

The Whakapiri framework in higher education: nurturing relational teaching

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Abstract

A growing body of research suggests that utilising Indigenous frameworks grounded in relational connection and multi-modal knowledge acquisition has numerous benefits for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities. This article focuses on the Whakapiri framework, and its application at Te Kunenga ki Pūrehuroa Massey University, Aotearoa New Zealand, within a new undergraduate mental health and addiction programme. This programme aims to equip graduates in the field, providing them with the foundational knowledge and engagement competencies necessary for working with both Māori (Indigenous people of New Zealand) and non-Māori. The Whakapiri framework enhances student engagement, fosters relational teaching practices, and designs effective online learning curricula. The framework also informs the design of online learning curricula, acknowledging the unique challenges and opportunities of digital education environments. Through its emphasis on engaging, enlightening, and empowering, the Whakapiri framework offers professional guidance and enriches student engagement, teaching methodologies, and the development of online learning curricula.

Keywords

curriculum development, Indigenous pedagogy, mental health and addiction, relational teaching practices, student engagement

Introduction

Higher education supports colonisation as a socialising process that reconfirms dominant forms of knowledge as valid while systemically rendering other forms of knowledge invisible or untrue. (Parson & Weise, 2020, p. 96)

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples established the importance of cultural education content and pedagogies in safeguarding the rights of Indigenous communities worldwide (Gargett, 2013). To address the prevailing dominance of Western epistemologies and educational practices, it is necessary to integrate Indigenous teaching frameworks, a process Stein et al. (2017) described as disrupting epistemic dominance. A growing body of international research demonstrates the numerous benefits of utilising Indigenous frameworks, which prioritise relational connection and multi-modal knowledge acquisition. These benefits extend to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities, as they can enhance students' engagement with course content, foster educators' relational teaching practices (Barkaskas & Gladwin, 2021), and facilitate the design of engaging online curricula (Wilks et al., 2017).

Expanding upon the global momentum towards the decolonisation of higher education, this article describes

the Whakapiri framework (Durie, 2008), an engagement framework originally conceived by Māori (Indigenous people of New Zealand) for working with at-risk youth. Subsequently, this framework has been seamlessly integrated into a higher education curriculum to facilitate the organisation of content, delivery, and student engagement within the online learning environment. This article focuses on utilising the Whakapiri framework across a new undergraduate mental health and addiction (MHA) programme at Te Kunenga ki Pūrehuroa Massey University.

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The context of MHA in Aotearoa New Zealand

Over the past decade, numerous reviews, sector reports, and workforce plans have extensively examined the challenges encountered by Aotearoa New Zealand's MHA sector. These investigations have particularly highlighted the sector's failure to adequately address the needs of Māori and the absence of pathways for educating Māori health practitioners. One prominent report among these assessments was the He Ara Oranga, a national inquiry into MHA conducted by the New Zealand Government (Ministry of Health, 2018). Collectively, these reviews and reports called for a paradigm shift including (a) the promotion of mental health and wellbeing as opposed to diagnosis and treatment; (b) a whole of government and community approach; (c) prioritising Māori and Pacific mental health; and (d) tackling the social determinants of MHA (Ministry of Health, 2018). Central to the recommended government response was establishing a culturally competent MHA workforce that was responsive to Māori and Pacific peoples' worldviews (Ministry of Health, 2018).

In 2020, Te Kunenga ki Pūrehuroa Massey University introduced a new undergraduate programme: an MHA major within the Bachelor of Health Science (BHlthSc (MHA)). This programme is centred on public health approaches to MHA, incorporating hauora (wellbeing), critical engagement skills for individuals and communities, and focusing on the health and wellbeing of Māori and Pacific peoples. This new programme aims to decolonise MHA training by challenging dominant Western perspectives and aligning with Māori conceptualisations of health, emphasising a public health, community-based, and strength-focused approach. Rather than privileging Western medical approaches to illness and disease, the programme aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of MHA, drawing on culturally relevant perspectives.

The BHlthSc (MHA) programme is designed to equip emerging leaders in the workforce with essential knowledge, skills, and engagement training. Currently, there are limited pathways for professionalisation and professional development in this field. The programme is accredited by the Drug and Alcohol Practitioners Association Aotearoa—New Zealand, with graduates eligible for provisional registration as addiction practitioners. By offering a coherent professional development pathway, the BHlthSc (MHA) programme allows the workforce to gain accredited status in the MHA sector. It also serves as a platform for identifying future leaders within the field, strengthening the sector's workforce, and promoting excellence in MHA work.

