Whakamana Tangata: An evaluation of a restorative Te Ao Māori-based approach in youth justice

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ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION: This article considers the implementation and evaluation of Whakamana Tangata, a restorative, te ao Māori-based practice approach within a youth justice residence. Developed as part of broader youth justice reforms and grounded in te ao Māori values and restorative–relational practices, the approach seeks to promote respectful and constructive engagement within secure residential care.

METHODS: Using a mixed-methods approach, the evaluation explored the implementation and embedding of Whakamana Tangata in Te Maioha o Parekarangi in Rotorua. Data analysis included 31 semi-structured interviews with residential kaimahi, leadership, Design Group members and rangatahi, alongside focus groups, surveys and documentary analysis.

FINDINGS: Findings indicate that restorative practices, combined with te ao Māori values, contributed to improved engagement, more meaningful responses to harmful situations, and a shift towards relational rather than punitive responses within the youth justice system. However, challenges remained, particularly regarding consistent embedding and the broader alignment of restorative principles and te ao Māori values within institutional frameworks.

CONCLUSION: By analysing this practice approach, the article highlights the significance of strengthening te ao Māori-informed approaches within youth justice and their meaningful alignment with restorative practices. The study underscores the potential of this approach to positively impact youth justice environments, advocating for frameworks that prioritise connection, respect, and accountability over punitive responses.

Keywords: Restorative practice, te ao Māori values, youth offending, secure residential care, Aotearoa New Zealand

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In Aotearoa New Zealand, the state has played a role in criminal justice processes for children and young people since the mid- to late-19th century (Watt, 2003). During their involvement with the justice system, some young people are placed in supported residential facilities, an approach that reflects a longer history of institutional care. The provision of this type of care has its origins in the establishment of industrial schools in 1867 and reformatories in 1900 (Dalley, 1998), highlighting a legacy of state intervention that continues to shape contemporary youth justice practices.

In 2025, residential care remains a small, but significant, component of the

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contemporary youth justice service model. Oranga Tamariki, in conjunction with a number of partners, operates a nationwide network of community-based homes that provide care for some young people who are involved with youth justice. While most young people can be safely cared for in the community, a small number are placed in temporary secure custodial care—an arrangement that raises ongoing questions about its effectiveness and alignment with principles of youth development. Research increasingly underscores the limitations of incarceration, revealing that it fails to address the developmental and criminogenic needs of young persons and does not effectively support meaningful rehabilitation (see Lambie & Randell, 2013). Concerns about the detrimental impacts of detention have also been expressed by the Children's Commissioner, highlighting risks such as further entrenching negative behaviour and advocating for its use only as a last resort (Office of the Children's Commissioner, 2017).

Despite these concerns, secure custodial care continues to be an integral part of the youth justice framework. Five youth justice residences[1] provide secure care for those on remand and those sentenced to certain orders by the Youth Court. They can also provide placements for some young people held under the adult jurisdiction.

In 2015 and 2017 two important reports were released. The Expert Advisory Panel was tasked with reviewing the operation of the care and protection and youth justice systems. Their report, published in December 2015, provided the broad conceptual framework for a new organisation that would replace Child, Youth and Family, the Ministry for Children – Oranga Tamariki (Ministry of Social Development, 2016). In relation to youth justice residences, the Expert Advisory Panel recommended that Oranga Tamariki should continue to develop the skills and knowledge of staff, deliver therapeutic care and evidenced-based programmes to reduce the risk of future offending.

In addition, the panel made other recommendations that had important implications for the operation of residences. These included the need to use a consistent practice framework, reduce the over-representation of rangatahi (young people) Māori through culturally aware practice, work with Māori to develop effective approaches, and support victims of offending to participate meaningfully in restorative processes.

The Office of the Children's Commissioner was created in 1989 and until 2023 played an important role in monitoring the operations of Oranga Tamariki and its predecessor organisations.[2] Since 2015, the Office of the Children's Commissioner has released reports examining the operation of youth justice and care and protection residences.[3] In their 2017 State of Care report, the authors noted opportunities to improve the quality-of-care practices, enhance responsiveness to tamariki (children) Māori, and embed a consistent therapeutic practice model. Echoing the Expert Advisory Panel, they also pointed out the need to continue to develop staff members' therapeutic skills and knowledge.

