story to reveal themselves in their own time. This approach reflects accountability to the people, places, and knowledge shared, and prioritises the integrity of storytellers' voices. Rather than imposing pre-

determined thematic codes, attention was first given to the integrity of each pūrākau as a whole narrative. This ensured that analysis did not fragment meaning or separate insights from their relational and cultural contexts.

Following this, a whakapapa lens was applied to explore connections across the pūrākau. Rather than focusing solely on recurring themes, this process attended to connections across time, place, relationships, culture, and healing. Concepts did not need to be articulated by all of the storytellers to be included; instead, significance was understood through connection and context. The diversity of storytellers' roles and experiences meant that pūrākau spoke to different aspects of whakairo and healing, yet meaningful connections emerged at their intersection. This relational mapping process involved moving iteratively between individual narratives and the collective body of kōrero, ensuring that interpretations remained grounded in specific accounts while identifying shared currents across the awa of stories.

The kaupapa of mauri ora guided subsequent cycles of analysis. Mauri ora encompasses the central rangahau question: how does whakairo serve as a therapeutic tool for mental health and wellbeing? To engage with this question, analysis considered three interconnected elements: understanding the carving itself; how the carving programme and healing processes were enacted; and the effects of the programme. In other words, it analysed the art, the kaupapa Māori approach, and the therapeutic outcomes. Whakaaro within the pūrākau were organised around these elements, with further cycles of analysis drawing again on wairua and whakapapa. Across these cycles of engagement, interpretations were continually revisited and refined to ensure coherence with the takarangi framework and alignment with the relational responsibilities established through whakapapa and tikanga.

It was through this sustained, iterative engagement that the findings took shape as an interpretative pūrākau, presented as a journey of a waka moving along a pathway toward intergenerational flourishing and the ripples it creates in the awa. This form emerged organically from the methodological commitments of this rangahau, rather than being imposed as a stylistic choice. It reflects the relational, cyclical, and whakapapa-informed processes through which meaning was generated.

3.4.6 Dissemination

Dissemination was not an afterthought in this rangahau but an integral consideration from its inception, shaping the design of methods, engagement processes, and ethical commitments. This rangahau has two primary dissemination pathways. The first is the thesis, as required by the institution. The second prioritises returning the rangahau to the community in ways that are meaningful, accessible, and consistent with kaupapa Māori principles of reciprocity and accountability.

This included presenting the findings to Te Kōhao at a hui where the rangahau was shared kanohi ki te kanohi and the uku taonga returned as koha in acknowledgement of the knowledge and care gifted to this rangahau. In this way, knowledge generation and knowledge return remain inseparable within the takarangi framework.

3.5 Chapter Summary

Having outlined the methodological pathway of this rangahau — from immersion and pūrākau to embodied inquiry, analysis, and return — the following chapter presents the findings as an interpretative pūrākau. In keeping with the takarangi framework, these findings are not presented as fragmented themes, but as a living narrative that carries the mauri of the storytellers' kōrero and traces the movement of whakairo as a pathway toward mauri ora.

Chapter Four: Findings

Figure 4.1. Carving the story into the ipu. As patterns are carved into the surface of the ipu, the findings of this rangahau are revealed — shaped by the voices of participants and inscribed through their lived experiences.

4.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter explores how whakairo acts as a therapeutic tool to support mental health and wellbeing. I present findings from interviews with nine storytellers, some of whom have been anonymised using names of native trees. Storytellers included:

- Matua Rei (tohunga whakairo; Tipu Ake)
- Matua Pene (tohunga whakairo; Te Pou Taurahere)
- Mānuka (Te Kōhao health leader)
- Rimu (kura - principal)
- Miro (kura - deputy principal)
- Rewarewa (kura - kaiako/teacher)
- Kahikatea (Te Kōhao project leader)
- Kauri (carving graduate)
- Mataī (carving graduate)

Bringing together these voices enabled a multilayered account of the programme's intent, facilitation, practice, and lived impact. Grounded in a kaupapa Māori approach, the findings were developed through the Takarangi Framework and are presented as an interpretive pūrākau. This pūrākau weaves the voices of the storytellers into an overarching narrative that illustrates the therapeutic application and outcomes of whakairo, likening the carving programme to a journey.

Large sections of participant kōrero are intentionally included throughout this chapter. This is a purposeful methodological choice grounded in kaupapa Māori principles, seeking to uphold the mana of the kōrero shared and to privilege storytellers' voices as the primary carriers of meaning. Rather than fragmenting their narratives into brief excerpts, extended passages are retained where possible to preserve context, wairua, and narrative integrity. My role within this chapter is therefore to provide interpretive signals and analytical framing, while allowing the storytellers' own words to guide the unfolding of the pūrākau.

As I engaged with the storytellers' kōrero, recurring ideas, metaphors, and symbols emerged across the interviews. Storytellers described carving as a "vehicle", spoke of "journeys", and reflected on processes that generate impacts which "flow" outward and "ripple" beyond the individual. Through analysis, these expressions coalesced into an image of a waka and the ripples it creates in the awa as it journeys toward intergenerational flourishing. This interpretative pūrākau is visually represented in Figure 4.2. These elements – the waka (carving), the awa (kaupapa Māori), and the ripples (mauri ora) – structure the sections of this chapter and provide the analytical framework through which the findings are presented. While discussed separately, these elements are not isolated; rather, they represent interconnected dimensions of a holistic process of wellbeing through whakairo. Carving, its processes, the space it opens to, the people who practice it, and its impacts exist simultaneously and in relation to one another. Accordingly, this interpretative pūrākau is offered not as a linear account, but as an integrated depiction of wellbeing as it is generated through whakairo. Selected participant quotes are used throughout this chapter to illustrate and ground key analytical insights.

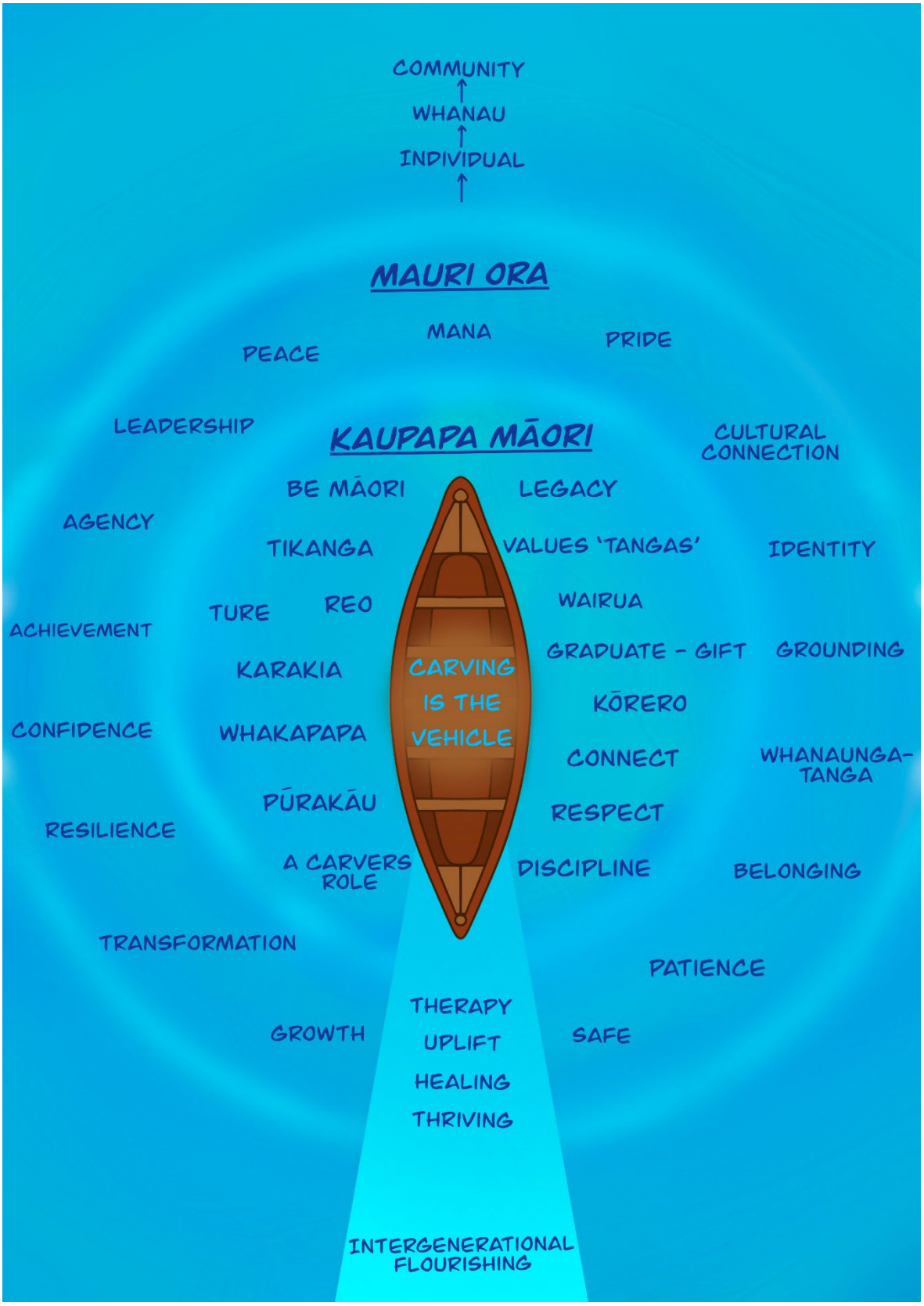

Figure 4.2. Interpretative pūrākau of whakairo as a therapeutic journey. This figure illustrates the carving programme as a waka journeying along the awa, and the ripples of mauri ora generated through this process.

4.2 He Waka: Whakairo as the Vehicle

The waka represents whakairo. It is what enables and initiates this journey to wellbeing as the vehicle that transports people to where they need to be. Much like the waka is the most tangible element of this journey, this section attends to what is most visible and commonly understood: the artistic dimension of whakairo. At the same time, it challenges narrow definitions of whakairo by foregrounding how the storytellers themselves framed its purpose and value.

