

TIHEI MAURI ORA—BREATHING MAURI INTO THE LIVES OF RANGATAHI MĀORI WHO OFFEND WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE OF TRAUMA

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Abstract

The New Zealand Government is planning to establish youth justice military-style academies through legislation. Public critique argues they are essentially boot camps, and research shows that these approaches can negatively impact young people who have experienced trauma. This article shares insights from a project funded by Ngā Pae o te Māramatanga investigating trauma in rangatahi Māori engaged in serious youth offending. This study explored the perspectives of Kaupapa Māori community-based social workers, youth workers and organisational leaders ($n = 11$) working with rangatahi Māori who appeared in the youth court for offending. Findings show that mauri and wairua concepts resonate more with professionals working in kaupapa Māori social services than Western trauma-informed concepts. Second, rangatahi Māori use self-protective measures to mask trauma experiences, which are sometimes misunderstood and misinterpreted as defiance. Third, disruptors of trauma and healing pathways are ecologically, relationally and culturally bound. We recommend the use of holistic Kaupapa Māori trauma-informed interventions with rangatahi Māori involved in the youth justice system.

Keywords

Māori youth, mauri, social services, trauma, trauma-informed, youth offending

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Introduction

Youth offending is a complex societal problem, and the causes of offending are often linked to a range of other variables, such as social, health, education and economic factors. With adolescence being a time of risk-taking, youth may engage in offending, but for most youth, their offending is unlikely to be serious and will not usually continue into adult offending (Moffitt, 1993). For a small group of youth, their offending will be more persistent and develop into serious offending that takes them towards a trajectory of adult incarceration (Moffitt, 1993). It is therefore important that we both understand and respond to the drivers of serious youth offending, with the intention of preventing it where possible and intervening appropriately when it occurs.

Trauma is a known risk factor linked to youth offending, as are adverse childhood experiences. However, little research exists in Aotearoa New Zealand that seeks to determine how trauma impacts rangatahi Māori who commit serious offences. Rangatahi Māori are significantly over-represented in the youth court appearance statistics (7.3 times higher than non-Māori) and are more likely to be sentenced in court for offending behaviours (Ministry of Justice, 2026). Understanding how trauma impacts rangatahi Māori should be a priority to inform social policy, as government policy decisions may affect rangatahi Māori well-being, entrench offending behaviours and shape lifelong outcomes (Cliffe-Tautari, 2021; Gluckman, 2018). In this article, we argue that Kaupapa Māori research evidence is critical to understanding the experiences of rangatahi Māori who offend. Part of that evidence, as this article discusses, should be the experiences of frontline youth and social workers who are working with these groups of rangatahi.

Currently in Aotearoa New Zealand, the government is pursuing policy and legislative changes that will impact rangatahi Māori engaged with the youth justice system. At the time of writing this article, the Oranga Tamariki (Responding to Serious Youth Offending) Amendment Bill (the Bill) is before Parliament. The Bill proposes a change in Aotearoa's youth justice legislation, providing for a military-style academy (commonly referred to as boot camps) as an available order in the youth court. Minister for Children Karen Chhour (2024) stated that these programmes will also be "trauma-informed". However, we argue (as have many others) that this label is inappropriate and the proposed approach could harm rangatahi

Māori who have experienced trauma and will do little to curb their offending behaviours.

National and international research has evidence that boot camps do not work in reducing recidivism in youth who offend (Gluckman, 2018). Recent evidence from the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Historical Abuse in State Care and Faith-Based Institutions (2024) has detailed the negative impacts of boot camps in the lives of survivors. According to our findings from professionals who work closely with rangatahi Māori, a boot camp approach would be both detrimental and ineffective.

Drawing on empirical findings from a project supported by the Ngā Pae o te Māramatanga Matakiteanga research fund, our study investigated trauma in the lives of rangatahi Māori engaged with the youth justice system. Study 1 of the broader research project included a systematic literature and policy review of Māori youth justice. Study 2 had two parts. Part 1 (discussed in this article) included findings from a one-day wānanga with social workers, youth workers and organisational leaders working in Kaupapa Māori social services ($n = 11$). Part 2 of Study 2 involved interviews with Māori youth who had been apprehended for serious youth offending ($n = 5$). Study 3 analysed the findings from Study 1 and Study 2 and more recent social policy and legislative responses to Kaupapa Māori approaches to trauma-informed care in youth justice and social service settings. The aim of Study 3 was to identify gaps and make policy and legislative recommendations in line with te ao Māori perspectives.

