



**Koi te matapunenga maianga i te matapuioio – See the unseen, feel the unfelt, believe in the impossible: Courageous and loving practice in a Māta Waka social service provider**

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**Abstract**

This paper showcases the kaupapa (philosophy) and practices of a Māta Waka (pan-tribal), community-based Kaupapa Māori service provider in the nation-state currently known as New Zealand. Te Hou Ora Whānau Services aims to provide services that support and empower tamariki (children), rangatahi (youth), and whānau (extended families) from diverse backgrounds and experiential realities to fulfil their potential within the context of their cultural heritage and their communities. The purpose of this study was to explore the philosophy and values underpinning the everyday practices and experiences of eleven kaimahi (practitioners) who work for the organisation. Analyses of the data identified five overarching pou, or foundational supports that underlie kaimahi ways of being, knowing, relating, and doing, together with seven ‘takepū,’ or preferred ways of engaging with others. Findings of the study provide an important window into the holistic, relational kaupapa of this Māta Waka organisation and its kaimahi: a set of commitments and actions that, as the findings demonstrate, are fundamentally a practice of aroha (love). While some of the elements are specific to the New Zealand context, the pou and takepū offer guidance relevant to programs globally seeking to successfully and creatively respond to the priorities, aspirations, and moemoeā/dreams of Indigenous children, young people, their families, and communities.

Stimulated by intransigent inequities in Indigenous Māori social, health, and economic wellbeing, a series of highly critical reviews of New Zealand’s statutory child protection services (for instance, Boshier, 2020; Whānau Ora Commissioning Agency, 2020; Waitangi Tribunal, 2021), and the current Royal Commission into Abuse in State and Faith Based Care (Royal Commission of Inquiry, 2022), there is resurgent government interest in the development of “by Māori, for Māori, with Māori” social and health services in New Zealand (Hyslop, 2022). In the child protection context, debates persist over the appropriate balance between devolution to Māori and services delivered in partnership with the government (Fitzmaurice, 2022; Hyslop, 2022). Nonetheless, there is growing agreement about the need for greater sharing of power, resources, and decision-making with Māori, and for services for tamariki, rangatahi, and whānau Māori that centre Māori sovereignty, world views and knowledges (Te Ao Māori and mātauranga Māori) (Boulton, 2020).

Calls for Māori-centred services likewise emphasise the importance of significantly greater investments in locally led community-based services and interventions. As Boulton et al. (2020) have noted “Innovative, localised solutions designed, delivered and implemented by whānau, hapū, iwi and hapori (communities) are crucial” (p. 9). Iwi services are a centrepiece in these efforts. However, particularly in urban settings, there is also need for and value in Māori-centred services responsive and accountable to community members that may have whakapapa connections to Iwi that are not mana whenua. Often referred to simply as Māori organisations (Eketone, 2002), they are also described as ‘Māta Waka’ organisations. Maaka (2004) describes the term ‘Māta Waka’ or many canoes, as “an oratorical expression...used as an inclusive honorific to cover all Māori regardless of tribal affiliation” (p. 333).

A range of Māta Waka settings and services provide pan-tribal resources and services – notably urban marae and larger entities such as Urban Māori Authorities (Barcham, 1998), which provide a range of educational, social and health services. Less visible, but also vitally important in the broader ecology of social and health services are smaller community-based services that serve Māori from diverse Iwi, while also opening their doors and services to clients from a range of other cultures and backgrounds. These Māta Waka organisations provide services based on residence rather than Iwi affiliation (Maaka, 2004): they are quintessentially local, inclusive, and community oriented. However, the services they provide are grounded in tikanga Māori and reflective of Māori ways of being, knowing, relating, and doing.

Although a range of scholarly work has explored the perspectives of Māori practitioners in social and health services organisations on their work with Māori communities (such as Lindsay Latimer et al., 2021; Mooney, 2012), we have found surprisingly little research focused

specifically on Māta Waka services (for an exception, refer to Walker, 2004). Exploration of the philosophy, values, and practices of these organisations can thus offer an important window into community-based Kaupapa Māori services that are responsive to tamariki, rangatahi and whānau Māori from diverse backgrounds and experiential realities. The insights of practitioners working within the context of Māta Waka on their everyday practices and experiences can also provide a guiding framework for services that successfully and creatively respond to the priorities, aspirations and moemoeā of tamariki, rangatahi and whānau Māori they work with, and for.

This paper explores key dimensions in the kaupapa (philosophy) and practices of Te Hou Ora Whānau Services (Te Hou Ora), a Māta Waka, community-based, whānau-led Kaupapa Māori service provider located in Ōtepoti (Dunedin, New Zealand). Initially established in 1976, Te Hou Ora aims to provide services that will support and empower tamariki and rangatahi to fulfil their potential within the context of their whānau, their cultural heritage, and their communities. The kaupapa of the organisation's services is deeply relational: whakawhanaungatanga (relationship making) is at the core of their daily mahi. This relational work is fundamentally a practice of aroha (love). On its website, Te Hou Ora makes this clear: "We act and work with aroha, always. Manaakitanga is a key demonstration of aroha, ensuring services are delivered with generosity and empathy" (<https://www.thows.org.nz/>).