In mid-2018, the Prime Minister's Chief Science Advisor released a report that reinforced the value of cultural connections. The report noted,

> [W]hat we have seen at times is the power of te ao Māori and tikanga as a counter-force to gangs – as well as being protective in many ways. If we could enhance opportunities to more fully immerse our youth in this environment in the most culturally appropriate, meaningful way possible (including involving community supports to reinforce and strengthen knowledge and connections), we would see greater success.

Youth justice residences

Youth justice residences are unique environments that present distinct and complex challenges. While these facilities are intended to provide structured care, young people who live in residences are separated from their family and community-based routines, often for long periods of time. They are supported by multiple staff teams who need to apply consistent approaches to care. The mix of young people—ranging in ages, developmental needs, and legal circumstances, whether on remand or serving a sentence imposed by the Youth Court—adds further complexity. Additionally, the over-representation of male and predominantly Māori youth raises questions about deeper systemic factors behind this disparity, stemming from a history of entrenched inequities. Youth justice custody numbers averaged 150 between April and June 2024. Over the period 2017-2024,[4] 89% of young people were male, and the proportion of rangatahi Māori ranged from 67% to 92%, with an overall average of 81% (Oranga Tamariki, Social Impact and Research, 2024). An examination of young people's childhoods reveals high levels of social, economic, cultural and familial adversity (Lambie et al., 2016). Furthermore, there is growing recognition of the high prevalence of neurodiversity amongst this population (Gibbs, 2022).

The current model of care utilised by youth justice residences consists of a mix of philosophies, conceptual models and frameworks, guiding principles, regulations, and staff practices focused on the order of maintenance and safety (Francis & Vlaanderen, 2023). The long-standing use of behavioural management techniques in residences shows this approach to care is underpinned by a framework provided by behavioural psychology (Cohen, 2011; Parker, 2006).

In their 2016 report, Lambie et al. discuss the critiques of behavioural modification techniques. Token economies and point systems may produce some degree of compliance, but do little to contribute to a young person's growth of self-regulation; one of the key development tasks of early adolescence. As Littlechild (2009, p. 230) stated, "it can be argued that helping young people to develop into responsible adults who can have mutually rewarding relationships is also part of what young people and the wider society should expect from those who care for them."

Against this wider backdrop, the possibility of introducing restorative and relational practices into youth justice residences began to be explored in early 2018. Three primary objectives were identified. The first aimed to establish a consistent, culturally informed practice approach. Early thinking held that a culturally designed approach could partially address the recommendations and opportunities identified by the Expert Advisory Panel and Office of the Children's Commissioner. The second objective sought to replace the reliance on behavioural management techniques, and the third aimed to lay a foundation for the future introduction of therapeutic programmes. It was posited that introducing a restorative-relational practice model into residences could be the first phase of a wider culture change programme. By building on innovative practices already under way, and enriching the operational culture, a restorative-relational approach could augment the foundation for the staged introduction of additional practice frameworks, therapeutic models, kaupapa Māori models, and consistent approaches to supporting young people.

In mid-2018, a small team of Māori and Pākehā academics, practitioners and restorative practice/justice professionals was brought together. Their goal was to design, develop, pilot and evaluate a Māori-informed restorative practice approach that could be used in youth justice residences. The name Whakamana Tangata was endorsed by the Chief Māori Advisor at Oranga Tamariki. It describes an approach to practice that facilitates the restoration of the mana of people, promoting their wellbeing in holistic

and culturally meaningful ways. The youth justice residence in Rotorua, Te Maioha o Parekarangi, was chosen as the pilot site.

Restorative justice and restorative practice

As a construct, restorative practices share a similar philosophical base to restorative justice, but they are distinct in their scope and applications.[5] In essence, restorative-relational practices contribute to the creation of a group culture based on care, dignity, and respect. The focus is on resolving issues between people in a manner that promotes understanding, empathy, self-development, and restoration.