In this article, we share findings from one of three separate studies (Study 2), which is based on wānanga with community-based youth workers, social workers and organisational leaders ($n = 11$) working in Kaupapa Māori social services with rangatahi Māori whose offending was serious enough to be prosecuted in court. Study 2 Part 1 is part of a broader project that examines the trauma experiences of rangatahi Māori involved with the youth justice system to answer the overarching research question: How does trauma impact rangatahi involved with the youth justice system, and how can their experiences and Māori approaches to trauma-informed care shape youth justice law and policy?

This article first canvasses the literature about trauma and trauma-informed care. Māori notions of trauma, as aligned with wairua and mauri, as underpinning concepts to the project, are discussed next, before the findings are presented. These findings include three key insights. First, culturally

grounded concepts such as mauri and wairua may resonate more with these professionals than Western definitions of trauma. Second, rangatahi Māori often mask their lived experiences, including experiences of trauma, and this may be misunderstood as defiance. Third, the disruptors of trauma are ecologically, culturally and relationally bound. The participants who are practitioners shared how whanaungatanga as cultivated relationships, aroha and kōrero are pathways to healing. This article concludes with a brief discussion on Māori youth offending and trauma-informed care (TIC) in youth justice and social service settings in line with current legislation and policy reforms.

Understanding trauma

Western clinical definitions of trauma primarily emphasise the individual experience based on a single event. The American Psychiatric Association (n.d.) provide the following definition of trauma:

Trauma is an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, crime, natural disaster, physical or emotional abuse, neglect, experiencing or witnessing violence, death of a loved one, war, and more. Immediately after the event, shock and denial are typical.

Chronic and collective trauma experiences of Māori and Indigenous peoples are not necessarily included or understood in traditional Western-based TIC. Individualistic clinical definitions, for example, do not accommodate experiences of historical trauma resulting from colonial practices, which have impacted Indigenous populations worldwide (Wirihana & Smith, 2014).

Indigenous scholars have argued that trauma extends beyond an individual's emotional response and reflects the enduring impact of colonisation and collective experiences of trauma. Trauma may be experienced directly or vicariously as secondary trauma (Wirihana & Smith, 2014). Collective Indigenous experiences of trauma are not limited to physical and emotional abuse but also include historical, intergenerational and spiritual forms (wairua) of trauma. Ruwhiu (2017) therefore argues that wairua “should be a forefront consideration” in assessing whānau well-being in social work practice (p. 102). Alongside other Māori and Indigenous academics, we argue that clinical models of trauma need to be bridged with Indigenous knowledges to ensure trauma care is culturally responsive and transformative (Pihama et al., 2020). To make this paradigm shift, culturally determined definitions such as

historical trauma need to be explored and better understood.

Historical trauma has multiple origins evident across biological, psychological and sociological domains (Sotero, 2006). Unlike Western trauma theory, which focuses primarily on post-traumatic stress disorder, historical trauma encompasses broader socio-historical impacts on Indigenous peoples across successive generations (Reid et al., 2014). Brave Heart (2003), who coined the term *historical trauma*, has defined it as “cumulative emotional and psychological wounding, over the lifespan and across generations, emanating from massive group trauma experiences” (p. 7). Historical trauma has three defining features: it arises from traumatic events, a specific population collectively experiences it and it persists across multiple generations (Mohatt et al., 2014). Colonisation has had a traumatic impact on Indigenous and Māori peoples; its impacts continue to affect everyday experiences (Reid et al., 2014; Wirihana & Smith, 2014).

In considering a Māori-specific complexity to trauma, the understanding of historical trauma is linked to whakapapa. For Māori, non-human entities such as whenua, awa, moana, whakairo and reo are all relations depicted in whakapapa, and therefore harm to these entities can affect Māori people themselves. Whakapapa can be recognised as “genealogical knowledge and storytelling which tell us about the world and our existence within it” (Royal, 2009, p. 70). Understanding our intergenerational relationships to place and the disruptions caused by colonisation is critically important to understanding the present-day trauma realities for rangatahi and whānau Māori.