In a recent paper on 'mahi aroha' (work performed out of love), the collective and loving care for others demonstrated by Māori in the context of recent disasters in New Zealand, Cram (2022) described aroha as "a way to move through everyday life that infects Māori life-worlds and people's paid and unpaid work-worlds" (p. 359). Other scholars are also beginning to affirm the importance of love, broadly defined, as a key foundation of relational social work practice (Godden, 2021; Szeintuch, 2022). Godden (2021) has explored the ethic of love embedded in Indigenous practices in South America, with a view to illuminating the value of love as a core dimension of relational community practice. At the direct practice level, Young et al. (2020) have highlighted the importance of love and care in social work practice with care-experienced young people, noting they "want workers who have warm eyes, who breathe warm air into their environments, and who have and who show heart warmth" (p. 16). Despite these indications of its importance, relatively little research is available that illuminates the ways by which an ethic of love is enacted in everyday practice. The aims and findings of this study offered us the opportunity to explore this question.

## Methods

The purpose of this study was to explore the philosophy and values that underpin the everyday practices and experiences of the kaimahi who work for Te Hou Ora. Underpinned by a Kaupapa Māori research paradigm that privileges Māori ways of being, knowing, relating, and doing as ‘the norm’ (Smith, 2021), this study utilised a wānanga approach to qualitative data collection and analysis. Kōpua et al. (2019) define wānanga as a “‘taonga tuku iho’ (gift from the past)...It is very much a concept that only has its full meaning within the context of Māori culture and epistemology” (p. 6). Pihama et al. (2019) reminds us that “as whānau, hapū and iwi we know how to wānanga. Wānanga as a space for learning and knowledge exchange is something built into our everyday lives” (p. 11). Royal (2011) describes wānanga as a knowledge creation process that perceives knowledge to be pre-existent in our world (rather than a product of human construction):

The goal of the knowledge journey, therefore, is not so much the gathering of discrete pieces of humanly created knowledge but rather the ‘cleansing of the lens of perception’ whereby the world itself seems to speak (kōrero) to those who have the commitment and willingness to hear...knowledge and understanding arises in the consciousness of the individual contiguous with the progressive revelation of depth in the world. (p. 5)

Wānanga thus supports a creative process of the mind or internalised knowing, resulting in a collective shift in awareness (King, 2021). Royal (2011) reminds us of the linkages between wānanga and the concepts of aroha and māramatanga, highlighting:

*Ko ngā hua o te wānanga ko te aroha, ko te māramatanga.*  
The fruits of wānanga are aroha and māramatanga. (p. 19)

## Ethics Approach

Our approach to ethics was informed by ‘Te Ara Tika Guidelines’ for Māori research ethics (Pūtaiora Writing Group, 2010). We were also guided by work on the ethics of care and transformational research practices (Brannelly & Boulton, 2017), and ethics and marginalisation (Ormond et al., 2006). Ethics was granted by the University of Auckland [Reference: UAHPEC 3398]. Appropriate organisational approvals were obtained prior to recruitment of participants. Study participants involved Te Hou Orakaimahi who were willing to participate, who were over the age of 16 years, and who gave written consent.

### **Data Collection Approach**

In following New Zealand Government COVID-19 regulations at the time, data collection was undertaken via a wānanga held in-person as well as online for those research team members unable to travel. The wānanga was held in Ōtepoti at Te Hou Ora and followed local tikanga that included karakia at the start and end of the wānanga, whakawhanaungatanga, and the sharing of kai with one another. The pūkōrero generated during the wānanga lasted 2.5 hours and drew on a flexible interview schedule. Consent for audio-recordings of the pūkōrero were obtained and these were transcribed verbatim. Research team members also took written notes during the wānanga. The wānanga was generally conducted in the English language, however, kaimahi participants used either Te Reo Māori or English during their pūkōrero.

### **Analysis Approach**

Our thematic analyses was informed by work that has been led by Māori scholars (Jackson, 2015; King & Cormack, 2022; Rolleston et al., 2021; Smith & Smith, 2018). We used a hybrid approach, by incorporating aspects of both a data-driven inductive approach, and a deductive (a priori) approach, that allowed Kaupapa Māori theory to be integral to the analysis (through the deductive approach to data coding and analysis, whilst allowing for themes to be generated via the inductive approach). Our a priori approach was directly informed by Smith and Smith's (2018) Kaupapa Māori theoretical framework comprising the five components of positionality, criticality, structuralist and culturalist considerations, praxicality, and transformability (Smith & Smith, 2018).

All of the research team members (six) reviewed the transcripts, and the data were coded systematically by two of the research team members. Over a series of wānanga, the research team collectively discussed the identified patterns and their meanings from the data, and from there, generated the overarching and supporting themes. Alongside the use of Smith and Smith's (2018) framework, our process of defining and naming of the themes involved reflection on Dr Moana Jackson's (2015) "ethics of prior thought". Hence, we privileged Māori concepts grounded in the ontological and epistemological systems of our tūpuna. We then undertook a quality check of the themes against the coded data by checking with and obtaining feedback on, the initial themes (presented with anonymised illustrative quotes) from the kaimahi who participated in the research wānanga.

## Results

Eleven kaimahi participants were involved in the wānanga. The kaimahi were diverse in age (20-50 years), ethnicity (Māori, Rarotongan, Samoan, Pākeha, and English), gender (tāne, wāhine and takatāpui), life experience, education, qualifications, Iwi, tikanga, and skills, with geographic roots extending from Te Tai Tokerau to Te Tai Tonga. Similarly, the whakapapa of participating kaimahi included tāonga tuku iho from across New Zealand, including Ngā Puhī, Ngāti Kahungunu, Te-Whanau-a-Apanui, Tuhoe, Ngāti Maniapoto, Te Arawa, Tainui, and Kai Tahu. The eleven kaimahi participants spoke on behalf of their specific areas of mahi, collectively reflecting all areas of Te Hou Ora mahi, including leadership, social work, internal operations, youth justice services, whānau centered services, and educational and development services.