4.2.1 Carving is the Vehicle

Carving as the vehicle is the overarching theme of the findings. Across the interviews, whakairo was consistently described as a means rather than an end. While the physical act of carving is a core component of this healing journey, the storytellers expressed that whakairo's therapeutic value lies in the culture, processes, relationships and transformations that come through it. Matua Pene explained that people often *"think that carving is just carving"* without recognising *"all these other properties happening within this realm of wellbeing, of who we are as Māori."* He expressed his hope of changing the narrative of whakairo to become a *"passionate"* and encompassing word. His kōrero situates whakairo within a broader Māori understanding of wellbeing, where carving operates as a space for self-exploration, cultural connection, and healing rather than an isolated creative activity. Miro further articulated this idea through the concept of 'kia puāwai te ngākau', describing carving as a vehicle that enables inner flourishing. He explained:

> *"We talk about kia puāwai te ngākau… that every student we believe has genuinely got something that is innately inside of them that is special and needs to be, and it is our job to try and bring this to the fore, and Tipu Ake is a vehicle for that to happen."*

Here, carving is positioned as a mechanism through which potential already held within individuals can be realised. The storytellers explained that the process of whakairo supports the emergence of confidence, resilience, identity and mana.

For others, carving functioned as a sustaining practice that grounded them emotionally and spiritually. Matua Rei described whakairo as central to his own wellbeing, stating:

> *"That's my life - if I ever stop carving, I would say that probably yeah, the world is not worth living for… it is my world, it keeps me grounded - yup it's my space, my therapy."*

He went on to emphasise that the value of carving lies not in the finished product, but in the process itself, noting that *"the carving is just the icing on the cake - it is a process for them in finding a way about how they can move forward."* The storytellers spoke about carving being a therapeutic vehicle that supports people to navigate challenge, uncertainty and find their way forward.

Whakairo is often perceived as the act of carving or the taonga created; however, such views risk overlooking the broader relational, cultural and spiritual dimensions that give whakairo its therapeutic value. Rather than being framed solely as art, whakairo was consistently described as an encompassing practice that enabled healing, connection, growth and transformation by creating space for Māori ways of doing, forward movement and flourishing. The following sections will demonstrate how whakairo acts as a vehicle and what it is a vehicle for.

4.2.2 The Artistic and Embodied Practice of Carving

Storytellers spoke to the physical practice of carving as being central to shaping not only the taonga created but the way people think, feel and navigate themselves through life.

The embodied nature of whakairo was seen as creating opportunities for therapeutic engagement, particularly through expression and the metaphoric application of carving to experiences of adversity and challenge.

Mānuka described how the hands-on craft of carving is used deliberately to support healing, explaining the expression that comes through carving:

> *"She was learning to communicate what was happening in her little world … it just became such a natural form for her to use that kind of media… so away she went… the transformation in her happened because the healing was happening in the expression and then having this person… to talk to throughout it"*

Mānuka also explained how the symbolism within carving enables people to process what has happened in their lives:

> *"He uses the symbolism in the hands-on craft of carving to help them process what's happened in their lives and the strategies that they've had to apply in this moment in time to navigate themselves around that particular knot… in the wood, you know what I mean. Originally, they saw a plan for this piece of timber… they start and donk, they hit something. So, he uses the very tangible realities in carving to help them apply it to real life in real time… the opportunity to explore what's happened comes through the exercise of the day, it just comes. And so that's where the teaching happens. That's where the healing happens."*

Similarly, Matua Rei spoke to the role of silence, frustration, and resistance in the carving process, describing how these moments open a space of reflection and learning for the carvers:

> *"While you're carving… that silence, things come to your mind and of course…the chisel they're not in control of it and it's going too deep and when it's going deep, they're getting frustrated. They're trying to dig it out and it's getting worse and worse. So in life I says, it's not smooth going all the time, you know, you're going to hit bumps in your road along the way. But I said just remember, try and take a step back and have a look from a different view rather than just trying to get in there and it's festering like a sore. Aye, you keep scratching it and scratching it, it gets worse and worse, so leave it alone. Oh yeah, but it's itchy, leave it alone. Little wee hints like that."*

The resistance within the wood was seen to activate problem solving, "*resilience,*" "*patience*" and emotional regulation. Working through the challenges of carving supported people to move beyond "*whakama*" and "anxiety", learning that *"it's not about making mistakes,"* rather it is about *"feeling safe",* continuing*, "contributing",* and finding a way forward. In this way, carving created a reflective space in which participants could step back, reorient their outlook, and reframe difficulties encountered both in the workshop and in life more broadly.

The physical taonga themselves, often patu (traditional Māori club), were described as extending this reflective process as they hold the stories of their maker's identity,

whakapapa and whānau. Mataī explained that while carvings may appear decorative to outsiders, they hold deep meaning and guidance:

> *"To most people, it could just look like some cool, pretty pictures, you know, but when you actually explain who is who, and what is what, and the reasons why they are on there, you know it's more than just a couple of korus. Everything has its reason for being there, there's always meaning behind everything… and I like to take certain things which generally leads you to where you need to be."*

Because these designs embody whānau and ancestral narratives, the process of creating the taonga provides carvers with a culturally grounded framework for making meaning of both their past and their way forward. Rimu described how a gifted taonga, embodying the story of their students, kura (school), and the carving programme, became the mauri of their kura and was kept at the centre of their space to help guide decision-making.

The process of gifting taonga at the end of the programme further extended the therapeutic impact of carving beyond the individual. The expectation that carvings reflect whānau stories and are given to others shifted focus outward, strengthening empathy and a sense of relational responsibility. As Kahikatea explained:

> *"The act of creating something that is intended for someone else helps develop empathy and thinking of others…there is a whole range of things that seem to pour out of it."*

Through these processes, the internal skills developed through carving — reflection, resilience, meaning-making, patience, and care for others — were understood as enduring and transferable across different spaces, whānau, and future contexts. As expressed by Rewarewa, it prepares people to "*walk in other spaces*." Mānuka also captured this aspiration when reflecting on what she hoped participants would carry forward:

> *"I would hope... they will never forget their beginnings with the programme and nurture it to help them become almost symbolically that patu that they make and give away. It's a creation that they are proud of and have put so much love into and time and effort, and they give it to the person they love the most. So that symbolism is what I hope for the future is that they take their own lives and create themselves*

into people they can just be so proud of, and that anyone and anything they are part of into the future will just be better because of it."

Together, these kōrero illustrate how the physical practice or artistic dimension of carving functions as a therapeutic process that shapes wellbeing in ways that extend beyond the carving bench. While the waka that is carving enables and starts the journey to wellbeing, as the storytellers shared, whakairo is not solely the act of carving or the taonga created. Our waka needs the awa to carry us.

4.3 Te Awa: The Kaupapa Māori Medium that Carries the Waka

The awa encompasses the processes, people, intentions, and tikanga that surround whakairo. Together, these elements form a therapeutic medium that carries the waka and sustains our journey to wellbeing.

4.3.1 A Kaupapa Māori Way of Doing

Carving has been passed down for generations and is a living, breathing expression of mātauranga Māori. With this comes a distinctive kaupapa Māori way of doing and being, grounded in values that have long shaped te ao Māori.

As Matua Pene explained, these ways of being are not new, but intergenerational practices that are continuously carried forward:

"Yeah, I think this has been done years and years back… it's nothing new. It's not new to our people…. kaitiakitanga, manakitanga, arohatanga - all those are encompassed within the te ao Māori way of being, of delivering, of how things are done. It's a thing that's been handed on that we're just continuing… delivering the same way to the next generation so they can keep those ethics going forward. And it's by Māori for Māori but for everybody."

Matua Rei similarly described this as a natural extension of Māori life, with the programme creating opportunities to bring rangatahi back into their *"natural world":*

"It's us being Māori - that's the way we are, that's the way we were brought up. It's our life. All of those things that become natural to us, we're just trying to bring it into

today's world where the kids all they know about is… iPads or whatever, and I says it's just bringing them back to their natural world."

Whakairo stands in the strength of its cultural foundations and intergenerational endurance. It is not a new or experimental approach, but a long-established solution for Māori. When applied at the intersection of health, it enables healing in ways that are meaningful and culturally grounded. This was expressed simply by Kauri as:

"It's beautiful learning something that you're a part of. He Māori ahau you know."

For Matua Pene, the carving shed became a site of affirmation and resistance against experiences of belittlement outside the carving space:

"We were being belittled outside of the [carving] shed, and I was used to that, and that's why I didn't want to be Māori. But inside the shed, we were told that we were clever, you know, we were experts and these other things pertaining to the environment of who we were, and I loved listening to that yeah so, I had a passion for carving."

The kaupapa Māori way of doing that comes through the process of carving is inherently validating and a core component of whakairo's therapeutic value. Central to the kaupapa was wairua, tikanga, and the tohunga guiding the programme.

4.3.2 Wairua

Consistent with kaupapa Māori understandings and modes of healing, wairua was described as an important mechanism of whakairo. As a gift passed from tūpuna (ancestors), rangatira and tohunga - with connections to our atua - whakairo itself is sacred. In turn, storytellers described an "*intangible"* space and feeling that exists through carving.

Kauri spoke directly to the tapu nature of carving and the way spirituality is held through karakia and pūrākau:

"I know you fulla's taken something that's you know tapu, aye bro… sacred." … "its real spiritual you know…. aye listen to the pūrākau… Karakia's every time before our classes."

Mānuka described wairua as something that becomes alive through the process and is felt immediately on entering the shed:

> *"The wairua… it's more alive in the process. Yeah, coz carving's a very, I say peaceful world, but you go into the shed its dink dink dink, not peaceful. But they're peaceful in their own bubble and their thoughts…. The wairua is there from the minute you step into the room."*

Rewarewa similarly described wairua as visible through participants' desire to be in the space and the happiness it evokes:

> *"Their wairua… it's not a measurable thing but... when they walk into that space you can see that they're happy they… want to be… in that space."*

While wairua was described as an immeasurable and intangible phenomena, these kōrero show that it inherently exists in the art of whakairo, is present in the space and felt by the carvers. Storytellers described wairua in terms that reflected a shift in energy, including feelings of "*peace,"* contentment*,* "*connection*," being *"magnetised"* to or falling in love with whakairo. In this way, wairua operated not only as an innate presence but as something that could also activate and guide individuals along in their journeys. As expressed by Mānuka:

> *"[Wairua] gives way for learning or whatever stage you're at… it fills that gap… it's that intangible thing between you and that, and it consumes you, and you want to feed it, you want to feed others what you've gained... Wherever you're at on the journey, it's the wairua that makes it get to wherever it's got to, for each individual, because we are each different."*

These kōrero position wairua as an active, dynamic, and relational force that connects the art, the carvers, the space, actions, and intentions. These insights suggest that healing through whakairo is experienced not only emotionally but also spiritually and relationally. With the sacredness and wairua of whakairo comes a tikanga to uphold the practice.