Intergenerational trauma and historical trauma are also deeply interconnected, both reflecting the transmission of trauma across generations. Brave Heart (2000) argues that they share features of collective trauma, unresolved grief and loss. Reid et al. (2014) argue:

What keeps the trauma of colonization alive [across generations] are the fundamental societal-level structural and systemic changes brought about by the process of colonization foremost among these being the loss of economic and political power and the loss of culture and traditional ways of life wrought by the loss of land. (p. 526)

Studies have also made links between epigenetics and trauma inflicted on Indigenous communities, where exposure to historical trauma may manifest

as physical illnesses (Walters et al., 2011). Without approaches that honour Māori and Indigenous knowledge and practices, trauma continues to be transferred across generations. As trauma manifests across biological, psychological, sociological, economic and spiritual domains, further research is needed to explore its full impact on Māori. This study specifically examined how trauma for rangatahi Māori who offend is connected to Māori notions of well-being, particularly mauri.

Māori notions of well-being

Māori well-being models are essential to informing TIC support for rangatahi Māori who offend and have experienced trauma. Key models acknowledge that wairua, mauri and hauora are critical to Māori well-being, and these feature in numerous Māori Health models (see Durie, 1994; Mataira, 1989; Pere, 1991; Pohatu, 2011; Waretini-Karena, 2014). Durie (2003) suggests that wairua should be a key domain in Indigenous-led TIC, and this is evidenced in his Paiheretia model. Here, Durie (2003) emphasises that relational and holistic well-being and collective experiences of harm require collective healing through te taha whānau as social well-being. The Mana Kaitiakitanga model (Penehira, 2011) positions mauri and hau as central underpinning tenets that act as fundamental dimensions of Māori well-being. Through hauora as holistic health and mauri ora, this model highlights Māori well-being as manifested through hau āio as breath of life, hau whenua as breath of land, hau moana as breath of sea, hau tāngata as breath of humanity. He Kākano Ahau framework (Waretini-Karena, 2014) merges four preconceived models to address intergenerational trauma through healing pathways embedded in mātauranga Māori (Pihama et al., 2020). The models and frameworks listed above are only a few examples of Māori well-being scholarship affirming the deep interconnection between hauora, mauri and wairua, and holistic views shaped by cultural and ecological ties.

In this study, we drew predominantly on the notion of mauri, given its holistic and complex nature, grounded in the physical, spiritual, mental and relational. Mauri, as a concept in te reo Māori, has many layers of meaning, which are aligned with te ao Māori perspectives and tikanga Māori. Mauri can refer to life force, vitality, spark, essence or ethos and energy shifting within and between people, place, animate and inanimate objects, encompassing physical, spiritual and psychological states (Marsden, 2003). Māori knowing informs the what, how and why facets that shape

and influence one's mauri. Mauri can inhibit and bind all things, including emotions and states of well-being (Pohatu, 2011). Mauri thus permeates Māori culture, te reo Māori, knowledge, thinking and the manifestations of those aspects in relationships, emotions and behaviours.

In this study, we drew on Pohatu's (2011) explanation of mauri as described in three states. The first state they describe as mauri moe, which literally translates as a sleeping or dormant state in which potential exists. In the state of mauri moe, there could be low energy and the person's engagement may be minimal. Pohatu (2011) suggests that there is potential in this state, but there needs to be an awakening or support to thrive. The second state can be described as mauri oho, which translates as an awakening state. In mauri oho, there could be more initiation to engage, and an emerging consciousness and readiness for growth and learning may manifest. The final state is mauri ora, which is described as a state of well-being and vitality. In this state, energy is possibly high where positive engagement is evident, and a sense of empowerment and purpose is achieved, reflecting flourishing, active, positive participation and engagement. Pohatu (2011) states that mauri manifests through these three distinctive and interrelated states, which are never static and are constantly evolving. The states of mauri provided a useful framework for this project as we were interested in trauma impacts on rangatahi Māori who offend and how services may initiate culturally grounded, trauma-informed approaches to support them.