The following sections outline five overarching themes ('Aro ki te hā', 'Whakapapa', 'Whanaungatanga', Whakamana, and 'Pono') and seven sub-themes ('Manaakitanga', 'Kanohi kitea', 'Wā', 'Māia', 'Ūkaipō', 'Mahi tahi', and 'Pūkengatanga') identified in the study data. The five overarching themes are depicted as the 'pou' or foundational supports that underlay kaimahi ways of being, knowing, relating, and doing. The seven sub-themes are depicted as 'takepū' or the "preferred ways, fashioned by Māori thinking and rationale, of engaging with others" (Pohatu, 2013, p. 13). Thus, the five pou (Table 1) underpin the seven takepū or "preferred ways" in which kaimahi work with, and for, tamariki, rangatahi and whānau Māori in their community (Table 2).

### **Pou: Aro ki te hā**

Our The first of the five overarching themes was that of 'Aro ki te hā', relating to the utmost reverence for one's breath of life (The Pūtaiora Writing Group, 2010). The pou 'Aro ki te hā' reflects the philosophy underlying kaimahi ways of being, knowing, relating, and doing in relation to the tamariki, rangatahi and whānau Māori they work with, and for. Love, compassion and empathy form the very essence of the approaches and practices that kaimahi undertake.

"I'm like, is this decision helping to breathe some life to this person or not?...Is what I'm doing working towards achieving that or not? And if it's not, it's probably not worth bothering with. But if it has some step in that process, then it is worth it."

"I think expressing love is a highly professional skill that is utterly underrated and is not considered to be professional. But I think people who treat it like that are amazing. And they tell you, you know, cos they wouldn't talk to you if they didn't know you thought like that."

The pou 'Aro ki te hā' also reflects how kaimahi hold and honour the pūrākau of narratives of the tamariki, rangatahi and whānau Māori that they work with, and for. The mana of each and every pūrākau shared by tamariki, rangatahi and whānau Māori is protected throughout via an

integrity of process with regard to everything that kaimahi do, and in the strengths-based perspectives that inform the way kaimahi represent those they work with:

“[We] see beyond what’s being presented...on a piece of paper...I think that’s what everyone here at Te Hou Ora does, they see the intrinsic value and the intrinsic beauty you are with as a person, as opposed to all this deficit model that’s been put on a piece of paper, that paints a picture that’s not even you.”

“In terms of processes, like in terms of referrals from [government agencies] it’s trying to get the whānau or the young person’s voice, not what the social workers want, because their goals are very different to what actually our rangatahi and our whānau want...before even meeting them, is like the referrals, like I’ve chucked a couple back to say, ‘No...This isn’t acceptable.’ So, it’s trying to really get the voice of them before we meet them, but when we meet them, we just take them at face value, so we don’t judge them by what’s been written in those referrals. So, I think those are like the main two things in terms of those relationships that we really do well in.”

### **Pou: Whakapapa**

The second overarching theme or pou of ‘Whakapapa’ reflects those structured genealogical and relational layers that are interconnected, interdependent and complementary, traversing generations, past, present and future, including connections with tūpuna, with atua, with the natural and spiritual worlds, and with the universe.

“Because I know like massively in the Māori community, we know everyone. And that’s how we get a big in with our whānau as well, it’s cos that cousin knows that cousin, and that cousin knows that cousin.”

‘Whakapapa’ is an integral pou that guides not only kaimahi approaches and practices, but also informs which kaimahi work within Te Hou Ora, and which of the kaimahi work with, and for the tamariki, rangatahi and whānau Māori that Te Hou Ora serves. This results in a collective of kaimahi with diverse knowledge, expertise, and lived experiences that come together under the kaupapa of Te Hou Ora to serve their community with integrity of process that involves accountability with one another as a diverse collective, and with tamariki, rangatahi and whānau Māori.

“One of the things that we do is make sure that whoever the rangatahi is, we’re trying to put them with kaimahi that actually they can relate to, you know? Like, I’ve had lots of conversations about this tamariki, who are they gonna go with? Who’s the best person for them, you know? And we make sure that we do put up them with the right person.”

“We’ve got each other’s back cos we are whānau.”

**Pou: Whanaungatanga**

Closely related to the pou ‘Whakapapa’, the third overarching theme or pou ‘Whanaungatanga’ refers to the importance that kaimahi place upon strengthening and sustaining the interconnected, interdependent and complementary relationships that are generated through whakapapa, through working on shared kaupapa with one another alongside tamariki, rangatahi and whānau Māori, and through the sharing of lived experiences as a collective.

“We create, we build genuine connections with our young people.”

“Usually a rangatahi is sort of connected majorly with one or two people, but everyone generally in the organization knows who they are...And it is like one big whānau really, like even if we're not specifically working with that person, most staff will know [them].”

“Another thing that I've seen is that the majority of people in Te Hou Ora have had their own trauma. And so if you're thinking about how you relate to people, you might do it unconsciously as a common link between everyone... And so you are automatically able to relate. I think that's a good thing”.

In response to these interconnected, interdependent and complementary relationships, the pou of ‘Whanaungatanga’ recognises and acknowledges the responsibilities, obligations and commitments that kaimahi have to the communities and collectives that they form part of.

“I think also to be mindful that we are only a part of the community, and people that we are helping are our community. You know, so we are not – there's no this, we're actually on par. So, if we want our community to thrive, that's what we do in order to make it thrive.”

The pou ‘Whanaungatanga’ also reflects the importance kaimahi place on undertaking a holistic ‘whole of whānau’ approach to their practice. Critically, the pou of ‘Whanaungatanga’ recognises and acknowledges that tamariki and rangatahi cannot be considered as existing outside the context of their whānau. Thus, being responsive to tamariki and rangatahi requires a responsiveness to the self-determined priorities, aspirations and moemoeā of the whānau collective.