4.3.3 Tikanga and Processes

If wairua speaks to the spiritual force that animates whakairo, then tikanga gives that force structure, form, and direction. Carving does not exist in isolation but is inherently connected

to ture (laws, rules), tikanga, karakia, kōrero, reo, pūrākau, pepeha (Recitation of identity and affiliations, introduction) and whakapapa. As Matua Pene noted:

> *"Like I say, carving was the vehicle, but to get to the carving part, you had to do these aye"*

These surrounding cultural practices form a process that gives access to the world of whakairo and healing. Storytellers described how ture and tikanga were enacted for the safety of carvers and to uphold respect for both the carving space and the taonga being created. Examples included keeping food separate from carving spaces, expectations around how tools are held and put down, how to treat taonga and guidance around what materials may be used, by who and when. Karakia were used to open and close the space, and pūrākau were used as teachings to bring greater connection and understanding to te ao Māori, the tikanga ture and kaupapa of carving. Another aspect of the tikanga is the role given to carvers, as explained by Matua Rei:

> *"We explain to the class that now that they've become carvers whether they are male or female they have a purpose in life that they must hold tight to ok… their purpose in life is to protect the female."*

Matua Rei described these processes as *"little wee gems"* that ground the carvers and support both structure and change:

> *"So just teaching them those little wee gems if you like and they hold fast to those things, and it's changed a few of their lives… it grounds them… It's just setting them with their protocols, and they really, really engage with the process and with structure and that's one of the things that are coming through."*

While these processes create a grounding structure and discipline, storytellers emphasised that the relational aspects were equally important within their processes. Whanaungatanga (relationship building) was enabled through kōrero. Alongside traditional pūrākau, participants were encouraged to share their own pūrākau – their life stories and experiences - as a way of opening up and connecting with others in the programme. As expressed by Matua Pene:

"It's not just about carving, you know the hands on it's about what's going on inside, sharing our vulnerability with each other, making connections. …. we had around the room kōrero about what we're grateful for, you know what have yous done in the last 24 hours. So was about getting our whānau to talk…"

"You know, telling my story of how I started not knowing that would go further, but just speaking how it was for me… and you know others listen and go wow, I was just like you bro, and where that takes us it takes us on a journey."

Storytellers described how having space for kōrero and connection enabled emotional exploration, positive social engagement and helped to foster a sense of belonging. Kōrero also gave space to te reo (Māori language). Matua Rei and Mānuka explained how te reo naturally emerged in the carving process and how impactful te reo was to the carvers:

*"We had a boy… wouldn't say anything, hardly moved. I said oh we'll have to try and find a way. Yeah, we carried on with our processes, and we got to a point you know where we say what is your purpose in life… so the class spoke up and they said protect the female. This boy that the school thought was mute… he goes mo ake tonu atu. Wow and we go *gasp and the teacher goes *gasp... They thought he was mute, he understood Māori! (Matua Rei)*

"There's one boy and he was a bully… and he did something to another child and Matua saw it and… spoke to him in te reo… when you use te reo it's softer, the message is… more directly meaningful for the situation and so that's what naturally came out of Matua's mouth, and the kid understood…and kōrero-ed back… it changed everything completely. And he went from being the school yard bully to the school leader and the cool kid. You know the kid that everyone wanted to be with and be like because he completely flipped around." (Mānuka)

Te reo is an integral part of te ao Māori. Indeed, another way of sharing one's story and fostering belonging was through Pepeha, which supported learning and expression of reo and whakapapa. Participants were encouraged to explore where they are from, who their whānau is, their iwi - or their cultural origins (for non-Māori), and to incorporate these elements into their taonga. This process was described as fundamental to strengthening identity, which many storytellers identified as the core of the programme.

Mānuka described this identity work as deeply relational and transformative:

> *"He spends time helping them understand who they are... he helps them love the maunga, become the maunga… I am my maunga, I am my waka, I am my iwi and my iwi we are one… that's why they can stand so tall and proud, and become a magnet for others. It's not just learning the art of carving, it's… knowing who you are, where you come from, your own stories… and how you can take those stories and become responsible for them…Because in that journey you're the one that's doing the work… so, it's becoming part of you... and then that extends to… you've got this obligation to do something with it and that leads to the sharing part…. the giving of that taonga to their significant whānau member... It grows from there…. it's about all the other people that you can help."*

This *"know, responsibility, share"* understanding of whakairo suggests a progression that participants move through: learning identity, taking responsibility for what has been gained, and then enacting that responsibility through giving to others. This aligns with the Māori values of manaakitanga (respect, generosity, care), kaitiakitanga (guardianship), and arohatanga (love, compassion), which emphasise care, accountability, and interdependence. In this way, identity is positioned not only as individual healing but as a foundation for relational responsibility and the wellbeing of the collective. This was evident in the storytellers' kōrero as they not only spoke of themselves or the person in the programme but of the impacts to their whānau and wider community.

These cultural processes are integral to the practice of carving. Together, they create an intentional, grounded, and safe space for the exploration of whakairo, identity, behaviour, spirituality, thinking, and connection. Importantly, these tikanga are not abstract; they are enacted, upheld, and given meaning through the tohunga who guide the programme.

4.3.4 Ngā Kaiwhakatere: Tohunga as navigators

As the navigators of this journey, the tohunga hold several important functions. Storytellers described them as conduits of mātauranga Māori, committed to transmitting the knowledge, skills, and benefits of whakairo to future generations. The other storytellers described Matua Rei and Matua Pene as positive role models, carrying the "*mana", "cultural expertise", "lived*

experience", "responsiveness to people's energies", and "interpersonal skills" that creates a healing space and connection.

Mānuka captured the role of Matua Rei in the succession of whakairo and healing as:

> *"Matua is the totara tree. He has his roots firmly in the ground, he provides shade to those who need it and he's feeding them, he provides that uplifting and inspiration that they look up at him. And the totara tree when they drop seeds, these seeds continue to grow, and the seeds are the kids."*

Mānuka also described the status of kaumātua (elders) as carrying a particular kind of healing presence:

> *"The status of kaumātua, it's a respect he attracts… Seeing unwell people sit with kaumātua who have a wisdom and life experience, that reminds them that the woes of this moment are so insignificant… they end up leaving feeling happier and better just for having spoken to and spent time with these wiser people."*

Miro emphasised Matua's pastoral role and the way his mana, humour, and high expectations empowered rangatahi:

> *"That pastoral role [of] Matua … empowers the wairua of our tamariki. Having someone with the mana that Matua has, the sense of humour, gets the kids, but also has really high expectations and big aspirations... For them, seeing a highly respected, distinguished Māori, absolute legend who thinks I can do incredible things"*

Across the kōrero, the tohunga's role went beyond mentorship to form a therapeutic alliance grounded in manaakitanga, aroha, and whanaungatanga. People described how "*respect", "trust", "connection", "inspiration",* and being *"understood"* formed the relational foundation that drew people into the kaupapa. It was this relationship and connection that opened the space for healing and guidance. This therapeutic alliance was about enabling whānau and strengthening their capacity to sustain their own hauora. As Mānuka expressed:

> *"Matua switched on, gave him permission to just be who you are, do what you do, you know because it's what they need"*

Matua Pene located this role within Te Kōhao Health's broader purpose as healers:

> *"That's the difference with what we do here at Te Kōhao Health - we're healers aye… Te Kōhao Health is about healing our whānau… in our space its whakairo that's the healer… our gig here is to whakapiki [promote support] nga tangata [the people] to the wellbeing in the best of their abilities so they don't have to rely on social services and WINZ and they can go out there and flourish like our tūpuna wanted us to."*
>
> *"Yeah, whakairo is my solution to supporting others that want a life beyond their wildest dreams."*

The tohunga uphold the programme, providing the spiritual, relational, and cultural foundations from which the kaupapa draws its strength and direction. They facilitate the programme's processes and guide people on their journey to mauri ora.

4.4 The Ripples: Mauri Ora

Having outlined the waka that is whakairo, the people that guide it, and the tikanga that carries it, this section turns to the impacts that ripple outward – the mauri ora that is seen and felt. Storytellers described the healing enabled through whakairo as difficult to fully articulate, yet something that could be understood through stories and observed through change. As one storyteller reflected, it is a *"deeply personal journey,"* where individuals *"get out of it what they put in,"* and the outcomes therefore look different for each person.

Across the kōrero, mauri ora was expressed through strengthened identity and cultural connection, resilience and growth, whanaungatanga and belonging, and enhanced mana, which was expressed through pride, achievement, confidence, and leadership. Through these forms of healing, participants were supported to move from states of mauri moe (unconscious state) or mauri oho (proactive state) toward mauri ora (conscious wellbeing, flourishing).

4.4.1 Identity and Cultural Connection

Whakairo facilitated Māori ways of being, enabling participants to explore and affirm their cultural identity. For some participants, engagement in carving represented their first experience of positive Māori representation. Identity was described not simply as a state of knowing, but as an embodied and energetic state — characterised by being *"switched on,"*

"enabled," and able to move confidently across different spaces. In this way, identity functioned as both an expression of wellbeing and a catalyst for change.

Mataī's kōrero illustrates this reconnection to identity later in life:

> *"What you said before, like you didn't like being a Māori and I didn't either… Being raised by a Māori that didn't want to be Māori, I was raised that way you know and I hated it coz I only ever saw the bad part… So, I'm basically starting the whole journey of all of my Māori things in my late 30's.*

Miro similarly described how identity provided grounding and stability for tamariki:

> *"They've found a place that they can stand, they've got this grounding now… the tamariki feel like they're connected and when they connect and have that solid base - I know who I am, where I'm from - then they can stand and rise up, and that's what we've seen."*

Storytellers emphasised that meeting people as they are, in who they are, was an intentional feature of the programme. This carving programme was adapted to include females as well as males, children as well as adults, Māori and non-Māori, and has the capacity to support people with special needs and people *"who have problems or don't."*

Rewarewa highlighted how this adaptability expanded access beyond traditional expectations, noting that:

> *"By Matua being able to find a way, it meant it was accessible by more who could be as impacted from it as the boys."*

Matua Pene similarly expressed:

> *"We open up our world to other people from around the world. However, my heart goes to our people because we are at the lowest scale of this… energy that's in Aotearoa… we're down the bottom and it's sad, but hey there is a solution… yeah whakairo is my solution."*

Matua Rei reinforced this inclusive intent, describing it as an approach grounded in openness and opportunity:

"It's just a matter of never closing the door… it might be the only opportunity that kid or person's going to have."