In Aotearoa New Zealand, some recognise the influence of elements of Māori customs and traditions on restorative justice processes and practices to address wrongful behaviour (Wearmouth et al., 2007). Other scholars acknowledge "some synergy between restorative justice principles and indigenous tradition" (Cleland & Quince, 2014, p. 173). However, Cleland and Quince (2014), along with other critics (see Moyle & Tauri, 2016; Tauri & Webb, 2012), argued that incorporating Māori values and perspectives into FGCs and the broader youth justice and care and protection systems is often problematic and may result in tokenism and cultural appropriation. Similarly, Blank-Penetito et al. (2022) drew attention to the marginalisation of rangatahi and whānau by the criminal justice system, raising concerns about tokenism and cultural co-option in youth justice processes. In response, critics call for a focus on policy reforms and community-driven approaches that emphasise Māori leadership and autonomy in shaping impactful responses to young people and their whānau.

Turning to the role of residential settings for adolescents involved in justice processes, McCarney (2010, p. 275) stated:

> The introduction of restorative practices is not just a matter of learning new skills. It is also about changing attitudes and

cultures – the creation of an ethos of respect, inclusion, accountability and the taking of responsibility. In a restorative environment young people, and indeed staff, are required to become accountable for the impact of their actions on other people, and to take responsibility for putting things right when mistakes are made. A restorative approach shifts the emphasis from managing behaviour to focusing on the building, nurturing and repairing of relationships.

Restorative practices in education began to be implemented in Aotearoa New Zealand in the late 1990s. The use of this approach in five schools was investigated, with generally positive results reported (Buckley & Maxwell, 2007). However, the unique nature of residences meant taking a restorative practice model used by a school and embedding it into a youth justice residence was deemed undesirable. A model designed to fit the residential environment was required.

What should a restorative-relational, te ao Māori-based practice model for residences look like?

The underlying ethos and values of a restorative-relational practice approach were found to be closely aligned with te ao Māori values of rangatiratanga (autonomy / self-determination), kaitiakitanga (safety), whakapapa (identity and belonging), whakawhanaungatanga (familial relationships, whakamānawa (respect), and manaakitanga (support and care). The key stakeholders who designed the approach proposed that these values, and their associated obligations and reciprocities, be developed into Whakamana Tangata, a te ao Māori-centred approach of restorative-relational practice.

Illustrating the approach

Whakamana Tangata is a relational-restorative practice approach for rangatahi which weaves together five Māori values—ara tikanga,[6] mana,[7] tapu,[8] mauri ora,[9] and

piringa[10] —and four restorative principles: relationships, respect, responsibility, and repair.[11] It expresses a way of being and living in relationship with other people that enhances mana, protects tapu, and seeks to foster mauri in all relationships. The values of mana, tapu and mauri ora give expression to te ao Māori and describe the social context in which relationships are exercised. Piringa, within Whakamana Tangata, relates to a process of building and restoring connection through safe, face-to-face dialogue. Ara tikanga as a practice encompasses knowing the right course of action, having the strength to do the right thing in difficult circumstances, choosing the right pathway, and finding the courage to move forward.

This approach draws inspiration from the voyaging of Māori to Aotearoa and their successful navigation of Te Moana-nui-a-Kiwa, the Pacific Ocean. Trained navigators were guided by te rā (the sun), ngā whetū (the stars), ngā manu me ngā hua rakau (birds and plant life), and ngā hau me ngā tai (the winds and tides). Whakamana Tangata employs this same journeying metaphor for rangatahi and kaimahi (youth workers) as they navigate life within the residence and beyond.

Core practices applied within Whakamana Tangata, mainly referred to in this article, include the kōrero whakapiri, hui whakapiri and noho mauri. Further practices and practice tools as part of Whakamana Tangata encompass the Social Discipline Window (adapted by McCold & Wachtel, 2001), a tool for reflecting on the quality of relationships with rangatahi; Pātai versus Kōrero (ask versus tell) to encourage dialogue and participation in a conversation; Community Hui, where rangatahi can practise skills such as listening to others, sharing and managing their thoughts and feelings, having their voices heard, and solving problems, and Hue Whakapiri, which symbolises the three components of a Hui Whakapiri: preparation, participation, and follow-up.