“I think something we do quite well as well is, you know, we get a referral for one tamariki, and then go into that household...we often end up servicing the whole whānau in there. It's that holistic, wraparound support that we provide... That's something I think I'm really proud that we're able to do.”

“So, it's highlighting the individualness of each whānau and what their wellbeing looks like to them.”

**Pou: Whakamana**

The fourth overarching theme or pou of ‘Whakamana’ reflects the centrality of ensuring that the priorities, aspirations and moemoeā of tamariki, rangatahi and whānau Māori are always forefront.

“It’s always about putting them first.”

Here tamariki, rangatahi and whānau Māori are recognised and acknowledged as being the experts of their own lives.

“I feel like [government agencies] can sometimes...it's talking down to them rather than talking to them if that makes sense. I think that’s something we do...we are talking to that person. Not because they’re a young person or because they have to be here, but because we want to learn a bit more about them and stuff to help them get to where they want to be.”

“Now this is what I’ve been told about you. Feel free to correct them because you are the expert of you, and I don’t want to get the wrong impression based on that information.”

Kaimahi also demonstrate whakamana in their ways of being, knowing, relating, and doing with one another, supported by an organisational culture that facilitates transparency and shared decision-making.

“We should be working in the same way that we are expecting our kaimahi to work with whānau.”

“You put the staff first, they will end up putting whānau first, so it’s pretty simple.”

“[When hiring new staff] ...it’s been very transparent and involving the current staff really openly.”

“Like nothing’s hidden.”

Management practices focus on supporting kaimahi to do the work they need to do. Kaimahi are enabled to use their discretion and to be flexible in responding to the priorities, aspirations and moemoeā of the tamariki, rangatahi and whānau Māori they work with, and for.

“It's about just empowering them to be accountable for what they do and then putting around the processes and providing the advice that they need for their service to shine. And so, to be honest, it's not terribly difficult to do.”

“It doesn’t feel like that hierarchical system you get in other normal organisations.”

“I feel like we have the autonomy to do what we can do and the flexibility.”

**Pou: Pono**

The fifth overarching theme or pou of ‘Pono’ relates to the importance that kaimahi place on being absolutely true, unfeigned and genuine with regard to the kaupapa and core values of Te Hou Ora.

“If you understand the essence of what you are doing and what we’re working represents, like it’s a simple equation too – you can’t get too lost if you’ve got that as a reference point.”

“It kind of just comes back to our kaupapa. And you know, you either support it or you don't. If you support it, you're gonna fit in here and have a great time, achieve some awesome stuff in the community, whether you're in a front facing social work role...or spend most of your time behind a desk like me. You know, that kaupapa is what keeps all of us going and that drive to make a difference in the community is really strong here. It's not just a job for any of us.”

For kaimahi, the pou of ‘Pono’ not only requires clarity, insight and understanding around the kaupapa and the core values of Te Hou Ora, but also holding steadfast to these in the approaches and practices that kaimahi undertake when working with, and for, tamariki, rangatahi and whānau Māori.

“Bring it back to those...core values of our organisation...I’ve gotta make sure that I’m representing this kaupapa.”

“When you have that heart, like main pou, it can guide you through really grey areas...where...you’re like, ‘this doesn’t feel right’.”

In addition, the pou ‘Pono’ refers to building the right team with the right mindsets and right skillsets to hold true to the kaupapa and core values of Te Hou Ora.

“It is about getting the right person to fit and consulting everybody who is already working in that way about anyone new coming in, just to make sure that they fit and thus serve our community better. Because we don't wanna muck around with the wrong person. That's just a waste of time. It's a waste of time for the people we're working for.”

“You’ve gotta fit into the family.”

The pou of ‘Pono’ also relates to the importance of having integrity of process with regard to everything that kaimahi do, including kaimahi ensuring they always follow through with what they say they are going to do, holding themselves accountable to tamariki, rangatahi and whānau Māori.

“One of the big things that builds trust with the whānau that we are working with, is that when things are going to be said they're going to be done, they end up actually being followed through on. Because, yeah, just a lot of the whānau that we are working with, like most of the times through their lives, a lot of what they carry is around people saying they're going to do shit and it never happens. And that starts as children and it goes up right through, like systemically through all of the other systems that we have in place.”

Table 1: Overview of the five pou.

Pou	Description
Aro ki te hā	Utmost reverence for one's breath of life. Love, compassion and empathy underlay the very essence of the approaches and practices taken when working with and for tamariki, rangatahi and whānau Māori.
Whakapapa	Structured genealogical and relational layers are interconnected, interdependent and complementary, traversing generations, past, present and future, including connections with tūpuna, with atua, with the natural and spiritual worlds, and with the universe.
Whanaungatanga	Those interconnected, interdependent and complementary relationships generated through whakapapa, through working on shared kaupapa with one another alongside tamariki, rangatahi and whānau Māori, and through the sharing of lived experiences as a collective, are continually strengthened and sustained.
Whakamana	Ensuring that the priorities, aspirations and moemoeā of tamariki, rangatahi and whānau Māori are always forefront, where tamariki, rangatahi and whānau Māori are recognised and acknowledged as being experts of their own lives.
Pono	The importance of being absolutely true, unfeigned and genuine with regard to the kaupapa and core values and having integrity of process when working with, and for tamariki, rangatahi and whānau Māori.

### Takepū: Manaakitanga

The takepū 'Manaakitanga' relates to the centrality that kaimahi place upon exercising respect, care and kindness during each and every interaction with tamariki, rangatahi and whānau Māori.