Trauma-informed care

Trauma-informed care is a systematic response in service provision to meet the needs of people who have experienced trauma. Practices grounded in TIC acknowledge what has happened to a person and focus on the coping mechanisms and behaviours that stem from trauma (Pihama et al., 2020). TIC recognises the pervasive impact of trauma on individuals and emphasises safety, trust and empowerment in all interactions to understand how trauma shapes behaviour and responses. Ideally, TIC will avoid retraumatising practices by prioritising empathy, transparency and support, creating a safe space where individuals feel seen and respected, and have agency. In practice, this may mean adjusting services and interactions to support healing and resilience, always respecting the dignity and unique journey of each person.

The Western notion of TIC, however, must be challenged to ensure that trauma is not only

viewed as more than a one-off event but also seen as something that can be cumulative across generations and grounded in notions of colonisation and historical trauma (Pihama et al., 2020). In a study with 150 professionals working in Kaupapa Māori TIC, Smith et al. (2019) found that Māori social service providers tended to seek collaborative and holistic approaches in which cultural knowledge and practices were adopted to reframe the concepts and discourses of trauma held in the field. The reconsideration of trauma through an Indigenous and Māori framework was encouraged, which included alternative ways through which relational notions and care strategies were adopted, to adapt and transform Westernised practice models (Smith et al., 2019).

Many Māori providers are already working from within culturally grounded trauma-informed practices that involve whānau, communities, healers and practitioners who have long drawn from mātauranga, te reo Māori and tikanga Māori (Pihama et al., 2014, 2020; Wirihana & Smith, 2014). Research about Māori notions of TIC and cultural approaches is steadily developing; however, there exists a gap in understanding TIC for rangatahi Māori who offend, who often come with complex trauma experiences within health, education and justice systems. This project aims to address this research gap for rangatahi Māori engaged in the youth justice system.

Methods

This study sought the perspectives of 11 kaimahi who are professionals working within Kaupapa Māori social services. Participants were selected because of their close professional relationships and expertise in working with rangatahi Māori who commit serious youth offending. The participants included youth workers, social workers and organisational leaders working with rangatahi Māori in supported bail and other youth justice programmes, or they were working alongside young people who have justice or care and protection backgrounds.

Kaupapa Māori theory underpinned this study. Kaupapa Māori centralises and privileges mātauranga Māori notions of methodological practice within a te ao Māori lens. Here, the research is grounded in Māori ways of knowing and being and is carried out by Māori, with Māori, for the benefit of Māori (Smith, 2012). The research team in this project are Māori, as are most of the participants.

Within this study, wānanga was selected as a preferred method because it is a Māori preferred

way of learning and sharing knowledge. The term wānanga, both traditionally and contemporarily, has multiple definitions. Wānanga is a dynamic living tradition that has developed across generations and is used within and beyond Māori communities in multiple ways (Mahuika & Mahuika, 2020). Grounded in Māori principles of kanohi ki te kanohi, wānanga can be seen as both a traditional Māori practice and a research method. Wānanga “encourage deep contemplation and deliberation over a considerable period to allow the group to ruminate on, contest, and consider specific ideas and concepts” (Korohere Ngapo, as cited in Mahuika & Mahuika, 2020, p. 373).

The reflexivity of wānanga aided us as Māori researchers of this study with hearing the voice of the participants so that the findings could be “translated into real-world positive outcomes for Indigenous [particularly rangatahi Māori] communities” (Smith et al., 2019, p. 1). As wānanga are a traditional method of Māori knowledge transmission (Mahuika & Mahuika, 2020), this study provided an opportunity for co-construction with participants, who were invited to contribute to discussions and to co-construct meaning about trauma and how it impacts rangatahi Māori engaged in the youth justice system.

In a one-day wānanga, we explored the views of the participants to distil their understanding of trauma, to determine whether trauma or trauma-informed practices were being used and whether notions of mauri resonated with them as an effective tool for their work (and potentially a more effective tool than non-Māori approaches to TIC). A key for this wānanga was to explore what kaimahi participants working with rangatahi Māori apprehended for offending, understood about trauma, the impacts of trauma and TIC.