The MHA programme offers foundational knowledge and engagement skills required for workers and emerging leaders working with Māori and non-Māori in the MHA sector. Students gain a comprehensive understanding of the models and predictors of mental health, public health and addiction approaches, MHA indicators, critical engagement techniques, effective helping skills, and te reo Māori (Māori language) and tikanga (ethically sound conduct) appropriate for work with Māori communities. In addition, students engage in

work-integrated learning opportunities that facilitate the practical application of their MHA practice knowledge.

Māori conceptualisations of MHA are holistic and interconnected. For Māori, MHA cannot be addressed in isolation but rather is seen as an important aspect of a broader understanding of hauora that recognises the interdependence of mental health on the physical, social, and spiritual realms of overall wellbeing. Connections to te taiao (the natural environment), cultural identity, and participation within cultural practices and activities alongside wider New Zealand society are further understood as important contributors to promoting positive Māori wellbeing (Russell, 2018). Addiction is viewed not just as an individual issue, but as affecting the entire whānau (extended family group) and potentially disrupting one's connection to their whakapapa (genealogy). Māori approaches to MHA often incorporate cultural practices, such as karakia (ritual chants, prayers) waiata (songs), and rongoā Māori (traditional Māori medicine). These practices are seen as integral to restoring balance and promoting hauora.

This undergraduate MHA programme leverages the diverse expertise of staff members across various schools both within and outside the College of Health. It is strongly aligned with the intent of Te Tiriti o Waitangi (the Māori language text of the Treaty of Waitangi). By partnering with Te Pūtahi-a-Toi School of Māori Knowledge and Māori academics in the Schools of Health Science and Social Work, we have been able to develop and deliver a qualification that addresses the specific needs of Māori communities. Through ongoing collaboration with Māori academics and Māori leaders, we will ensure that the curriculum remains of high quality and relevance for Māori communities.

The Whakapiri framework

Durie's (2008) Whakapiri, Whakamārama, Whakamana is a relational model delineating three stages of working with tangata whai ora (individuals seeking wellbeing, service users) in the MHA field. We adopt the framework to facilitate learning and the achievement of learning outcomes at both the whole programme and course levels. Our courses organise weekly modules into three sections: Whakapiri (engagement, building close connections and relationships between people), Whakamārama (enlightenment, building clarity in knowledge and understanding), and Whakamana (empowerment, giving effect to, enacting). At the programme level, the students progress through a journey starting with first-year engagement—Whakapiri, second-year enlightenment—Whakamārama, and ultimately third-year empowerment—Whakamana.

Whakapiri: he ora te whakapiri (there is strength in unity)

The term whakapiri derives from the root word piri, which can be translated as "adherence, loyalty, commitment, allegiance" (Te Aka Māori Dictionary, n.d.a). Adding the prefix whaka (to cause something to happen) strengthens

the word *piri*, emphasising the concept of actively causing it to occur. Therefore, *whakapiri* becomes a modifier that signifies the act of building close connections or relationships between people (Ngata, 1972).

In the learning context, the application of *Whakapiri* plays a vital role in establishing meaningful connections. This stage bridges students' personal experiences with the subject matter, generating attention, curiosity, interest, optimism, and passion. At the course level, each module commences by actively engaging students in the content, ensuring their active involvement from the start. On a broader scale, at the programme level, the emphasis on relationship building during the student's first-year experience becomes crucial for maintaining their engagement and retention. To effectively manage this transition, we proactively incorporate it into our curriculum design. To locate students in the *Whakapiri* space, we undertake several key measures. First, we integrate support services and learning resources, ensuring students have the tools to succeed. In addition, we strive to create a coherent, achievable, and motivating structure within the programme, enabling students to progress confidently. The initial focus of our programme centres on MHA work, with a specific focus on Aotearoa New Zealand. We place great importance on understanding the social context of MHA, which provides a foundation for students' learning journey. To support this, we ensure that assessments are relevant, consistent, and integrated, providing students with meaningful opportunities to demonstrate their learning. Moreover, we prioritise providing early constructive feedback and offering guidance and support to students throughout their journey. Furthermore, we remain mindful of the diverse student cohorts, acknowledging and addressing their unique needs. Finally, we display a visible commitment to engaging with *te reo Māori* and *tikanga*, actively incorporating and respecting Māori culture and language.