"Making sure that they're settled. That their pukus are full. That they're in a good head space."

"It's really quite sad really cos sometimes when you meet someone for the first time and after the initial meeting they're like, 'that's the first time I've heard praise in I don't know how long'."

"But also, when you were saying that you were smiling cos you were thinking of some of those young people and you could see them. And so you didn't see this problem as such, you saw everything else that was there. I think it's really sad when especially statutory work robs people of that, you know? When they're talking about all the whānau they have a privilege of working with, they should light up...Do you know what I mean? Otherwise, they shouldn't be there."

Kaimahi also highlighted how manaakitanga with tamariki, rangatahi and whānau Māori was often reciprocal, as a result of the whanaungatanga sustained by kaimahi, and in response to their expression of aro ki te hā for the tamariki, rangatahi and whānau Māori they work with, and for.

“Even though I haven’t been here and I’ve been away with my own stuff, my young people found a way to still message me and check in because they care and we’ve built such a good relationship. Same as like their mum and their cousins, because they heard through the grapevine, even though I didn’t work with them, that I was helping that young person in such a way. So then the cousins and then the aunties would drop me messages just to see how I am. So, that’s what you create. You create like such a connection that it impacts indirectly people that weren’t directly involved. Yeah. And that’s what you want to see. You want to see that go from boom, boom, boom, spread out the love.”

### **Takepū: Kanohi kitea**

The takepū ‘Kanohi kitea’ refers to the significance of being present, not only in the physical sense but also in terms of being real, human and relatable.

“One of the best ways to build a relationship is just to be with them...be present.”

“You just don’t ask fake questions that you don’t care about. If you’ve got a question and you want to know, but it’s about being real, I suppose.”

Reciprocity (for example, through the sharing of one’s own experiences) was considered important to being a real, human and relatable presence in the lives of tamariki, rangatahi and whānau Māori.

“There’s also a certain amount of, in the space that we work in, you speak to your own experiences in some circumstances as well...obviously we have our own boundaries with our personal things, but I feel like in this line of work and with some of the young people, because they are living very much in a rough space sometimes, and don’t get that honesty from adults, so it’s quite cool to be able to talk to them about our own experiences, that are negative or positive and how we navigated those. And they’re like, ‘Oh, this person maybe does know a little bit’.”

“It’s like giving a little bit of yourself as well.”

Kaimahi are also the ‘seen face’ that will turn up when others won’t, that can be trusted during nights, weekends, and in the spaces that tamariki, rangatahi and whānau Māori inhabit.

“I feel like that’s the difference between us and statutory, is that we’ll keep turning up...We keep turning up always.”

“When I have been out, I’ve seen my young people...run up to me and be like, ‘hey, what are you buying? Shall I come to your house for dinner?’ They feel comfort enough to come up and do that, because you create a space around you that lets that happen. And that’s something that, I feel, [Te Hou Ora] does, like with their young people, the people they work with, they create such an aura about them that they feel comfortable enough to go up and do that in spaces that aren’t professional settings.”

**Takepū: Wā**

The takepū ‘Wā’ relates to the centrality of time to Māori ways of being, knowing, relating, and doing. Kaimahi highlighted that responding to the priorities, aspirations and moemoeā of tamariki, rangatahi and whānau Māori, and being accountable to them required an honouring of the time that it takes to achieve this. Thus, rather than a 9-to-5 job, the work of kaimahi is based upon the kaupapa of Te Hou Ora and their commitment to ensuring whakamana for tamariki, rangatahi and whānau Māori. Other factors such as the time constraints generated by formal government contracting are secondary considerations.

“A lot of the kaimahi here go above and beyond. Well it’s seen as above and beyond, but any one of us would do it anyway, just because it’s what’s necessary...And I think that families see that or they say that effort that you’re putting in to try and stand by them and stand for them as well.”

“There’s no box checking and all those kinds of things. You know, some of the bigger organisations...they’ve got huge caseloads and lots of box checking that they have to do, and they have to try to move things on. And we don’t want to do that, we don’t want to move someone on that should not be moved on yet, even if the contract’s coming to an end.”

**Takepū: Māia**

The takepū ‘Māia’ refers to the importance that kaimahi place on being courageous in all interactions with one another, with tamariki, rangatahi and whānau Māori, and with other organisations. Acts of courage strengthen and support those relationships that have been developed and sustained through whanaungatanga.

“One of the things that I’ve seen constantly...is that one of the things these guys are really good at is exercising courage. Having the courage to stand up for whānau...But also the courage to say when they might not be the right person for the rangatahi or whānau.”

“Confrontation is one of the biggest tools that I use in my mahi, and it’s calling their bullshit...that’s where the honesty comes from.”

“You have relationships that can withstand those conversations.”

**Takepū: Ūkaipō**

The takepū ‘Ūkaipō’ refers to the ways in which kaimahi return tamariki and rangatahi back to Papatūānuku as the sacred source of sustenance and of nurturing. This might take on the form of activities within the moana (surfing, diving for kaimoana), or working on the whenua (mahi māra), or nurturing of baby animals. Connecting tamariki, rangatahi and whānau Māori back to Papatūānuku and with Ranginui was not only considered an integral part of the healing process for minds, bodies and spirits, but was also a way in which the knowledge held by Papatūānuku

and Ranginui could be shared with tamariki and rangatahi, contributing to their growth (alongside that of kaimahi) and the development of life skills that come from being within, and caring for, the natural world and everything that exists within it.

“Just connecting them with nature and simple things like gathering kaimoana and stuff, and then taking it back and sharing it with people.”

“I think for us we really connect them back to the taiao, so our environment and actually being able to look after and nurture other things also.”