Because Kaupapa Māori underpinned this project, we were interested in exploring these topics from within a Māori well-being lens. We were also interested in understanding their views on what conditions were needed to support the flourishing of mauri ora in rangatahi Māori who offend.

To ensure we met research ethical expectations, this study was approved by the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee (UAHPEC 24469). Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the data, drawing on Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six stages of thematic analysis: (1) familiarising ourselves with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) reporting the themes. Specifically, inductive

thematic analysis was conducted. We first identified semantic themes and then drew connections between the inductive findings and the semantic. An inductive data analysis approach was chosen as it is more suited to Kaupapa Māori research, allowing for holistic understandings to emerge from the data and allowing the voice of participants to shape the emerging themes, emphasising participant-driven data. The following section discusses three key insights from the themes and the wānanga with the participants ($n = 11$). The first is the importance of understanding trauma from within a te ao Māori lens.

The resonance of mauri versus trauma

The resonance of the words mauri and trauma was an overarching theme that emerged in discussions with the participants. For most participants, trauma was defined as a Western term associated with triggers, behaviours and emotions. When asked to describe what trauma might look like and how it might present, the participants discussed the links between trauma and emotional responses, stress and psychological distress (such as anxiety). One participant spoke about trauma affecting psychological well-being, which led to impulsive behaviours. They said that trauma was based on “trigger points that trigger that anxiety, and they [rangatahi] just react without thinking”. Another participant described both actual and perceived trauma events as being rooted in fear. They said, “I see it [trauma] as a fear instilled in someone from something, whether it be something physical or something mental.”

While the participants understood what was clinically meant by the terms trauma and trauma-informed, Western definitions sat somewhat awkwardly for them. For most participants, there was a disconnect with the word trauma because they felt that it only singled out the psychological impacts on a person, which did not include the impact of trauma on a person’s wairua or the impacts of trauma in Māori as a group.

Collective experiences of trauma were described as resulting from colonisation and the historical and intergenerational trauma that Māori have endured through loss of land, language and cultural identity. One participant said:

Our people, we have suffered through colonisation. I mean we still suffer trauma, intergenerational trauma from what our tūpuna had to go through and the impact that colonisation has had on them and now the impact that it is still having on us to this day and in our modern day.

This comment illuminates the impacts of historical trauma, which is still felt today in whānau across generations. Another participant said that modern collective structures, such as gangs, were the result of trauma:

Gangs are an example of collective trauma in one form or another and being how they express themselves and exactly how the young fellas are expressing themselves today. Their trauma is openly expressing their frustration and anger, and the sad thing about it is they don’t care who it is impacting, and it is almost like self-implosion because it is impacting our kids.

This participant’s comment suggests that some whānau do not have the needed skills to cope with trauma, and by implication, this can affect rangatahi Māori. This point aligns with previous research that suggested that whānau may struggle to address rangatahi Māori trauma, as they are caught in their own trauma cycles (Cliffe-Tautari, 2021). Effectively addressing trauma in rangatahi Māori who offend necessitates a holistic trauma-informed approach that is ecological and relational, consistent with Māori frameworks of well-being in which whānau well-being is considered as well (Cliffe-Tautari, 2021; Durie, 2001).

While there was a disconnect for the participants with the Western definitions of the word trauma, when mauri was discussed, it made much more sense to the participants in describing how trauma impacts the holistic needs of a person’s state of being. Mauri appeared to resonate more as it drew on the holistic understanding of Māori ways of knowing and the significance of our connection to the whenua, to humanity and to wairua.

The participants had a shared understanding that mauri is something we are born with, and it is felt in our environment. One participant said:

Mauri is what makes us individually different because we are gifted that mauri at birth, and so we all have a different mauri, and maybe trauma strips us from that mauri. But I keep going back to being Māori, we have those things like feeling the power of the moana and of the ngāhere, and stuff is because they have a great mauri, and it can help.

Mauri is thus not fixed and is shared. We are always being impacted positively or negatively, whether it be by the environment, trauma or unseen forces. The participant responses in this theme illustrate that trauma must be defined for different cultural contexts, including for rangatahi

Māori. Considering culture in relation to trauma is important as “culture affects trauma symptoms, health care experiences and, subsequently, the provision of trauma-informed care” (Reeves, 2015, p. 706). Cultural points of reference are different depending on whose culture is being discussed.