These kōrero highlight the inclusivity and reach of whakairo as a therapeutic practice — one that is responsive to age, gender, culture, and life circumstance. As a health intervention, whakairo therefore operates not only as a healing response but also as a preventative and sustaining practice that supports ongoing wellbeing. The innovation and adaptability also signal the capacity for whakairo to continue to evolve in response to changing Māori needs.

4.4.2 Resilience and Growth

Alongside strengthened identity, mauri ora was evident in participants' growing capacity to persist and adapt when facing challenge. Storytellers described how carving normalised struggle and reframed mistakes as part of learning and growth.

Matua explained:

"One of the biggest things is they're feeling safe… doesn't matter if they make a mistake, they can contribute. It's not about making mistakes. They go oh Matua… sorry but how can I fix? …Take a diversion and have another look from another angle and see what you come up with. And… the smile on the face you know worth a million words aye you don't have to say anything".

Similarly, Rewarewa spoke to how the carving process resisted the anxieties tied to expectations, stating:

"It's teaching resilience … the children are learning it doesn't have to be perfect the first time because a lot of their anxiety… is coz they don't feel like they can meet the expectations... But here… it teaches them to keep going and have that resilience and that making mistakes is ok - like that is part of growth."

Others spoke of witnessing profound personal growth over time:

"I've seen bros in my programme lost you know… and then to the graduation they were like, they were just blooming aye. You know so like a sense of who we are, sense of wellbeing, the inner peace, connections." (Kauri)

These shifts demonstrate how whakairo supported participants to develop resilience that extended beyond the carving space and into their wider lives.

4.4.3 Whanaungatanga and Belonging

As the ripples extended beyond the individual, whanaungatanga emerged as a central expression of mauri ora. Because this programme is conducted in group settings and incorporates whānau and community, it enables the opportunity for social engagement, relationship building, and shared purpose. Whanaungatanga was a key expression of mauri ora, enabling participants to experience belonging and connection. As stated by the storytellers:

> *"The sense of whakawhanaungatanga, that ropu… do that mahi together and they are connected." (Rewarewa)*

> *"What I seen it brought… there were about nine of us - togetherness… that's what this does, brings us together to know each other over a piece of wood aye… it was a sense of belonging for me." (Kauri)*

> *"I can categorically say that we're opening a space where they felt a belonging, they've felt safe, and I think that's been important for a lot of them" (Matua Rei).*

Importantly, the programme has had a big impact on whānau. The carvers' transformations and learnings were carried over into the whānau space:

> *"It's had a domino effect on their family lives. So, at home we're getting information back from the teachers. Oh, Matua gotta let you know about so and so he's been a bully at home with all the other siblings and so forth, he's changed, something's changed, he now does his bed, he now supports the kids, he does the dishes. And mum is going what happened what light switch went on. (Matua Rei)."*

> *"I think about one of the whānau members that came up to me and said this hasn't just helped our kid this has actually made me want to be more connected and know who I am and he has actually helped me as a parent find out who I am. And so that's impact then on him and the other Tamariki in the whānau as well." (Rimu)*

Storytellers also spoke about how it creates and enhances relationships between the carver and their whānau:

"We have got some rangatahi on board at the moment, and after they did their presentation with their patu, one of the mums comes up and says you know I really want my son to stay here because I have a relationship with him [now]. You know that's amazing that they can have a relationship with their child aye." (Matua Pene)

"The end celebration… those are the most moving times… last time we had one child who just stood and wept… it was almost like a cleansing and a bringing to the surface of pride that he didn't know how to express and his whānau wrapping around him and that connection between the tamariki and their whānau." (Rimu)

The storytellers also spoke of the impacts that the programme has had on whānau in terms of community and participation. Rewarewa explained how whakairo enhanced the kura-parent partnership as it connected to familiar protocols and their identity, which allowed them to *"feel more at home"* in the kura space. Rimu and Matua Rei explained that the enhanced connection with whānau has been important to the kura and whānau:

"Transformative for the whānau as well. Because they were equally disengaged from school, no teacher parent interviews, no responses to letters, no engagement. But after he graduated and gave the patu… they're part of the school even to this day, they are in all the different little committees… the parents are right there now." (Rimu)

"Now the parents are contributing to the school…taking part. They want to know what their child is doing yeah." (Matua Rei)

Through the shared kaupapa of the carving programme, carvers, whānau, and community became known to one another, strengthening relationships, belonging and participation. Through the connections formed, the impacts of the programme are seen to ripple out into whānau and the wider community.

4.4.4 Mana

Mana was used as an overarching concept to capture the empowering impacts of whakairo. Strengthened by identity, whanaungatanga, and internal capability, mana was expressed through pride, achievement, leadership and confidence. As Matua Rei stated:

> *"They've formed a whānau connection, a culture between themselves, and we've heard in the playground the other kids are saying oh look there's the carvers, so they've built mana up within themselves and the other kids within the school acknowledge them, there's the carvers. That… really gives them a lift."*

Pride and achievement were tied to the graduation and the ability to show progress, as Mātai and Kauri reflect:

> *"Good sense of pride aye, you know like that's how I felt anyway when we were in the graduation room and showing our work and just explaining it, and you could just feel the pride from the other boys you know." (Mataī)*

> *"I've never had much certificates, I got a certificate at the end... And it was good to see that my baby mama, my son and my moko came to my graduation coz they've never experienced a graduation outside the prison walls and they was happy as. I was proud as to kōrero Māori, they were like where did that come from?… It was just showing them the progress… from how they used to see me to where I was 15 months clean… Being able to gift it to my son, you know clean, drug free was the greatest gift that this whakairo could have given me… to see the smile on my son's face when I was gifting it to him." (Kauri)*

In these kōrero, mana was not abstract; it was enacted and witnessed through moments of recognition, restoration, and responsibility.

Achievement extended beyond completion of the carving programme to improved engagement and success in other spaces. Kahikatea and Rimu talk about how the tamariki extend themselves in the school environment:

> *"The biggest impact I've seen is… kids extending themselves into the literacy group… that flow-over into academia." (Kahikatea)*

> *"It's noticeable — attendance, engagement, achievement, wanting to be at school to learn." (Rimu)*

Mana was further evident in changes in confidence and leadership that were seen in the carvers. Storytellers described participants moving from withdrawn or hesitant states to standing confidently and being leaders.

> *"That separation and eyes on the ground sort of look to confidence, self-esteem." (Matua Pene)*
>
> *"I think they're just more confident in who they are… They consider themselves as leaders now… It was wonderful to see children who've journeyed in this become really confident on stage in front of people." (Rewarewa)*
>
> *"From a really quiet kid… to standing proudly… leading karakia across the whole senior school." (Rimu)*

These outcomes illustrate how whakairo supported confidence, achievement, leadership, and participation across multiple domains.

4.4.5 Moving from Mauri Moe to Mauri Ora

At its deepest level, these ripples reflect movement across states of mauri. Storytellers described being in or encountering participants in states of mamae (hurt), grief, disconnection, disengagement, isolation, frustration, and lowered wellbeing. These states were evident in their physical being and withdrawn or negative social behaviours. Through engagement in whakairo, participants experienced observable transformations.

Mānuka described this embodied shift:

> *"It's how the physical presentation on a child that is burdened with these kinds of things…" "this frown… eyebrows… crossed… their posture all sort of bent over… or the opposite, chest puffed out, sort of ready to be aggressive. Then going to the very next week… and I couldn't believe this was the same kid type thing." "How they just physically change. They stand more upright… their countenance is different, it's not so dark that lifts aye… even a smile… And just seeing this sense of belonging… that's what it was, finally, I'm home, that kind of look."*

These transformations reflect mauri ora as both an internal and visible state — one that is felt, embodied, and relationally recognised.

4.4.6 Pūrākau as Lived Expressions of Mauri Ora

The ripples of mauri ora are perhaps most powerfully understood through lived experience. The following pūrākau are presented as examples of carvers' journeys in their own words,

illustrating how mauri ora was experienced and lived through whakairo. These longer stories are shared without interruption to allow the storytellers' voices, meanings, and narrative flow to remain intact. Together, they show how the impacts of whakairo unfolded across identity, wellbeing, and future aspirations.

Kauri's Pūrākau:

"The past 6 months I've been privileged to watch my cousin pull apart Rangatahi it's one of our waka's… and just how much mahi goes into that. If I can see my pūrākau as that waka in parts yeah that's who I am. I'm a total shell that needs work. Rebuild, yeah and it starts from the inside for me….

I am a grateful recovering addict, so my journey started off at rock bottom. My rock bottom might be different to everyone else's, but in 2023 the day I was born… my moko that I love so dearly goes when are you going to grow up? And then I stepped away from the phone. She got me. I couldn't answer it… I've been an addict for over 25 years… I've been in and out of prison all my life, and it took me a while to get into the drug court… and this carving wānanga came up….

I've got a real good understanding of who I am, like he Māori ahau, and what addiction took away from it and what is addiction, and I lost everything when I was in addiction… You know, I was born [and] raised in a gang environment; it wasn't as if I was going to be a rocket scientist or a policeman; my path was really designed for me. But I'm proud of who I am. I'm proud of my life and what I've done, you know… It took me over 40 years to learn to know myself and I just see mahi whakairo as a therapeutic tool I could use. I was addicted to methamphetamine and that's a drug that steals your soul you know and I'm so happy that I am 20 months and 18 days clean off methamphetamine today…

Yeah, I'm so happy that what I've lost is slowly coming back and for myself now I'm a very proud member of [my iwi], and I've been asked to sit in on huis that never would have looked at me when I was in addiction, they were just oh the cuzzy's not ready. I'm still not ready but I know what I want for my 5-year plan I'm studying right now… level 4 in mental health and addiction… next is to go to university and psychology or human behaviour… that's my 5-year plan, and I'm sticking to it… no matter what you know….

My whole teams still in addiction. What I'm trying to do is role model what it looks like to be out of addiction, you know and one day my brothers will get it aye…. For my story now, I just want to help people like myself that have been through the system, that have been through the mud, that have been through muck, they have been where I have been and be able to give back in this sector."