“It just has this real calming, soothing thing. And so, I find that with the ocean myself, and I think perhaps we do find the things that our rangatahi enjoy that we also enjoy, and then experience that with them and then essentially we are all growing together...we let our rangatahi know what this is something that's growing me.”

### **Takepū: Mahi tahi**

The takepū ‘Mahi tahi’ highlights the importance of collaborative approaches in support of shared goals whenever working with, and for, tamariki, rangatahi and whānau Māori. Strong relationships based on trust are critical to collectivist approaches such as ‘Mahi tahi’.

“I wanna know how they're feeling, whether they're comfortable, what they want to get out of this... Whether they've just been sort of put there... And if so, how can we do it in a collaborative way with them, where they are getting the most out of it that they can. And I want their input.”

### **Takepū: Pūkengatanga**

The takepū ‘Pūkengatanga’ relates to the extensive knowledge, expertise and skill sets that kaimahi must hold in responding to the priorities, aspirations and moemoeā of tamariki, rangatahi and whānau Māori. The takepū of ‘Pūkengatanga’ is grounded in mātauranga Māori; the body of knowledge derived from, and built upon, the knowledge of our tūpuna. Kaimahi not only require grounding in mātauranga Māori, but also require a fluidity in their ways of being with tamariki, rangatahi and whānau Māori, and a creativity in their ways of doing. Kaimahi thus weave together numerous Māori knowledge systems, for instance, ‘Tuakana/Teina’, ‘Ngā Pā Harakeke’, ‘Te Whare Tapa Whā’, ‘Te Pae Mahutonga’, ‘Te Whāriki’ (Wilson et al., 2021), in the approaches they take to responding to the priorities, aspirations and moemoeā of tamariki, rangatahi and whānau Māori.

“Everything for the mahi that I do is so individualised, and I am not a weaver by any shape or means, but that one person...that was the way that she could fill her cup and it was mental health for her.”

“So many people here are so skilful in so many different areas, so that's what we are able to koha our whānau.”

Table 2: Overview of the seven takepū.

Takepū	Description
Manaakitanga	Respect, care and kindness is exercised during each and every interaction with tamariki, rangatahi and whānau Māori.
Kanohi kitea	Being present, not only in the physical sense but also in terms of being real, human and relatable is crucial to developing and strengthening whanaungatanga, and to being accountable to tamariki, rangatahi and whānau Māori.
Wā	Time is central to Māori ways of being, knowing, relating, and doing. Responding, and being accountable to the priorities, aspirations and moemoeā of tamariki, rangatahi and whānau Māori requires an honouring of the time that must be taken to achieve this.
Māia	Acts of courage in all interactions with oen another, strengthen and support the relationships developed and sustained through whanaungatanga.
Ūkaipō	Tamariki and rangatahi are returned back to Papatūānuku as the sacred source of sustenance and of nurturing. Connecting back to Papatūānuku and Ranginui is not only an integral part of the healing process for minds, bodies and spirits, but also a way in which the knowledge held by Papatūānuku and Ranginui can be shared with tamariki and rangatahi, contributing to their growth and development of life skills.
Mahi tahi	Collaborative approaches in support of shared goals are crucial whenever working with, and for, tamariki, rangatahi and whānau Māori. Strong relationships based on trust are critical to such collectivist approaches.
Pūkengatanga	Fluidity in ways of being, and creativity in ways of doing are required in responding and being accountable to the priorities, aspirations and moemoeā of tamariki, rangatahi and whānau Māori. Ways of being, knowing, relating, and doing are grounded in mātauranga Māori; the body of knowledge derived from, and built upon, the knowledge of our tūpuna.

### Discussion

The pou and takepū identified above constitute an integrated, holistic framework that underlies the Kaupapa Māori whānau-centered services provided by kaimahi at Te Hou Ora, an urban Māta Waka social service provider. Collectively the five pou of ‘Aro ki te hā’, ‘Whakapapa’, ‘Whanaungatanga’, ‘Whakamana’, and ‘Pono’ provide a robust foundation for the kaupapa of Te Hou Ora, underlying kaimahi ways of being, knowing, relating, and doing. In turn, the pou guide the seven takepū of ‘Manaakitanga’, ‘Kanohi kitea’, ‘Wā’, ‘Māia’, ‘Ūkaipō’,

‘Mahi tahi’, and ‘Pūkengatanga’ by which kaimahi strengthen and sustain the ‘Whanaungatanga’ that is grounded within ‘Whakapapa’, and the ways in which kaimahi are ‘Pono’ in their ‘Whakamana’ of tamariki, rangatahi and whānau Māori, of each other, and of their partners, in their expression of ‘Aro ki te hā’ for the communities they serve.

Many of the pou and takepū highlighted by the kaimahi in this study map closely onto findings of recent studies identifying practices essential to the support and wellbeing of tamariki, rangatahi, and whānau Māori. In a recent review of Māori models of health and wellbeing, for example, Wilson et al. (2021) identify whanaungatanga and whakawhanaungatanga as foundational to building trust-based relationships with whānau Māori. Hamley et al. (2022) likewise underscore the centrality of whakawhanaungatanga in practice with rangatahi Māori, a finding buttressed by Lindsay Latimer et al. (2020), whose study of Māori practitioners in youth development services emphasises the importance of “relational contexts, processes and practices” (p.4) in supporting rangatahi Māori. From a different but related vantage point, Keddell et al. (2022) have identified relational services provided by community-based Māori practitioners as a key element in preventing the removal of pēpi from whānau Māori.