Connections to te taiao have a positive impact on a person’s mauri. Participants expressed that definitions of trauma for Māori were thus better understood through a te ao Māori lens, such as within the concept of mauri, as it could encompass factors grounded in the historical, collective and spiritual, while also acknowledging the ecological ties Māori have to the whenua. Creating safe spaces in trauma-informed practices and acknowledging mauri and wairua elements should thus be considered fundamental to any intervention, programme or activity with rangatahi Māori who have offended and have trauma backgrounds. The next key insight from the wānanga highlights the importance of recognising how trauma may be expressed in rangatahi Māori who offend.

Self-protective measures to mask trauma

Rangatahi Māori involved in the justice system can often mask emotional pain, psychological trauma and suffering. Participants discussed how rangatahi Māori may present with shielding behaviours such as fear, sadness and anger, which can sometimes be misunderstood as antisocial behaviours. These emotions were described as more likely a response to trauma. Many of the participants had experienced trauma themselves, so they understood that shielding behaviours were a form of self-protection. Participants recounted how they themselves understood trauma responses as they too would “cover their fear” (masking) as children and described feeling “scared” as children, but that outside the home, such as at school, they put on a false bravado so that they were seen as “f**king not scared” (shielding). Other research with rangatahi Māori who offend has found that defiance and resistance can be a positive mechanism and a way that rangatahi take control of and navigate challenges in their surroundings (Cliffe-Tautari, 2021, 2024). Recognising and deciphering what negative rangatahi Māori behaviours represent is imperative.

Rangatahi Māori may not have the necessary psycho-social skills to address or share that they are experiencing trauma. One participant said, “They [rangatahi] don’t have the tools because our [their] parents had the trauma too, they haven’t got the tools to pass down, you know, so that is why it is intergenerational.” Here the impact of historical

and intergenerational trauma can be “cumulative emotional and psychological wounding across generations” (Brave Heart, 2005, p. 4). Negative behaviours may be a result of experiences in a vacuum of intergenerational cycles of trauma, which can have ongoing detrimental impacts on rangatahi and whānau Māori. One participant said:

I think the suppression of trauma too is very impactful to our whānau, you know, in terms of people not dealing with their trauma and then that is where the vent out in anger comes into play and the alcoholism and all these other sorts of, I call them suppressions of the trauma ... They are just trying to suppress that [trauma] and not deal with it.

While it is important to recognise that trauma is intergenerational, to determine that trauma is located only within individual rangatahi or single whānau units is to negate the conditions that created historical trauma that have also impacted Māori as a collective (George et al., 2014).

Central to trauma-informed approaches with rangatahi Māori is understanding how trauma affects the overall mauri, well-being and mood(s) of rangatahi. One participant acknowledged that when the mauri of rangatahi Māori is impacted and there is low energy and low mood, they may shut down to any support as a form of self-protection:

In terms of relationships, how do we connect with that mauri of others when talking about those who have been hurt and those who are experiencing or have experienced things? They have shut those doors because it keeps them safe in that space.

These findings suggest that professionals who are attuned to both wairua and mauri and have a first-hand experience of trauma can positively influence rangatahi in their own healing journeys. One participant said:

In my mahi because I’ve walked it, I can see the same patterns being run in rangatahi, which enables me to better understand, and I can identify with this young fullah. I can reciprocate the same energy because I have an understanding personally about what he is going through, then I can actually communicate with him and engage and get him to engage with me—how does that look? by actually talking about it.

When rangatahi Māori have negative childhood or life experiences or find themselves caught

in the cycles of intergenerational trauma, or adverse childhood experiences, connections to people and place can be at the centre of what makes it traumatic for them. Trauma can thus be ecologically situated. An important inverse discussed in the next section is how healing, too, can be ecologically bound.

Disruptors of trauma—ecologies of aroha, whanaungatanga and kōrero

In the wānanga, participants discussed how TIC with rangatahi Māori who offend should include healing pathways that lead to mauri ora. Three key ecologies elaborated on here are whanaungatanga, aroha and kōrero as talking therapies.