Mataī's Pūrākau:

"I got the carving programme offered to me as a form of therapy and… I was instantly magnetised to it. Just wanted to know more about it and… be able to go through with it, coz at that time I wasn't in a very good mind space. Yeah, my mental health issues started only a few years ago. I had a bit of a fallout with my whānau… felt abandoned type thing… I started getting these really bad headaches… turned out I had a swollen brain, so I had to go through surgery… when it comes to your brain, anything poking it will cause you to think and say different things and react different ways. So, there was some days I was just a angry, angry man. Other days I was just sad, didn't know why yeah. I was in recovery for a few days and the day that I got out my best mate crashed his motorbike and died… Bit of a realisation there of you know he's not coming back, so trying to battle through that as well… then not long after that I had some more complications where I had a seizure. I was hospitalised for that… when you have a seizure you lose your licence for 12 months… so I lost my job because of that. So, three big things all at once kind of spiralled myself…

Now I'm just a completely different person because of different things. I've just been trying to find my way forward in Māori culture as well as just yeah, mentally, just trying to be a better person for everybody, it's been a bit of a journey… all the love's come back now so just through the crew here teaching me the way… But yeah, just grateful to be where I am at now because of everybody, coz in all honesty I probably wouldn't be here if it wasn't for the course particularly, but just the people around me you know…

I'm glad to be back on this cultural journey…the day before our graduation I signed up to my tribe and stuff like that … and I am excited coz there's so much I can learn and so much that can be taught by even my own kids learning…

"It sort of helped me as well with the spiritual side of it with the bro that passed, you know. Knowing that he is still around. He may not physically be here, but he's coming along with

me in many different ways and some of the things that have happened to me since he's been gone, could be coincidences, but I sort of just take them as signs of him, or that I'm on the right path, I'm doing the right things…

My patu has a good story behind it… I have reconnected with my brother… One side was traditional east coast… and then the other side was actually my whānau, my brother's whānau, and it was just like the reconnection of the brotherhood. I didn't get to talk to my brother for three and a half years… after all that's happened, we've got this beautiful taonga you know, that has sort of been made from all the, I suppose, issues we had together as a brotherhood…

Obviously, [the course] was really good for my mental health but for my physical health as well, because when I first started, I just wasn't looking after myself... But then I started caring about myself because of all this, you know seeing that there is a reason to be healthy and alive… so just been watching what I eat and just been trying to stand up more and get things done you know."

Mataī and Kauri's pūrākau show their personal journeys to, within, and beyond the programme, illuminating the healing transformations made possible through their engagement with whakairo. Through their pūrākau, we are also able to see the range of challenges they overcame, including addiction, loss, whānau disconnection, and mental and physical difficulties. Through the waka, awa, and ripples of mauri ora discussed by the storytellers (including Mataī and Kauri), they have found a path forward for themselves, as evidenced by their transformation and the continuation of their journeys. This was seen in "giving back" to others, "being better for everyone", and their aspirations for the future beyond the carving programme. As such, they demonstrate that the journey does not end with the programme, carrying forward the aspiration stated by Mānuka. Mataī and Kauri have symbolically become their patu; they have taken their lives and created themselves into people they are proud of, bettering the people around them and the spaces they are part of.

4.5 Chapter Summary

The findings presented in this chapter form a journey articulated through the interpretative waka, awa, and ripples pūrākau. Rather than discrete or linear outcomes, the themes reflect

interconnected movements toward mauri ora, shaped by the artistic, relational, cultural, spiritual, and embodied processes of whakairo. The following chapter builds on these findings, situating them within wider literature on creative practice, kaupapa Māori approaches, and hauora, and considers the broader implications for health care delivery and policy.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Figure 5.1. The completed unfired ipu. Through this chapter the analytical shaping is complete and the vessel stands formed. While the ipu is finished in structure it leaves space for future possibilities. Similarly, the discussion engages evidence, reflects on strengths limitations and recommendations for what may come next.

5.1 Chapter Overview

This rangahau aimed to explore how whakairo acts as a therapeutic tool to support mental health and wellbeing. Using a kaupapa Māori approach exercised through the Takarangi Framework, it traced how whakairo is operationalised within a kaupapa Māori health organisation and demonstrated its therapeutic value through pūrākau. In this discussion chapter, I situate the storytellers' kōrero alongside broader mental health, kaupapa Māori, and arts-based literature, with particular attention to implications for practice and mental health care. Reading the kōrero with this literature positions whakairo as a holistic, culturally grounded system of healing, rather than an adjunct to Western mental health approaches.

This discussion is organised using the waka (artistic dimension), awa (kaupapa Māori dimension), and ripples (mauri ora) structure of the findings chapter. In doing so, it extends existing literature on arts-based, mahi toi, and kaupapa Māori approaches to wellbeing by offering new insights into the therapeutic mechanisms and impacts of whakairo in a contemporary health setting.

5.2 The Waka: The Artistic Dimension of Whakairo

The findings of this rangahau highlight that whakairo is experienced as both an artistic practice and a relational, culturally embedded healing process. Accordingly, this waka section attends to the artistic dimension of whakairo while acknowledging that carving cannot be defined in isolation.

Golden et al., (2024) described art as a powerful, accessible, scalable and cost-effective way to promote mental health and wellbeing for diverse peoples across the world. Globally, there is an increasing interest in arts-based approaches to mental health (Jensen & Bonde, 2018). Art therapy is a creative form of psychotherapy that uses artmaking within a therapeutic relationship to support cognitive, emotional and physical wellbeing (British Association of Art Therapists, 2026; Australian, Aotearoa and Asian Creative Art Therapies Association, 2022). While the profession of art therapy is a relatively recent adaptation in Aotearoa (Woodcock, 2011; Angell-Morice, 2025), art itself has long been central in Māori life, particularly whakairo (Brown et al., 2024). The findings of this study affirm that the artistic and therapeutic mechanisms of whakairo are not new, nor are they derived from the

Western frameworks of art therapies. Rather, they are embedded within unique and longstanding Māori philosophies of creative practice, identity, hauora and life. While art therapy emerges from Western clinical traditions (Kaimal & Arslanbek, 2020), it offers a strong evidence base through which the artistic mechanisms described by storytellers can be recognised and made legible within dominant mental health discourse. Art therapy literature is useful here not as a lens of explanation but to help make visible what Māori knowledge has long held.

Art is inherently embodied (Koch, 2017). De Witte et al. (2021) identified embodiment in art as an important agent of change, while Malchiodi (2018) credited it as one of the most compelling neurobiological factors in the arts' capacity to support healing. Indeed, the storytellers' kōrero showed that it was the embodied nature of whakairo that created opportunities for therapeutic engagement through expression, symbolism, reflection, the development of coping skills, meaning-making and forward movement. Storytellers spoke of symbolism and reflection being present in the act of carving when meeting the resistance of wood, in one's control over the chisel and in the designs and stories carved into the taonga. Scholars position that artistic symbolism acts as a means to externalise, explore and express emotions and experiences in a non-verbal capacity (Reisner et al., 2025; Stevenson & Alzywood, 2025; Koch, 2017). This makes it particularly valuable in mental health contexts where clients may be unable to verbalise, require distance and time to face trauma, or desire a combination of verbal and non-verbal expressions (Reisner et al., 2025; Stevenson & Alzywood, 2025; Koch, 2017).

As the storytellers expressed, the creative process also becomes a site of resilience and confidence as well as a means of reinterpreting struggles more broadly (R. Sheridan & Van Lith, 2025). These factors are necessary for coping with life's stressors. Through these mechanisms, people are able to make meaning of their experiences and their way forward (Reisner et al., 2025; Gerber et al., 2018; Van Lith et al., 2011). Forward movement, as described by the storytellers, referred to growth and a capacity to walk in other spaces. In the kōrero offered by the storytellers, these actions varied for each person. Meaning and forward movement in art therapy are not imposed but emerge subjectively through engagement with art making (Reisner et al., 2025) as the creative process focuses on what is true and helpful for the patient (Koch, 2017). Thus, progress aligns with each individual's

needs and aspirations. Koch (2017) argues that the creative and expressive mechanisms discussed distinguish art therapies from other medical treatments and psychotherapies. The storytellers' kōrero supports these findings and demonstrates that mechanisms of art therapy are already embedded in whakairo. Their kōrero adds to art therapy literature by providing an Indigenous te ao Māori perspective of these mechanisms through whakairo.

The te ao Māori perspective has also been encompassed in the existing body of mahi toi literature (Cherrington, 2003; Hapeta et al., 2019; Hodgson, 2018; Hollands et al., 2015; Kirkwood, 2015; Lowe & Fraser, 2018; McMeeking et al., 2025; Pio et al., 2020; Rangihuna et al., 2018; Rollo, 2013; Standing & Kahu, 2021; Waitoki & McLachlan, 2022), which like this study captures the cultural and spiritual contexts that are largely marginalised within art therapy. In regard to the artistic mechanisms of whakairo, this study locates the practice of whakairo as well as the stories and designs of the taonga within a cultural and spiritual base. Toi is an expression of cultural identity (Pio et al., 2020; Cherrington, 2003). Participants spoke to the significance and meaning of taonga and the carved designs which story their identity, whakapapa, and whānau. These connections were also supported by Kirkwood (2015), Cherrington (2003) and Hollands et al. (2015). It was in this context that carvers found deep meaning and guidance. The taonga were also gifted at the end of the programme through a graduation ceremony. This was an important function of the programme, not only for enhancing prosocial thinking in carvers but because it extended the therapeutic reach of whakairo beyond the carvers to include whānau and community.

Mahi toi are relational, cultural and spiritual practices embedded in community, where creativity sustains knowledge transmission and collective wellbeing (Cherrington, 2003; Hapeta et al., 2019; Hodgson, 2018; Hollands et al., 2015; Kirkwood, 2015; Lowe & Fraser, 2018; McMeeking et al., 2025; Pio et al., 2020; Rangihuna et al., 2018; H. Smith, 2025; Standing & Kahu, 2021; Rollo, 2013; Waitoki & McLachlan, 2022). By centring a kaupapa Māori understanding of whakairo, this study contributes conceptually to art therapy literature by highlighting dimensions of embodiment and healing that are not fully captured within Western therapeutic frameworks —in particular, those grounded in culture, spirituality, and relational identity. To the body of mahi toi literature, this study adds insights on whakairo as a healing practice, which is largely unexplored.