In the practice context, *Whakapiri* is the initial referral and contact stage with *tangata whai ora*, leading to readiness and willingness to engage in services (Durie, 2008; Lang & Gardiner, 2014). Success in building connections at this stage contributes to participation and positive outcomes, and conversely, failed relationships can lead to disengagement (Durie, 2008; Paki, 2010). Learning focuses on students' ability to develop rapport and engage in meaningful and enduring relationships in the first year. Students are introduced to effective engagement and successful relationship building with those experiencing MHA needs, including brief interventions. They learn the importance of *tangata whai ora* and *whānau* experiences and perspectives. In the same way that students are more likely to engage in learning, *tangata whai ora* also are more likely to respond to and benefit from safe and supportive relationships with their MHA workers. In MHA services, *Whakapiri* extends to setting clear boundaries and defining suitable parameters of time and space (Paenga, 2017).

The *Whakapiri* stage is also reflected by the course *tohu* (motif) in the stylised *tāniko* (finger weaving) diamond with triangles design (Figure 1). In the centre are a representation of the many different dualities within the

human body, particularly the left and right sides of the brain and the connection and engagement they have with each other. The *haehae* (layered rings) circling the *tāniko* show the journey's beginning and potential.



Figure 1. The *Whakapiri* stage (designed by Maihi Potaka). *whakapiri* = engagement, building close connections and relationships between people.

Whakamārama: whāia te mātauranga kia mārama (seek knowledge for understanding)

Whakamārama contains the root word *mārama*, translated as “brightness, light, clarity or understanding” (Te Aka Māori Dictionary, n.d.b). The addition of the prefix *whaka to mārama* transforms the word into an active concept, indicating that understanding or clarity is being actively brought about or facilitated. Therefore, *whakamārama* is a modifier that refers to illuminating and explaining, building clarity in knowledge and understanding.

In the learning context, the second stage of the framework, *Whakamārama*, builds on successful engagement to enhance students' knowledge and skills. Here, student learning focuses on developing a full comprehension of the subject matter at hand. Students develop increased awareness and shared understanding of MHA (Durie, 2008; Paenga, 2017).

At the course level, the *Whakamārama* section presents the main course material for each module. This section also includes links to class discussion forums where students can discuss and enhance their ideas about course material and share their learning experiences. At the programme level, students' learning focuses on Māori MHA work, applying a *hauora* approach—a holistic Māori philosophy of health and wellbeing that encompasses physical, mental, social, and spiritual dimensions—to focus on engagement, prevention, and early intervention with *tangata whai ora*, *whānau*, and communities. Learning covers *te reo Māori*, *tikanga*, and *kawa* (protocols) for mental health work, prevention, early intervention, and recovery pathways to promote *tangata whai ora*, *whānau*, and community wellbeing.

In the practice context, the *Whakamārama* stage builds the capacity for enlightenment and understanding for both the practitioner and *tangata whai ora* and their *whānau*. Durie (2008) explains *Whakamārama* as switching on the light and gaining knowledge in spiritual, intellectual,

emotional, physical, and social domains. Whakamārama may be experienced through increased spiritual awareness, emotional release, positive relationships, and the acquisition of knowledge (Paki, 2010).

Te Taiwhenua o Heretaunga (TToH), an iwi (tribal) organisation providing social and health services and known for its pioneering initiatives in Māori development, trialled the first application of the Whakapiri framework as a service delivery model in 2013. Like the course level described above, the Whakamārama section was applied by TToH as the stage of shared learning. It was likened to a standard clinical assessment process but with an added focus on understanding the power differential in the therapeutic relationship. That is, the Whakamārama process allowed both the health professional and tangata whai ora to learn and understand together, thereby interrupting the didactic process of the health professional knowing what was best. It shifted the rangatiratanga (self-determination) back into the hands of the tangata whai ora and their whānau. In doing so, tangata whai ora effectively chooses whether or not to progress with the support of the service. Many health professionals were concerned that this would increase access rates and challenge the capacity and demand of the service. It increased initially, but only by a fraction. Notably, it also significantly decreased and did not attend rates as only those tangata whai ora who were genuinely motivated to change remained. This was further observed by Whānau Ora (culturally-based and whānau-centred approach to wellbeing delivered through non-government organisations) agencies across Aotearoa New Zealand.

The Whakamārama stage is further reflected in the course tohu with the main poutama or stairway pattern (Figure 2). It represents the journey towards gaining knowledge and enlightenment, shows the many different layers of learning and understanding, and is the epitome of intellectual achievement. This tohu shows the effort and attitude needed to complete the second year of the programme and gain the skills required to enter the next stage of learning.