Whanaungatanga in this study is defined as having and cultivating strong relationships that provide the gateway to important conversations, which can lead rangatahi and whānau Māori into healing spaces. One participant said:

So, when we are working with the rangatahi, if they are acting in a certain way or something happens, we pick up on those symptoms. We have the capacity to address it, to them or help them identify it [signs of trauma], because a lot of our rangatahi and even our whānau don't understand it. But for us if we have a better understanding of it, so we can pick it up because we have that relationship. We can actually touch on the subject and say, "Hey have you heard about, you know, do you know much about anxiety or depression or anything like that?" and it might open up that conversation and start the kōrero about it. Unless you can identify it, you are not going to be able to have that conversation.

This quotation illustrates how whanaungatanga is the backbone to cultivating influential relationships and working with rangatahi Māori who have trauma backgrounds. Whanaungatanga enables practitioners to become a conduit to help rangatahi Māori navigate the impacts of trauma in their lives. In another study, with six social workers, a positive rapport was deemed critical and essential to working with rangatahi (Mooney, 2012). In Pihama et al.'s (2020) study, whanaungatanga enabled collectivism, which better reflected Māori realities, unlike Western approaches to TIC, which tended to be based on individualism.

In this study, at the heart of an ecology of whanaungatanga are wairua and mauri, which are crucial elements for fostering a sense of safety and trust with the rangatahi. One participant spoke about being able to pick up on another person's

mauri and wairua: "So, we can feel each other's energy and feel each other's mauri, that is why it can affect us physically." Another participant said:

You have to create that [trust] and cultivate it. My presence is walking in with the energy it is that wairua thing, they feel safe. Separating or improving and bringing them into a safe space to be able to talk to them and kia ngāwari with your voice, come in at the present. Straight away, it gives them [the rangatahi] a sense and it fills them up.

How practitioners express themselves emphasises an ecology of aroha. Through their mauri, wairua, tone, and presence, the demonstration of aroha is evident. Aroha is fundamental to engagement, and expressing or withholding it can positively or negatively affect rangatahi well-being. Durie (2003) articulated mauri as energy in healing spaces. He said: "Energy in whānau [is when] healing flows outwards, away from intensity and raw emotion towards shared ownership of whatever problems are unearthed" (p. 206).

Demonstrating aroha can also be the reason why rangatahi Māori are open to discussing sensitive areas with people they trust. One participant spoke about how important it was to acknowledge rangatahi Māori and show them that they cared about them. They said, "They [youth workers] give them that acknowledgement as soon as they bring them in, you know, give them that awahi, the aroha and give them that acknowledgement that they do matter." Enabling a culture and ecology of aroha fosters trust so that rangatahi will want to open up and kōrero about what is happening in their lives.

Developing and maintaining an ecology of kōrero (talking therapies) needs to be fostered within the attitudes, connections and spaces that practitioners create. One participant said, "The hardest thing in terms of dealing with that trauma is having kōrero about it. The more we talk about trauma, the more the healing process sets in play." Another participant said:

My own experiences help to relate to his experiences, so we can get on an even medium, I'm not above you, I'm not below you, I'm beside you. That is exactly how I approach it, and the outcomes speak for themselves.

Collectively, ecologies of whanaungatanga, aroha and kōrero are embedded in a whakapapa of relationality.

Our whakapapa connections and relationship to te taiao are equally important to healing pathways. One participant said:

That is our culture, you know, our culture is very much interconnected into our taiao, into our ngāhere, into our awa and to our moana and to our maunga. From a young age we are instilled with that and we have been taught what it means to us, and why it means that to us. So, we just have that innate understanding, even though we might not know exactly what it is, we can feel it no matter where we are. You can feel it, and it is not until someone says or explains it in a way that resonates with you that you can say, “Ah, that is what it is.”

Recognising that rangatahi Māori come from a rich cultural heritage, in which wairua ways of knowing, being perceptive and intuitive are the norm, invites practitioners to consider their approach, where the connection between wairua, mauri and praxis becomes central to trauma-informed ways of working with rangatahi Māori who come from trauma backgrounds. Valentine et al. (2017) argue that wairua is “an immaterial entity that cannot be seen or touched” (p. 67). Therefore, understanding who we are, where we come from and our connections to the environment strengthens cultural identity-making, which is a buffer of negative experiences (Cliffe-Tautari, 2021). In this sense, Māori well-being is inherently connected to “our whānau, our environment, our connection to land, sea, rivers and mountains” (Pihama et al., 2020, p. 39).