Whakairo draws strength from its artistic core, but it is not solely art. While catering to the artistic dimension of whakairo, the waka theme does not treat art, health and te ao Māori or whakairo, its processes and impacts as separate or sequential phenomena. Rather, they are parts of an interconnected whole. Storytellers affirmed that whakairo is not simply carving, defining it as a vehicle to many aspects of culture, identity and wellbeing. Accepting whakairo as a three-dimensional practice—a kaupapa Māori toi-based approach to wellbeing—challenges tendencies to interpret Indigenous practice through a narrow lens. Whakairo is a complete system of cultural knowledge, artistic embodiment and healing in its own right. It facilitates healing not through static or linear steps but through an encompassing and embodied process of making, doing and being, principles fundamental to both kaupapa Māori and art-based pedagogies (Moore, 2012; H. Smith, 2025). Recognising the artistic, cultural and therapeutic dimensions of whakairo has significant implications for how such programmes are understood, supported, and resourced within mental health and wellbeing services. This understanding is the foundation of the following sections, which explores the cultural (awa) and healing (mauri ora) dimensions of whakairo.

5.3 The Awa: The Kaupapa Māori Dimension of Whakairo

Building on the findings, this awa section enhances the analysis of whakairo as a kaupapa Māori practice, highlighting how the cultural, spiritual, and relational dimensions are integral to its therapeutic impact.

One of the main findings was the importance of wairua in whakairo's therapeutic application and effect. Māori scholarship consistently recognises the importance and centrality of wairua to Māori wellbeing (Durie, 1998; Marsden & Royal, 2003). Valentine (2009) explained that wairua is a fundamental attribute that enables Māori to engage with the inclusive and interconnected aspects of their reality to express identity, forge relationships, maintain balance, adhere to restrictions and safety and transmit healing. Similarly, the findings of this study assert that wairua is not an abstract belief system but a live, relational and dynamic force that shapes and connects people, intention and the practice of whakairo. In the storytellers' kōrero, it is a force which draws people in, sustains them, evokes peace and happiness and activates the carvers in their healing journeys. However, despite being the most widely cited part of Māori wellbeing (Cram et al., 2003), the dominant psychosomatic

model of medicine in psychology does not account for the spiritual domain (Marsden & Royal, 2003). Māori mental health and wellbeing cannot be meaningfully supported without addressing people's wairua (Durie, 1998). The findings of this study demonstrate how whakairo activates wairua as a therapeutic mechanism in practice, offering forms of healing that sit outside the scope of dominant psychosomatic models.

The theme of tikanga in the findings was described as a set of cultural practices and values that dually give access to and are accessed through whakairo. As Mead (2016) outlines, tikanga is Māori philosophy in practice. It assumes that every practical action needs to be conducted with the intention of doing the right or correct thing. The interconnected cultural mechanisms of ture, karakia, pūrākau, kōrero, reo, pepeha and whakapapa were part of the programme's tikanga and formed the practical system that provided safe, accountable and ethical engagement with carving. Māori assert that te ao Māori, mātauranga, reo and tikanga are essential aspects of wellbeing (Durie, 2001; GIMHA, 2018). For the people in the carving programme, whakairo became the site through which these practices could be accessed. For many, it facilitated cultural connection and participation, which had a significant impact on identity. A secure connection to culture and identity is associated with positive mental wellbeing (Durie, 2004; Durie, 1999; Hollands et al., 2015), as it increases resilience and protects against adversity and distress (Durie, 2001). Toi cannot be separated from the cultural, ethical and relational foundations in which they are embedded. The foundation of tikanga is critical to realising the full potential of toi and ensuring cultural continuity, holistic wellbeing and ethical engagement are achieved. The findings suggest that tikanga is not supplementary to whakairo's therapeutic impact but a necessary condition through which safety, meaning, accountability, and healing are made possible.

This study also affirms the importance of kaumātua and tohunga as the pou (pillars) upholding te ao Māori and whānau (Muru-Lanning et al., 2021). Māori knowledge systems have long maintained their own rigorous mechanisms for recognising and validating knowledge and expertise (L. T. Smith, 2021). Tohunga and kaumātua are culturally constituted experts whose authority is grounded in whakapapa, experience, and collective recognition by whānau, hapū and iwi (Mead, 2016; Katene, 2010). The storytellers' kōrero showed tohunga as conduits of mātauranga Māori with the mana, expertise, skills and care to empower whānau healing. The findings challenge dominant clinical notions of expertise

by demonstrating how tohunga and kaumātua enact culturally grounded forms of authority and care that are recognised and validated within Māori knowledge systems. Kaumātua are an important part of Māori social structures and leadership (Katene, 2010). They are often drawn on in health services to ensure Māori culture, customs, language and relationships are incorporated for improved responsiveness to Māori needs (Ahuriri-Driscoll et al., 2015). This subtheme highlights the importance of Māori expertise and leadership in delivering effective mental health interventions.

Whakairo draws its strength from its cultural foundations. The prioritisation and dominance of Western frameworks within Aotearoa's mental health services struggle to cater to the diverse realities and aspirations of Māori and minority cultural groups (Groot et al., 2018). In order to improve health outcomes, care must align with client views (L. T. Smith, 2015; Haitana et al., 2022). The findings show that whakairo reflects Māori values, cultural knowledge, and modes of expression, allowing Māori to participate in care in ways that feel familiar, meaningful, and affirming. Applying traditional arts at the intersection of health decolonises Western ideas of care as it centres practices and knowledge relevant to the client's background (Arslanbek et al., 2022).

The whakairo programme, like art and kaupapa Māori (whānau ora) approaches, also draws on existing community strengths and resources (Golden et al., 2024; Te Rau Matatini, 2015). Aotearoa's mental health system specifications require services to be responsive to culture and to recognise community resources, relationships and protective factors (Health New Zealand, 2024). The findings of this study support that Māori communities and Māori health providers hold the knowledge and capability to provide effective responses to Māori health inequities (Health and Disability system review, 2019; Waitangi Tribunal, 2023; Te Rau Matatini, 2015). The findings provide strong evidence that kaupapa Māori toi-based approaches, such as whakairo, are not only culturally responsive but are well aligned with national service directions. This reinforces the validity of whakairo as a therapeutic tool and the legitimacy of the kaupapa Māori approach.

5.4 Mauri Ora: The Therapeutic Dimension of Whakairo

Mauri ora attends to the healing dimension of whakairo. The findings of this study demonstrate that whakairo supports healing not as symptom reduction alone, but as

movement toward mauri ora — a state of wellbeing characterised by flourishing, connection, and restored mana.

Whakairo is operationalised in the context of this study as a primary healthcare response through Māori health provider Te Kōhao Health. Primary healthcare is the first point of contact within the health and disability sector (Ministry of Social Development, 2021). 90% of essential interventions for universal health coverage and 75% of the United Nations Sustainable Goals can be achieved using a primary healthcare approach (World Health Organization, 2023). Primary healthcare improves the health system overall as it lowers healthcare expenditure and improves population access and health (Van Weel & Kidd, 2018). Health equity is therefore largely driven by the efficacy of the primary health system (Ministry of Social Development, 2021). However, government prioritisation of individual-level secondary services and performance targets has dominated the health space (Goodyear-Smith & Ashton, 2019). The mental health system also prioritises a reactive and pharmacological response (GIMHA, 2018). As such, the primary health sector remains underfunded and under-resourced while experiencing higher demand (Lorgelly & Exeter, 2023; Ministry of Health, 2024). Conditions are made worse for Māori health providers who are systematically underfunded relative to their mainstream counterparts. This occurs through the capitation formula and the cost of providing culturally competent care to high-needs populations (Lorgelly & Exeter, 2023; Goodyear-Smith & Ashton, 2019). Additionally, Māori health providers face biased contracting environments, receiving shorter contracts, less money for the same outputs, misaligned monitoring and more frequent auditing (Came et al., 2022). Such conditions can impede culturally grounded and meaningful approaches such as whakairo.

Mental health is defined more by one's capacity to function, relate, contribute and flourish over the absence of disease (WHO 2022a), which aligns with the holistic understanding of hauora held by Māori (Durie, 1998). Consistent with these definitions, whakairo, like other forms of toi, was seen to act on multiple dimensions of wellbeing, including social, spiritual, mental and physical domains (Cherrington, 2003; Hapeta et al., 2019; Hodgson, 2018; Hollands et al., 2015; Kirkwood, 2015; Lowe & Fraser, 2018; McMeeking et al., 2025; Pio et al., 2020; Rangihuna et al., 2018; Rollo, 2013; Standing & Kahu, 2021; Waitoki & McLachlan, 2022). Like Māori health models such as Te Whare Tapa Whā, the findings of this rangahau

affirm that healing and transformation are achieved by stepping beyond the biomedical framework to consider the whole person (Durie, 1998). Both the arts and kaupapa Māori approaches are known for their resistance to dominant illness narratives because they cater to the person as a whole rather than being reduced to the symptoms of illness (Borda-Nino-Wildman & Simopoulou, 2025; Durie 1998). This study demonstrated that whakairo promotes strengthened identity, cultural and social connection, belonging, resilience, growth, achievement, confidence, and restored mana. In turn, these factors were seen to move people from states of mauri moe or mauri oho (low wellbeing) to mauri ora (wellbeing, flourishing). Therefore, this study contributes an Indigenous conceptualisation of healing that extends beyond dominant biomedical and symptom-focused models.

Te Kōhao's carving programme has been innovated to be inclusive of a diverse range of peoples and needs. Tipu Ake and Te Pou Taurahere collectively cater to children and adults, males and females, Māori and non-Māori, people with illness and without and people with special needs. This demonstrates the versatility and inclusivity of whakairo as a therapeutic practice. Mental health exists across a continuum of wellbeing and is experienced and expressed at different levels (WHO 2022a). These findings support that whakairo has the capacity to work across this continuum, helping people at varying ages, with different needs and states of wellbeing. In particular, it has the ability to act as prevention and maintenance of health, areas which Aotearoa's mental health system has been critiqued for neglecting (GIMHA, 2018). Together, the findings of the study contribute to broader discussions about the direction of mental health services, particularly calls to move toward culturally grounded, strength-based, holistic approaches with the capacity to work across the life course (Durie, 2011; Ministry of Health, 2023; GIMHA, 2018). The findings highlight whakairo as a culturally grounded intervention capable of working across the mental health continuum and life course, addressing prevention and maintenance in ways that remain underdeveloped within Aotearoa's mental health system.

Many of the storytellers alluded to the difficulty in expressing the healing that comes through whakairo, opting to share the transformations they witnessed through pūrākau. However, dominant health evaluation frameworks exist within a Western framework and continue to privilege outputs that are determined by the state, readily quantifiable, individualised and time-bound (Gifford et al., 2018). Such measures are poorly equipped to

capture the impacts of an intersectoral and holistic approach, such as whakairo, which operates across multiple domains of wellbeing (Rolleston et al., 2020). Failing to account for the many-layered and interwoven dimensions of whakairo risks undervaluing and constraining such health approaches.