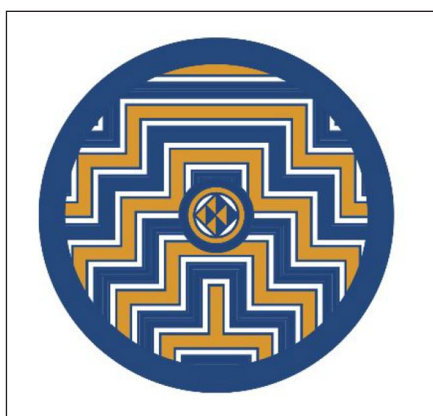


Figure 2. The Whakamārama stage (designed by Maihi Potaka). whakamārama = enlightenment, building clarity in knowledge and understanding.

Whakamana: inā kei te mārama koe, ka whakamana i ētehi atu (once knowledge is discerned, empower others with that knowledge)

Whakamana contains the root word mana, translated as “prestige, authority, control, power, influence, status” (Te Aka Māori Dictionary, n.d.c). The addition of the prefix whaka to mana transforms the word into an active concept, indicating that prestige, authority, or power is being actively conferred or enhanced. Therefore, Whakamana is a modifier that refers to the empowerment and legitimacy of those involved.

This stage consolidates students’ capabilities and competencies in the teaching context, and students become confident in connecting the subject matter and applying it in broader contexts. At the course level, the week’s last section is the Whakamana section, where students use their learning. This may include a reflective journal entry, a weekly online quiz, or review questions. These Whakamana activities allow students to lead in sharing their knowledge, reviewing their goals, and for an examination of their learning. Applying their learning draws on students’ potential, acknowledges their achievements, and creates a sense of empowerment (Buissink et al., 2017). Students are now in their final year of study at the programme level.

At the programme level, Whakamana builds on the success of the previous two years of study, moving them from comprehension to action and practice (Durie, 2008). Students become agents of social inclusion, moving their work beyond understanding to empowerment, action and sustainability. Students integrate and apply collaborative and reflective practice, critical thinking, coordinated responses, and mana-enhancing approaches to work with tangata whai ora, whānau and communities. Whakamana represents the empowerment to be ready to continue outside of the established support systems of the programme (Paenga, 2017). A work-integrated learning capstone provides opportunities for students to develop a sense of agency and become confident in making decisions and working to support wellbeing (Lang & Gardiner, 2014).

In the practice context, traditional mental health services in Aotearoa New Zealand experienced significant lengths of stay. On average, tangata whai ora was active in mental health services for long periods. The national average length of stay during the 1990s and early 2000s was 7 years. However, Duncan et al. (2009) highlight that most therapeutic changes occur within the first four to six sessions. Progress after that plateaued. Durie (2008) defines Whakamana as self-control and self-management, a sense of dignity, integrity and self-worth, a secure identity, robust social support systems, and having a clear understanding of risk and pathways to wellbeing. Whakamana requires ongoing support for recovery over time and ensuring successful long-term outcomes (Paki, 2010). The Whakamana stage offers a Māori-centred approach to the discharge process. It reflects the empowerment of tāngata whai ora and whānau towards a pathway to mauri ora (state of flourishing). The Whakamana stage provides a

framework for transitioning tāngata whai ora out of services into self-management. This approach aims to reduce the time spent in services by actively working towards empowerment and self-determination. Whakamana encourages practitioners to build the capacity of tāngata whai ora and their whānau and helps to address the systemic issue of prolonged service engagement by creating clear pathways for tāngata whai ora to move beyond institutional support.

The Whakamana stage is reflected in parts of the tohu coming together (Figure 3). The skills gained throughout the first and second years can now be used. The whakarare design—top, bottom, left and right directional linework—represents change. It acknowledges the paradigm shifts in mental health approaches throughout history, reflecting the evolution from institutionalisation in asylums, to medicalisation in hospitals, to the current emphasis on community-based care, recovery-oriented practices and self-determination. This can also be likened to the development of the students as they progress through the programme.