Our study extends this literature by bringing to the foreground Aro ki te hā, the foundational pou that emphasises the reverence for a person’s breath of life, with its embedded emphasis on the central importance of aroha, or love. As our study findings demonstrate, “Love, compassion and empathy underlay the very essence of the approaches and practices taken when working with and for tamariki, rangatahi and whānau” (Table 1). This throughline of love, care, and recognition links and breathes life into the pou and takepū that collectively make up the kaupapa of Te Hou Whanāu Services.

The reflections of the kaimahi on their practice also bring into view the dimensionality and depth of aroha as it is enacted in the Kaupapa Māori. As a cultural construct, aroha has layers of meaning that go beyond the ways that love is typically understood in Western context. As Wardell (2019) points out:

“In aroha we find the space for acknowledging the presence (aro) of the breath of life within others (haa) (Gray 2002). Aroha therefore comes from the centre of one’s self, not as a feeling but as a capacity—a capacity for love, sympathy, compassion, charity and forgiveness (Ryan 1997). As such it can be a powerful part of relationships both within and between groups (p.2).

The multi-dimensionality of aroha as tikanga (cultural practice) is similarly emphasized by Young et al. (2020). Extending Wardell’s points, Young et al. note that aroha has a “doing component that is related to the ‘ha’ (to breathe, to taste) and the ‘aro’ (to pay attention, take

notice)” (p.2). In practice, therefore, as the words of kaimahi in this study demonstrate, aroha entails doing as well as feeling: a deeply intentional practice of noticing and recognition that is fundamental to creating relationships, breaking the harmful grip of intergenerational trauma, and working effectively in partnership with tamariki, rangatahi and whānau Māori.

The expression of aroha as an everyday relational practice is articulated in the takepū of Manaakitanga: the exercise of respect, care, and kindness during each and every interaction with tamariki, rangatahi and whānau Māori. As Wardell points out, “Aroha is a form of relational care, through action (Rua et al. 2017). It assumes the universe is abundance. Manaakitanga can be understood as the actioning of that abundance, visible in acts of caring, helping, hospitality, generosity, and respect” (pp. 4-5). The “heart warmth” (Young et al., 2020) of the kaimahi in this study lays an essential foundation for practice that elevates and amplifies the voices of tamariki, rangatahi and whānau Māori. Tēnā koe: there you are, I see you, I notice you, I can walk along side you. Te Hou Ora kaimahi ‘become whānau’ with those they serve, doing whatever is needed to ensure tamariki, rangatahi and whānau Māori find healing and grace. They traverse the borderlands (Cormack & King, 2022) in these relationships, creating permeable spaces that are full of possibilities.

In tandem with those in related literature, the findings of this study underscore the value and importance of the relational and loving practice of Te Hou Ora and other Māta Waka providers in the expanding ecology of ‘by Māori, with Māori, for Māori’ services. As a recent study drawing on 2013 census data makes clear, Māori are a heterogeneous population (Greaves et al., 2022). In this study, those who identified as Māori but did not know their Iwi (a majority of whom are urban residents) were found to have the highest proportion of no or low educational qualifications, to be most likely to be employed in trades or other low wage occupations, and to have the highest levels of reported discrimination.

Māta Waka providers thus serve Māori who in a range of ways are “in between” (Greaves et al., 2022). They ensure that urban whānau who identify as Māori but are not affiliated with local Iwi, many of whom experience significant inequities in wellbeing outcomes but are among those least well served by mainstream services (Ryjs et al., 2016), can access vitally important Kaupapa Māori services. As organisations deeply embedded in local communities, they typically are trusted providers of vital social and health services. Offering a range of culturally safe services in locally accessible sites, usually with open door policies, they are also important facilitators of access to mainstream services for tamariki, rangatahi and whānau Māori who may be deeply reluctant to engage with public organisations because of personal and generational histories of traumatic and punitive interactions with colonising systems (Keddell et al., 2021;

Leckey et al., 2022; Lindsay Latimer et al., 2020). The diversity among Te Hou Ora kaimahi facilitates this engagement. Mātā Waka kaimahi find common ground with each other and with tamariki, rangatahi and whānau Māori through shared experiences, including the migration of tūpuna in search of a 'better life' and consequent disconnection from their haukāinga, awa, maunga, and te reo me ōna tikanga.

As the pūkōrero of the kaimahi in this study make clear, much of their mahi occurs in the space between tamariki, rangatahi, and whānau Māori and the many statutory and mainstream services that typically are also in the mix. Many complexities are associated with practising across the interface between Māori and Western paradigms and systems. Scepticism has long existed about the place of love in professional social work practice (Godden, 2017; Szeintuch, 2022). As Eketone (2021) has pointed out, whakawhanaungatanga, the essence of which entails family-like relationships, also raises questions from a Western social work perspective because of concerns about dual relationships and the transgression of ethical boundaries. Similarly, tendencies persist for practices grounded in Te Ao Māori and mātauranga Māori, such as Te Taiao-focused interventions (Boulton et al., 2021) and cultural practices such as raranga, to be labelled as 'not really social work' or 'not really mental health interventions' – that is, as ancillary rather than critical to the work. There is likewise a lack of recognition, support, and resourcing for Māori forms of open-ended engagement and flexibility in services.