Kōrero whakapiri is a structured restorative dialogue, based on four steps, to address low- or medium level incidents. This one-to-one conversation takes place between kaimahi and rangatahi and is particularly employed when rules, regulations, tapu, tikanga and kawa have been breached. Hui whakapiri refers to a facilitated restorative process used to discuss issues with the intention of seeking resolution. It is employed to restore mana and balance mauri ora when tapu has been breached, and when relationships and connections have been impacted or damaged. Lastly, the noho mauri process is a restorative version of the time-out procedure, adapted from a process referred to as a Non-Participation Table. Its aim is to explore self-regulation techniques and help rangatahi understand the broader implications of their wrongdoing. Noho mauri provides rangatahi with time to calm down and de-escalate, followed by a kōrero whakapiri to explore the implications of the harm and how to address it.

Findings from the pilot evaluation

Evaluation approach and methodology

The overall aim of the evaluation was to assess the implementation of the Whakamana Tangata approach in Te Maioha o Parekarangi (Te Maioha).[12] Specifically, the evaluation explored its impact on the practice of residential kaimahi and how it affected the relational culture within the residence. Additionally, though to a lesser extent, it considered the approach's effects on rangatahi in Te Maioha.

A developmental evaluation approach was employed, which provides feedback and generates insights while a programme is in the design and early implementation phase.[13] This approach supported refinement and adaptation as Whakamana Tangata was being implemented and embedded within the residence. The evaluation also identified factors that influenced the implementation and sustainability of the approach, while assessing stakeholders' overall experiences with the pilot.

Ethical approval was obtained from Te Herenga Waka – Victoria University of Wellington's Human Ethics Committee. The evaluation design and objectives have been discussed with the Design Group as well as with the residence manager of Te Maioha and senior officials at Oranga Tamariki. The evaluative framework was informed at an early stage by contributions from Māori researchers and residential kaimahi involved in the design and planning of the practice approach.

The evaluation used a non-experimental design and included both qualitative and quantitative data analysis to assess the implementation and embedding of the practice approach, as well as its broader impact on the residential culture.

In total, 31 semi-structured interviews were held with different sets of participants. These included 22 interviews with residential kaimahi and leadership to capture their experiences with, and perspectives on, the implementation and further embedding of Whakamana Tangata. Additionally, two interviews were conducted with members of the Design Group to gather their views on the introduction and embedding of the approach, and seven short interviews were held with rangatahi on Whakamana Tangata values and practices. Interviews were held face-to-face except for one which was conducted via Zoom. Interviews with rangatahi were conducted by designated Oranga Tamariki kaimahi outside the residence, and in accordance with Oranga Tamariki ethical guidelines. Although this approach may raise concerns regarding potential power imbalances and intimidation that could affect the responses of rangatahi participants, it was chosen to ensure interviews were conducted sensitively and appropriately by well-prepared staff. The involvement of kaimahi who have expertise in engaging with rangatahi, along with their familiarity and understanding of the cultural and systemic contexts, helped foster a supportive interview process.

In addition to the interviews, two focus groups with seven young men at Te Maioha and one focus group with three kaimahi were facilitated by Design Group members to seek early feedback on Whakamana Tangata. Another focus group, comprising four Design Group members, was held to discuss the underlying philosophy and concept of the approach. In total, 14 participants attended the focus groups. Informed consent was gained prior to the interviews and focus groups, and the recordings were transcribed verbatim.

Furthermore, the findings were informed by questionnaires and a survey. Post-training questionnaires were completed by 149 participants in initial and ongoing Whakamana Tangata training. A survey seeking feedback on kaimahi views and experiences on the practice approach included responses from 47 participants. Moreover, a small number of follow-up questionnaires ($N = 8$) provided kaimahi reflective feedback on the experience with hui whakapiri.

The methods also included the analysis of background information and the review of training and practice videos. Data were collected from December 2018 to December 2020. Data coding and analysis were conducted using NVivo data analysis software.