5.5 Strengths of this study

A strength of this study was the kaupapa Māori approach underpinning it. The Takarangi Framework was grounded in the principles of a kaupapa Māori approach and shaped to meet the needs and aspirations of the community and this study. It was a model of collaboration, centring wairua, whakapapa, tikanga and mauri ora (creative wellbeing) as vital to the rangahau process. It guided accountable and ethical rangahau which prioritised the voices of Māori. The cultural congruence of the methodology enabled deeper, more relational and meaningful kōrero and analysis to occur, adding to the trustworthiness and validity of the study. The methodological inclusion of uku as an embodied inquiry also enhanced the study (Wilson, 2017), as it maintained creativity in the rangahau process and outputs (Byrne et al., 2018).

The manaakitanga of Te Kōhao Health was another strength of this study. I was welcomed into their space, immersed in their processes, offered use of their venues and guided by their involvement and input. This enhanced not only my experience as the researcher but also elevated the rangahau. Immersion into Te Kōhao's processes gave me access to the world of carving—its spaces, people and practices—directly. These were experiences that took me beyond what could be heard in interviews. They allowed me to experience it, which resulted in a more connected, informed and richer analysis of the findings. Through their manaaki of this rangahau, Te Kōhao also facilitated whakawhanaungatanga, bridging the distance between me and the storytellers. This enabled a more trusting and meaningful engagement. Many storytellers were excited and happy to share their kōrero and pūrākau. The positive reception of this rangahau, I believe, is due in part to the methodology, in particular the collaboration and positioning of Te Kōhao as experts with the space to be, do and guide. It was also due to the nature of the whakairo programme and how meaningful it is. It was a privilege to be able to conduct my research on this kaupapa.

The expanse of perspectives and expertise of the storytellers was another key strength. Storytellers who took part in this rangahau were Te Kōhao leaders, tohunga whakairo, kura leaders, kaiako, and graduates of the carving programme. The combination of these voices brings a depth, richness and validity to the findings. It includes many of the stakeholders in health services, engaging those who deliver, facilitate and experience healthcare. The multilayered perspectives strengthen the findings by showing whakairo's application and lived impact. The majority of storytellers were Māori; however, there were also tauiwi (non-Māori) involved in the study, and both men and women contributed their insights on the whakairo programme.

5.6 Limitations and Opportunities

This study is situated within a specific Māori health provider and focused on a particular carving programme as it is operationalised and delivered in a health and wellbeing context. While toi practices are inherently healing, the findings of this rangahau are tied to the deliberate integration of this carving programme in a health service capacity. Whakairo can be facilitated and resourced differently and may not have the same therapeutic activation or organisational support. The study also consists of a small sample size, and for these two reasons, the generalisability of the rangahau is limited. However, generalisability was not the intent of this rangahau (Agius, 2018). Rather, its value lies in its capacity to offer situated, in-depth insights into how whakairo can function as a therapeutic tool. While this study included one locally situated application, it is argued that the mechanisms through which whakairo supports wellbeing have relevance and transferability beyond this context. It is my hope that this rangahau may contribute to the evidence base that can support whakairo and toi-based approaches to mental health and holistic wellbeing.

Due to the specific focus of the rangahau, this study used purposive sampling in the recruitment of participants. Participants were recruited through Te Kōhao as they knew who had recent or ongoing involvement with the programme and who were best positioned to speak on whakairo. While the researcher acknowledges that this approach introduces the potential for selection bias, whanaungatanga and connecting with those who are recognised holders of particular knowledge is part of a kaupapa Māori approach to rangahau. Additionally, while my personal values, knowledge, perspective, experience and

interpretations have inevitably influenced the rangahau, ongoing reflexive engagement supported careful interpretation of the data, ensuring that analysis remained grounded in participants' kōrero and accountable to kaupapa Māori principles.

Despite the expanse of perspectives included in this study, a perspective not captured is that of whānau. Whānau was identified as an important stakeholder in health services, hauora and particularly this carving programme. Further rangahau should consider inclusion and investigation of the whānau perspective.

With little academic literature existing on the therapeutic application of whakairo, this rangahau has taken an exploratory approach, mapping its key mechanisms and outcomes. The scope of the rangahau question and aims required engaging numerous interconnected concepts within a finite word limit. Thus, while key concepts have been examined with the depth necessary to meet the scope of this rangahau, the full cultural, spiritual, experiential and relational richness of the whakairo programme exceeds what can be contained in academic analysis. This thesis does not presume to represent the entirety of the realm of whakairo but rather opens a space for its recognition as a meaningful mental health approach in research, practice and policy contexts. Further research could investigate specific mechanisms in greater depth to extend the concepts explored in this thesis. The difficulty in evaluating the efficacy of toi-based and kaupapa Māori approaches was also identified in this rangahau. Kaupapa Māori and toi approaches cannot be narrowly confined, and current evaluation frameworks do not recognise or are unable to capture the holistic, spiritual, cumulative, and intergenerational impacts of such approaches. Further rangahau could be conducted on developing more aligned evaluation frameworks. The efficacy of whakairo and its application to other contexts or specific mental health conditions could also be explored.

Conclusion

Figure 6.1. The mould made from the completed ipu which enables the making of many vessels from one form. Likewise, this rangahau does not end here; it becomes a source of continuation for myself and others.

This rangahau explored how whakairo is operationalised as a therapeutic tool within a kaupapa Māori health organisation to support mental health and wellbeing. The findings and discussion highlight whakairo as an interconnected system of artistic practice, kaupapa Māori processes, and healing outcomes—an approach that supports wellbeing through an embodied, relational, cultural, and spiritual journey rather than through static or linear steps. Whakairo emerged not as an adjunct to Western mental health approaches, but as a complete system of cultural knowledge, artistic embodiment, and healing in its own right.

The study highlights the interconnected artistic, kaupapa Māori and healing dimensions of whakairo. As an art, whakairo emphasises an embodied process, symbolism, reflection, meaning-making, expression, coping skills and forward movement. As a kaupapa Māori approach, it is grounded by tohunga in tikanga, wairua, and collective responsibility, producing outcomes that are relational, spiritual, cumulative and intergenerational. As a therapeutic pathway, whakairo supports prevention, maintenance and healing, strengthening one's capacity to flourish rather than symptom reduction alone. Through these mechanisms, this study demonstrates whakairo's capacity to move people from states of mauri moe or mauri oho (low wellbeing) to mauri ora (wellbeing flourishing). Mauri ora was found through identity and cultural connection, resilience and growth, Whanaungatanga (belonging, whanau and community relationships and participation) and Mana (expressed through pride, achievement and confidence). The impacts that stem from the carving programme also extend beyond the individual, rippling out to whanau and community.

These insights have significant implications for mental health and wellbeing services in Aotearoa. The persisting mental health inequities, alongside calls for culturally aligned, promotion-based and holistic approaches, underscore the importance of Māori-led initiatives such as whakairo. This rangahau demonstrates what is possible when Māori lead, define, and sustain their own pathways to hauora. Because whakairo is grounded in kaupapa Māori and aligns with holistic Māori understandings of hauora, it engages whanau in ways that are meaningful, validating and affirming. Whakairo is not only culturally responsive but capable of meeting various needs and working across the lifespan and mental health continuum. In doing so, it addresses prevention and maintenance in ways that remain underdeveloped within New Zealand's mental health system. There is a need to shift away

from the current reactive model of mental health care and enable kaupapa Māori approaches such as whakairo and other toi, which have the ability to prevent illness and sustain ongoing wellbeing. A primary care kaupapa Māori approach has the capacity to significantly impact health equity.

However, the ability to sustain and expand kaupapa Māori and toi-based approaches is shaped by funding, contracting, and evaluation environments. Holistic outcomes that are relational, spiritual, cumulative, and intergenerational are not well captured by narrow clinical indicators or output-based measures. Evaluation frameworks, funding models, and service structures therefore need to better recognise te ao Māori, intersectoral collaboration, and holistic relational methods of healing, so that Māori health providers and approaches such as whakairo are not undervalued or constrained.

This rangahau contributes to the growing evidence base supporting Māori and toi-based approaches to mental wellbeing, offering new insights into the therapeutic application of whakairo—an area that has been largely absent from the academic literature. Future rangahau could extend these contributions by exploring whānau perspectives, developing evaluation approaches that better align with kaupapa Māori and toi-based outcomes, examining condition-specific applications, and investigating other contexts in which whakairo may support hauora.

Reflection Through Uku

Engaging in this rangahau has been an intellectual journey as well as a creative one. While whakairo was the site of this rangahau, uku was where I was able to personally experience many of the mechanisms and impacts that the storytellers described. The ipu whenua depicted throughout this thesis embodies my journey through the making of this research. Like the ipu, I—and this rangahau—became a vessel privileged to hold the stories, insights, and aspirations shared by the storytellers and the community involved.

This ipu whenua tells the story of the rangahau. The takarangi design on the wing and base reflects the methodological framework that guided this study, and the collaboration involved in generating this knowledge. The manu converge and mirror the spiral design as a tribute to the interweaving threads of this thesis—uku and whakairo, toi and hauora, kaupapa Māori

and rangahau. I selected manu forms to embody the sense of uplift I felt throughout this journey, and in response to the uplift carried by the whakairo programme itself.

This ipu whenua and other taonga were fired and gifted to the facilitators of this research; however, the final form depicted in this chapter is that of the mould and unfired piece. Ipu whenua are intended to be unfired so that they and the placenta may be returned to Papatūānuku. The mould pictured in figure 6.1 is created from the first ipu whenua depicted throughout this thesis which was cast and transformed into this sustaining form. This mould is intended to be used by others so that they may create their own ipu whenua. Similarly, my moemoeā is that this rangahau will go on to support Māori-led creative solutions for wellbeing—so that kaupapa Māori, creativity, and hauora may soar. Te Kōhao Health and the storytellers have inspired me to continue this learning and creative journey. At the closing of this master's journey, I have been offered the opportunity to develop my creative practice under the care of a community-centred Māori arts initiative, where I will explore the therapeutic application of uku. I intend to carry this rangahau—its teachings and aspirations—forward in my personal life, career, and creative practice as an uku artist.