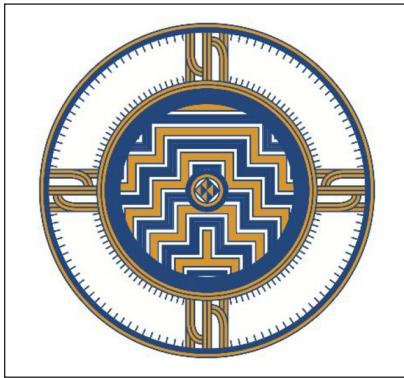


Figure 3. The Whakamana stage (designed by Maihi Potaka). whakamana = empowerment, giving effect to, enacting.

With the experience and skills gained throughout the course, sharing the knowledge gained to empower whānau towards mauri ora is essential. The relationship between the practitioner and tangata whai ora is seen through the short, repetitive lines with radial symmetry. The inside layer of lines is the energy and awahi (support) the practitioner gives to tangata whai ora. The outer layer is the energy from tangata whai ora received by the practitioner as interaction, reciprocity, and discussion, which goes both ways. It is important to see the white space between these lines as this represents clarity and understanding of both energies being received and emitted. This is the space of understanding, the space of resolution and discussion.

Feedback on the enhanced learning experience

Student and staff feedback consistently highlights the positive impact of integrating the Whakapiri framework into our courses. Students appreciate the framework's role in

enhancing online content navigation and staff engagement, leading to a strong sense of supported learning and increased self-belief:

Each week was easy to navigate with the Whakapiri, Whakamārama and Whakamana sections. (231106 student)

Lecturers went above and beyond what I expected . . . their engagement blew me away and made the course meaningful. (147102 student)

I felt valued and supported as a student. (147102 student)

The staff have been very understanding, supportive and encouraging which in the long-term has resulted in me having belief in myself. (147102 student)

Our foundational MHA course, redesigned in 2020 with the Whakapiri framework, serves a diverse student cohort ranging in age from 18 to 70 years, with varying levels of online education experience and lived experience of MHA. Since implementing the framework, we have observed improved class grades, fewer non-engaged students, and significant class grade point average improvements. Staff feedback on the integration of the Whakapiri framework for enhancing the teaching experience is also overwhelmingly positive:

Your learning narrative is so clear, straightforward, supportive and friendly all the way through. Brilliant creative and interactive learning activities, and the content is so well sequenced. The Whakapiri framework works so perfectly. (University academic staff member)

These outcomes demonstrate the Whakapiri framework's effectiveness in enhancing both the teaching and learning experience across our diverse student population.

Discussion

The model outlines a cyclical nature of engagement, all phases necessary for successful outcomes (Durie, 2008; Paki, 2010). Engagement processes support the development of knowledge and understanding to empower the movement to action. Whakamana extends from Whakamārama established through Whakapiri. Adopting this model has realised our two main motivations in using Whakapiri in curriculum design: first, to uphold Te Tiriti o Waitangi in our programme and centre mātauranga Māori (Indigenous Māori knowledge systems), and second, to model Whakapiri as a MHA practice model for students through the curriculum.

First, the marginalisation of Indigenous knowledge in higher education has led to strong calls for the decolonisation and indigenisation of health education, including the horizontal and vertical integration of Indigenous knowledge through curricula (Ahuriri-Driscoll et al., 2021; Castellano, 2014; Coombe et al., 2017, 2019; Lee et al., 2017; Severinsen et al., 2021). Te Kunenga ki Pūrehuroa Massey University holds an aspiration to be a Te Tiriti o Waitangi-led

institution. In Aotearoa New Zealand, Māori have a national treaty negotiated with the colonising British Crown. The treaty, Te Tiriti o Waitangi, guarantees continued Māori sovereignty, protects Māori interests, promotes Māori wellbeing, and guarantees the Crown limited kāwanatanga (governance). This treaty forms the foundation for the relationship between Māori and the New Zealand government and increasingly informs institutional policies and practices. This goal requires us to promote the determination of Māori-led aspirations, active use of te reo Māori and the vitality and wellbeing of all people and our environment to give full and authentic expression to the eminence of Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

As a Te Tiriti-led institution, Te Kunenga ki Pūrehuroa Massey University's programmes must embed and enact Te Tiriti o Waitangi, acknowledging that mental health and wellbeing are taonga (treasures) that Māori were guaranteed tino rangatiratanga (self-determination, sovereignty) over (Severinsen et al., 2024). This recognition has implications for how MHA education is conceptualised and delivered within our institution. Our programmes recognise the inherent value of Māori perspectives of mental health and wellbeing, prioritising mātauranga Māori in curriculum design and content. The programme has been co-developed in partnership with Māori to contribute to equity in health outcomes for whānau, hapū (subtribes), and iwi (tribes). The Whakapiri framework aids in embedding a Te Tiriti o Waitangi approach at every programme level. The curriculum creates space, privileges Māori knowledge and ways of being, and provides opportunities for students to critically reflect on the history and development of MHA services. This approach prepares students to work effectively in partnership with Māori communities, respecting Māori rights to self-determination. The Whakapiri framework helps to build students' critical consciousness and deepen their understanding of and ability to advocate for equity in their practice.