Such struggles over legitimacy and value highlight the ongoing privileging of mātauranga that comes from a Western/Pākeha rather than Te Ao Māori world view, raising questions of epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007) and underscoring the persistence, despite expressed commitments to 'by Māori, for Māori, with Māori' services', of colonised and colonising views of 'appropriate' interventions and practices (Cormack & King, 2022). The kaimahi in this study recognise, and are subject to, these critiques. Nonetheless, they are clear in their foundational commitment to relational accountability and loving practice. Where Western frameworks aim to deter misuse of power by delineating (and enforcing) clear professional boundaries, Kaupapa Māori relational practices enact 'right relationships' through culturally informed protocols identifying mutual responsibilities and underscoring the importance of reciprocity (Eketone, 2021). From this perspective, as one of the kaimahi pointed out, love is a professional skill, the value of which is consistently under-rated. As we noted in a companion paper (Lewis et al., 2023): "The pou and takepū highlighted by the kaimahi in this study manifest in their tiaki for those they serve, and for one another—highly professional and volitional acts of love that evoke power in its most beautiful form" (pp. 16-17). Eketone takes a similar position, pointing out that "[j]ust because boundaries are crossed, it does not mean that boundaries are violated" (p. 35).

This is a small study in a space where there has been surprisingly little research focusing on the experiences of Māta Waka-specific providers. It is thus only an initial, if important step toward making the contributions of Te Hou Ora and other Māta Waka organisations more visible, and further specifying the contours of their practice. Māta Waka providers are integral to building a trusted, strong, cultural safety net for the majority of Māori who live in urban settings and/or do not have the opportunities to access Te Ao Māori (Ryks et al., 2016). These organisations enable belonging and tūrangawaewae for tamariki, rangatahi, and whānau Māori living apart from their Iwi and ancestral lands and/or separated from opportunities for building an identity as Māori – providing services grounded in Te Ao Māori, and responsive and relevant to the diversity and complexity of contemporary Māori identities (Kukutai, 2014), priorities, aspirations and moemoeā. Yet, they are largely overlooked in contemporary discussions of Māori-centred services. From that perspective, this paper is an intervention, aimed not only at naming, recognising, and acknowledging the practice and contributions of these front-line providers, but at underlining their importance in the network of services and supports that constitute an effective, mana-upholding tamariki, rangatahi and whānau Māori support system.

### **Conclusion**

The pūkōrero Te Hou Ora kaimahi have gifted to this study demonstrate that aroha is at the heart of how they mahi alongside tamariki, rangatahi and whānau Māori. To mirimiri with aroha is to love fearlessly with profound caring, forming deeply purposeful connections that privilege relationality and disrupt harmful cycles of historical and inter-generational trauma. To mirimiri with aroha is to be a positive agent for change through refusing and resisting colonialised norms of western professional practice, dismantling the colonial layers of oppression that reinforce suspicion and mistrust. To mirimiri with aroha opens the space for regenerative Indigenous knowledge practices (Simpson, 2017; Tuck & Yang, 2014) that lay down the essential tūāpapa for positive transformational outcomes for tamariki, rangatahi and whānau Māori. As Indigenous scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2017) highlights: “we need to join together in a rebellion of love, persistence, commitment, and profound caring and create constellations of coresistance, working together toward a radical alternative present” (p.9).

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### Glossary

Aroha	love, compassion, empathy
Awa	river
Hā	breath, essence
Haukāinga	true home, local people of a marae, home people.
Iwi	extended kinship group, tribe, nation, people, bone
Kaimahi	worker(s)
Kaimoana	seafood
Kanohi kitea	to have a physical presence, to be seen, to represent
Kaupapa Māori	Māori agenda, Māori principles, Māori ideology – a philosophical doctrine, incorporating the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values of Māori society
Koha	gift, offering, contribution
Kōrero	speak, speech, address
Mahi	to work
Mahi tahi	to work together, collaborate, cooperate.
Māia	bravery, courage
Mana	spiritually sanctioned or endorsed influence, power, and authority
Manaakitanga	showing and receiving care, respect, kindness, and hospitality
Mana whenua	power associated with possession and occupation of tribal land
Māori	Indigenous Peoples of New Zealand
Mara	garden
Marae	courtyard – the open area in front of the whareniui, where formal greetings and discussions take place. Often also used to include the complex of buildings around the marae.
Māramatanga	enlightenment
Māta Waka	many canoes, a pan-tribal Māori organisation
Maunga	mountain
Mirimiri	to soothe, massage

Moemoeā	to have a dream, have a vision
Ōtepoti	Dunedin
Pākehā	foreign, often used to describe New Zealand European
Papatūānuku	Earth Mother
Pēpi	baby, infant
Pono	to be absolutely true, unfeigned, genuine
Pou	post, upright, support, pole, pillar, goalpost, sustenance
Pūkengatanga	expertise
Pūkōrero	well-informed, speaking with authority, articulate
Puku	stomach, belly
Pūrākau	ancient/historical narrative, story
Rangatahi	young people
Ranginui	Sky Father
Raranga	to weave
Takatāpui	Māori who identify with diverse genders and sexualities, for instance, lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex, queer
Takepū	preferred ways of engagement with others
Tamariki	children
Tāne	male
Tāonga tuku iho	heirloom, something handed down
Te Ao Māori	the Māori world
Te Taiao	the natural world
Te Tai Tokerau	Northland
Te Tai Tonga	southern North Island, Chatham Islands, South Island, Stewart Island
Tēnā koe	formal greeting (to one person)
Tūāpapa	foundation, platform
Tūpuna	ancestors
Tūrangawaewae	standing, place where one has the right to stand

Ūkaipō	the suckling of a child on their mother's breast at night, one's ancestral land, a place of nurturing and of spiritual and emotional strength
Wā	period of time, interval
Wāhine	female
Wānanga	to meet, discuss, deliberate, consider
Whakamana	to give authority, to validate
Whakapapa	ancestry, familial relationships
Whānau	to be born, extended family, family group
Whanaungatanga	relationships
Wharenui	meeting house
Whenua	placenta, ground, land

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