E rere taku uku – e rere	*Take flight my clay - fly*
Ki te ao whānui e	*Out into the world*
E rere taku uku – e rere	*Take flight my clay – take flight*
E rere te mauri ora e rere	*Essence of life – take flight*
Ki te ao whānui e	*Out into the world*
E rere - te mauri ora - e rere	*Vitality of life - fly*
E rere ngā moemoeā tapu rawa	*Let the sacred dreams come forth*
Mai i Te Kore	*From the place of infinite potential*
Mai i Te Pō	*Through the conceptual night*
Ki Te Ao Mārama	*To the world of light*
E rere…. ngā moemoeā – e rere	*Let the dreams be manifest*
E rere….ngā moemoeā – e rere	*Let the visions fly free*

Baye Riddell (as cited in Riddell & Heke, 2023 p. 19).

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Glossary

Aotearoa	New Zealand
Aroha	Love, compassion
Atua	Primary energy sources, gods
Awa	Water
Haka	Traditional Māori dance
Hapū	Subtribe
Haumia-tiketike	God of fernroot and uncultivated food
Hau ora	Breathe of life
Hauora	Māori philosophy of health
Hineahuone	The first woman
Hui	Gathering/meeting
Io-matua-te-kore	Supreme being/god
Ipu whenua / ipu	Vessel used to hold and bury the placenta
Iwi	Tribe
Kai	Food
Kai moana	Seafood
Kaiako	Teacher
Kaitiaki	Guardian
kaitiakitanga	Guardianship
Kaiwhakairo	Carvers
Kaumātua	Elders

Kapa haka	Māori performing art
Kanohi ki te kanohi	Face to face
Karakia	Ritual chant, prayer
Kaupapa	Topic, purpose
Kaupapa Māori	Māori way of doing
Koha	Gift
Kōkōwai	Red ochre
Kōrero	Talk, narrative
Kotahitanga	Unity, togetherness
Kowhaiwhai	Māori patterns
Kura	School
Mamae	Hurt
Mahi	Work
Mahi tahi	Work together, collaborate
Mahi toi / toi	Māori arts
Mana	Prestige, authority
Manaaki	hospitality, care, support
Manaakitanga	To show respect, generosity and care for others
Matakite	seer with foresight and awareness of actions and activities in other places.
Mātauranga Māori / mātauranga	Māori knowledge
Mauri	Spirit, life force
Mauri moe	Unconscious state, untapped potential
Mauri oho	Proactive state, begin to take action

Mauri ora	Conscious, state of wellbeing, flourishing
Moemoeā	Dream vision
Ngahere	forests
Noa	Ordinary, free from restrictions
Papatūānuku / Papa	Earth mother
Pātaka	Storehouse
Patu	Traditional Māori club
Peitatanga	Painting
Pepeha	Recitation of identity and affiliations, introduction
Pōrangi	Māori conception of mental illness, dark night
Poupou pou	carved posts, pillars
Pūrākau	Talk, stories narrative / Ancestral narrative form that transmits mātauranga Māori, cosmology, and cultural knowledge
Rākai	Adornments
Rangahau	Process of finding out or seeking – Māori research
Rangatahi	Youth
Rangatira	Chief
Ranginui/rangi	Sky father
Rongoā Māori / rongoā	Māori healing practices
Storytellers	Participants
Tā moko	Tattoo
Tauiwi	Non-Māori
Taha hinengaro	Mental and emotional domain of health

Taha Tinana	Physical domain of health
Taha wairua	Spiritual domain of health
Taha Whanau	Social and family domain of health
Takarangi	Double spiral / methodological framework
Tamariki	Children
Tāne Mahuta / Tāne	God of the forests
Tangaroa	God of the sea
Tangata	People
Tangata Whenua	People of the land
Taonga	Treasure
Taonga pūoro	Singing treasures, Traditional musical instruments
Tapu	Sacred, restricted.
Tawhirimatea	God of wind and storms
Tūrangawaewae	Place where one can stand, place of belonging through whakapapa
Te Aka Whai Ora	Māori Health Authority
Te ao Māori	Māori worldview
Te Ao Mārama	The world of light
Te Kōhao Health	Māori health provider based in Kirikiriroa
Te Kore	The void
Te Pō	The night
Te Pou Taurahere	Te Kōhao carving programme
Te reo Māori / te reo/ reo	Māori language
Tīhei mauri ora	The sneeze of life

Tikanga	Customary system of values and practices
Tino rangatiratanga	Māori self-determination
Tohunga	Expert
Tohunga Rongoā	Māori healers
Tohunga Whakairo	Expert carvers
Tukutuku	Lattice panels
Tupuna / Tūpuna	Ancestor / Ancestors
Ture	Laws, rules
Uku	Clay
Wahine	Female
Wai 2575	Waitangi Tribunal's Health Services and Outcomes Inquiry
Waiata	Song
Wairua	Spirit
Waka	Canoe
Whakaaro	Understanding
Whakairo	Carving
Whakapapa	Genealogy, connection
Whakapiki	Support, promote
Whakatauki	Proverb
Whanau	Family
Whanaungatanga	Connection, kinship, relationship
Whakawhanaungatanga	Relationship building
Wharenui / whare	Meeting house

Whenua Land

Appendix 2: Scoping Review Search Strategy

Databases searched

The search was conducted using Massey University's Discover search platform, which searches across 28 databases including Scopus, CINAHL, and MEDLINE.

Date of search: 02/04/2025

Search limits

- Publication type: Peer-reviewed articles
- Date range: No date limits applied
- Available in Library collection

Search terms

The following search string was used:

("mahi toi" OR carving OR carver* OR whakairo OR raranga OR tukutuku OR weav*

OR pūrākau OR "story telling" OR art OR arts OR "kapa haka"

OR music* OR song OR singing OR "taonga pūoro"

OR tattoo* OR "tā moko" OR uku OR clay OR peitatanga

OR kōwhaiwhai OR paint*)

AND

(mental OR psychiatric OR psycholog* OR emotional)

AND

(health* OR illness* OR wellbeing OR "well being" OR distress OR oranga)

AND

(māori OR maori OR indigenous)

AND

(zealand* OR Aotearoa)

Appendix 3: Information sheet:

Kia ora,

I, Ngawai O'Leary, am inviting you to take part in my research on the Te Pou Taurahere Carving Programme for mental health and wellbeing. I am from the School of Health Sciences at Massey University exploring the health benefits of whakairo (carving).

What is the project about?

This research seeks to:

- Understand personal experiences with the Te Pou Taurahere carving programme
- Explore how whakairo functions as a therapeutic tool for mental health and wellbeing
- Strengthen support for Māori led health initiatives and kaupapa Māori health services
- Inform health policy and service delivery

What would you have to do?

If you agree to take part, I will invite you to participate in a semi-structured interview (60-90 minutes). These sessions will explore your perspectives on Te Pou Taurahere Carving Programme.

With your permission, I will record the discussion to help us identify the key ideas.

You have the right to withdraw from the study. After completing the interview, I will transcribe our discussion and send this to you for review. You will have one month from the date which you receive your transcript to advise if you would like to withdraw. This information including the specific date will be provided again with the sent transcript.

What will happen to my information?

Your contributions will help develop evidence-based insights into the use of whakairo – carving for mental health and wellbeing. Findings will be presented in a way that protects individual privacy, unless you give explicit consent to be identified. The results may be used in research reports, journal articles, conference presentations, and educational resources. I will provide you with access to the findings.

Koha:

To acknowledge your time travel and contributions a $40 petrol voucher, small kai and gift will also be offered. The koha is a gesture of appreciation and Manaaki and you are welcome to accept or decline.

If you decide to take part:

- You can change your mind about participating in the research and advise Ngawai up to one month of receiving your interview transcript that you would like to withdraw.
- You don't have to answer any questions you don't want to
- You can ask us any questions about the research
- Your information remains anonymous unless otherwise stated.

Who can you talk to about the research?

For any questions about the research, or if you would like to participate, please contact:

Ngawai O'Leary – [redacted]

Supervisor: Angelique Reweti - [redacted]

Supervisor: Linda Murray - [redacted]

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Ohu Matatika 2, Application OM2 25/24. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact the Chairperson, Massey University Human Ethics Ohu Matatika 2, email *humanethics2@massey.ac.nz*.

Appendix 4: Consent form

Participant Consent Form – Interview

I agree that Ngawai O'Leary will have a conversation with me to discuss my experiences with the Pou Taurahere Carving Programme.

I understand that:

- I can stop my involvement in the interview anytime if I don't feel like it anymore.
- I don't have to answer any questions I do not want to.
- Ngawai will record our conversation, but I can ask for the recorder to be turned off anytime.
- Ngawai will keep all my personal information private.
- I have read the information sheet. Ngawai has answered my questions, and I know I can ask more anytime.
- I agree to the interview being audio recorded.

Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Ohu Matatika 2, Application OM2 25/24. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact the Chairperson, Massey University Human Ethics Ohu Matatika 2, email humanethics2@massey.ac.nz.

Appendix 5: Consent form to be identifiable

Participant Consent Form – to be identifiable

Following what was agreed in the "Participant Consent Form – Interview" I wish to forgo the clause that Ngawai will "keep all my personal information private". Instead, I wish to be identifiable in the research findings.

I understand that:

- My name, role and contributions may be quoted in the final research reports and related outputs (the research report, any hui, presentations, or publications)
- I can change my mind at any time and inform the research team

I agree to being identifiable in the research findings:

Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Ohu Matatika 2, Application OM2 25/24. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact the Chairperson, Massey University Human Ethics Ohu Matatika 2, email humanethics2@massey.ac.nz.

Appendix 6: Group interview confidentiality agreement

Group interview confidentiality agreement

*Ngawai O'Leary (the researcher) acknowledges that the information shared it is not solely for the purpose of this research as it may be drawn on for your ongoing work within the organization. The information shared is owned by you, your organization (Te Kōhao) and your community.

I agree that Ngawai O'Leary will have a conversation with me to discuss my experiences with the Te Pou Taurahere Carving Programme and we will be discussing in a group.

To help everyone feel safe and know that they can share openly, the researcher asks that you agree to the following:

- I agree to respect the confidentiality of the discussions that involve my peers
- I agree not to share personal reflections or sensitive details from or about others
- If I am worried about anything that was talked about in the focus group, I can talk to the researcher/Ngawai about it.

Kōrero should not be taken out of context or used in a way that misrepresents or disempowers those who shared it

Signature: _____

Name: _____

Date: _____

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Ohu Matatika 2, Application OM2 25/24. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact the Chairperson, Massey University Human Ethics Ohu Matatika 2, email humanethics2@massey.ac.nz.