Second, the Whakapiri framework aligns with Māori pedagogy and practice approaches by applying ako (to teach, to learn), reflecting the reciprocal roles of both teachers and learners (Alton-Lee, 2003; Glynn et al., 2010; O'Malley et al., 2008; Tangaere, 1997). The fluid process of ako allows the co-construction of knowledge.

Applying the Whakapiri framework positions students as active partners in their learning and fosters engagement and partnerships with teaching staff to develop shared understandings. At the pedagogical level, our focus remains on the engagement and retention of students, active learning and transformative education, and empowering students through further developing their existing experiences and knowledge for continued learning. The Whakapiri framework is simultaneously a practice model for MHA work, where we model Māori approaches in MHA work across the programme.

Conclusion

The whakapapa of this approach, underpinned by the concepts of Whakapiri, Whakamārama, and Whakamana, is informed by a mātauranga Māori understanding of

connection, participation, and change. To achieve successful outcomes in MHA work, it further draws upon the past efforts of others influential in the field and the experiences of tangata whai ora and whānau to engage and be engaged with health workers in ways that acknowledge their will for self-determination. Using the Whakapiri framework across an MHA programme at Te Kunenga ki Pūrehuroa Massey University to structure teaching and learning methods provides opportunities for teachers and students alike to reflect on their practices and experiences and proceed effectively. The Whakapiri framework contributes to critical consciousness and deepens an understanding of and ability to advocate for equity. The spirit and practical application of the framework to engage, enlighten, and empower emphasises its versatility and value to offer more than just professional guidance but also the enhancement of public health education.

Authors' note

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Luke Rowe (Ngāti Raukawa te au ki te tonga, Ngāti Tūwharetoa) (MSc, PDipCP) contributed to the programme development, course coordination, and teaching in Bachelor of Health Science (Mental Health and Addiction) through his role as a Senior Lecturer at Te Kunenga ki Pūrehuroa Massey University.

Andy Towers (PhD) is an Associate Professor in the School of Health Sciences at Te Kunenga ki Pūrehuroa Massey University and is the co-Director of the Bachelor of Health Science (Mental Health and Addiction) programme.

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Glossary

ako	to teach, to learn
awhi	support
hapū	subtribes
hauora	wellbeing
He Ara Oranga	a national inquiry into mental health and addiction conducted by the New Zealand Government
he ora te whakapiri	there is strength in unity
inā kei te mārama koe,	once knowledge is discerned,
ka whakamana i ētehi atu	empower others with that knowledge
iwi	tribal, tribes
karakia	ritual chants, prayers
kawa	protocols
kāwanatanga	governance
mana	prestige, authority, control, power, influence, status
Māori	Indigenous people of Aotearoa New Zealand
mārama	brightness, light, clarity or understanding
mātauranga Māori	Indigenous Māori knowledge systems
mauri ora	state of flourishing
piri	adherence, loyalty, commitment, allegiance
rangatiranga	self-determination
rongoā Māori	traditional Māori medicine
tangata whai ora	individuals seeking wellbeing, service users
tāniko	finger woven
taonga	treasures
te reo Māori	Māori language
Te Taiwhenua o Heretaunga	an iwi organisation providing social and health services
Te Tiriti o Waitangi	the Māori language text of the Treaty of Waitangi
tikanga	ethically sound conduct
tino rangatiranga	self-determination, sovereignty
tohu	motif
waiata	songs
whāia te mātauranga	seek knowledge for understanding
kia mārama	
whaka	a prefix—to cause something to happen
whakamana	empowerment, giving effect to, enacting
whakamārama	enlightenment, building clarity in knowledge and understanding
whakapapa	genealogy
whakapiri	engagement, building close connections and relationships between people
Whakapiri, Whakamārama, Whakamana	a relational model delineating three stages of working with tangata whai ora in the mental health and addiction field
whānau	extended family group; families
Whānau Ora	culturally-based and whānau-centred approach to wellbeing delivered through non-government organisations

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