These examples highlight that through the ecologies of whanaungatanga, aroha and kōrero the pathway to restore mauriora to rangatahi Māori becomes a possibility. These findings underscore the need for self-determined Māori approaches to TIC.

Final words: Implications for social work practice, law and policy reform

Currently, our legal framework for youth justice makes no mention of the need to address trauma, let alone considerations of Kaupapa Māori approaches to TIC. In this current policy context, it seems highly unlikely that the government’s reintroduction of military-style academies will ever be able to fulfil the criteria that the evidence suggests are required to address trauma for rangatahi Māori in a meaningful way. The current youth justice policies have a focus on behaviours that are antisocial. However, rather than “pontificating what resistant behaviour represents [we also need]

to understand the context in which resistance is created” (Cliffe-Tautari, 2024, p. 152).

The findings from this study have highlighted how Kaupapa Māori social service programmes grounded in healing pathways and led by adults whom the rangatahi trust can be a significant source of support for young people who find themselves in the justice system. In considering a Kaupapa Māori approach with rangatahi Māori, we argue that there are a multitude of healing pathways, including the criticality of wairua and mauri as spiritual and relational dimensions in Kaupapa Māori approaches to TIC. The relationship that exists between rangatahi Māori and those who work alongside them is also fundamentally important. Acknowledging whanaungatanga as trusting and safe relationships, which are grounded in aroha and kōrero, are not just niceties. As illustrated in the participant quotes, they should be fundamental ecologies that shape practitioner praxis.

These findings also suggest that TIC and healing for rangatahi Māori involved in the justice system must include, but also go beyond, individual rangatahi and whānau units, and look to solutions that address healing pathways for Māori as a people. Pihama et al. (2020) also stress that strengthening Kaupapa Māori frameworks and critically assessing Western individualistic models are essential to advancing Indigenous TIC. There are further links here with issues in the care and protection system. As previously argued from a Kaupapa Māori perspective, the goal of child protection interventions should not be just to restore individual whānau but to restore the tikanga of whānau more broadly (Fitzmaurice, 2020).

In finishing, at the heart of this project has been mātauranga Māori understandings of mauri, wairua and kōrero, which are deeply layered concepts to support the well-being pathways needed for rangatahi Māori involved in the justice system who experience trauma. To aspire to a better future that reshapes the trajectories of our rangatahi Māori in the justice system, we must ensure that our system is fit for purpose and is responsive to their experiences of trauma within our own cultural understandings. Tihei mauri ora!

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Glossary

aroa	kindness, affection, love, compassion
awa	river
awhi	care
hau	vital essence, vitality
hau āio	breath of life
hau moana	breath of sea
hauora	health
hau tāngata	breath of humanity
hau whenua	breath of land
kaimahi	professional
kanohi ki te kanohi	face to face, in person
kaupapa Māori	Māori way of thinking, or doing things based on Māori principles
kia ngāwari	be gentle
kōrero	talking, to talk, conversation; talking therapies
mahi	work
mātauranga	knowledge
mātauranga Māori	Māori knowledge, Māori process of thought of knowing
maunga	mountains
mauri	life force, essence, state of well-being
mauri moe	a state of untapped potential
mauri oho	a proactive and awakened state
mauri ora	a fully aware state of transformative potential
mauriora	flourishing, active, positive participation
moana	sea, ocean
moe	sleep, dream
mouri	life force, essence, state of well-being
ngāhere	forest
oho	awake, awakening
ora	life, health, vitality
rangatahi	youth, younger generation
reo	language; short form of te reo Māori
taha	side, part, portion, section
te ao Māori	Māori worldview
te reo Māori	the Māori language
te taiao	the environment
tihei mauriora	breath of life

tikanga	customary practices, protocols
tūpuna	ancestors
wairua	spirituality
wānanga	discussion
whakairo	carving
whakapapa	genealogy
whānau	family, close kin network
whānau Māori	Māori families
whanaungatanga	relationship, kinship, sense of family connection
whenua	land

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