Limitations of the evaluation

One of the main limitations of this evaluation was the small number of rangatahi who contributed directly—only 14 participated through focus groups and interviews. This limitation is related to time and resource constraints in complying with ethical standards in a timely manner. Therefore, our assessment on how rangatahi experienced Whakamana Tangata is complemented by kaimahi perspectives of the value of the practice approach for rangatahi.

The validity of our findings faces additional limitations due to the context in which Whakamana Tangata was implemented. The

implementation occurred during a period of significant change and transitions within Te Maioha. Thus, when discussing the impact of Whakamana Tangata, we refer to our assessment as reported by the participants. It is important to acknowledge that it is not feasible to attribute all observed changes solely to Whakamana Tangata, nor can we disregard the influence of other concurrent activities.

Another limitation pertains to the inability to use statistical data on behavioural incidents to assess the impact of the practice approach on rangatahi behaviour. This limitation arises from various factors, including the way data are collected and the complex nature of incidents. Consequently, meaningful and valid conclusions could not be drawn, and the findings were not included in the evaluation.

Finally, the effects of Covid-19, alongside legislative and structural changes in youth justice and significant staff turnover at the site, had an impact on implementation and evaluation timeframes.

Key findings and discussion

This section discusses key evaluation findings. First, it focuses on critical factors that contributed to the successful implementation of Whakamana Tangata in Te Maioha and the challenges related to its further integration into practice. Second, it assesses the impact of the restorative, te ao Māori-based approach on kaimahi practice and the residential culture. Third, it examines how well rangatahi comprehended and responded to the practice approach, acknowledging the limitations of the small sample size.

Factors that contributed to the successful implementation

Design process

The evaluation revealed that the implementation of Whakamana Tangata, conceptualised as a *way of being*, was effectively set up by the Design Group.

The Design Group consisted of 10 practitioners and researchers with diverse professional backgrounds, including social service, education, youth justice, restorative justice practice, public policy, academia and iwi[14] governance. Nearly half of the Design team self-identified as Māori. The participation of three local staff members in the Design Group facilitated the creation of a tailored, residence-specific approach for kaimahi and rangatahi, fostering a greater sense of ownership. Respondents highlighted the value of this co-design approach in the conceptual development of Whakamana Tangata. The Design Group considered rangatahi voices in developing and continuously adapting the practice approach. External advice was also sought from local iwi Te Arawa and Māori justice sector experts.

The design process evolved through comprehensive discussions, debates and thoughtful reflections over an extended duration. The group delved deeply into core aspects that would shape Whakamana Tangata, including the Māori values and restorative principles. Te ao Māori encompasses a rich array of values, and the Design Group carefully chose the most appropriate ones for the residential setting, as emphasised by a Design Group member:

> The DG [Design Group] worked really hard in thinking about what would work for Māori young people. Along with reviewing a range of literature and evidence, deep discussion, they grappled very thoughtfully. They considered the appropriateness and fit for rangatahi and for a YJ [Youth Justice] residence. For example, there are many Māori values (tikanga) that apply in a te ao Māori world. They considered and selected those most appropriate for the context and the fit with restorative practice. (Design Group member)

The Design Group's profound conceptual groundwork signalled the initiation of a journey towards aligning Māori values with restorative justice practices, an ongoing endeavour.

Training, development of resources and integration of Whakamana Tangata values into restorative practices

The training and professional development opportunities developed by the Design Group provided a solid foundation for the implementation and embedding of Whakamana Tangata into residential practice. Training recipients found the Whakamana Tangata training to be a valuable experience.

> This [training] has helped me to build rapport with all different personalities of our rangatahi and also my work peers. (Te Maioha kaimahi)

> We are on a journey and the idea of navigating our waka using stars, and then giving our rangatahi the skills to one day navigate their own waka really resonated with me. (Training participant)

Additionally, a suite of materials, including the Whakamana Tangata kete (manuals) and visual resources, was created by the Design Group and the Practice Lead (see below for the role of the Practice Lead). These materials were progressively adapted to serve as reminders to rangatahi and kaimahi of the values and to facilitate their integration into conversations.

Whakamana Tangata values and principles were also gradually incorporated into existing recording processes and aligned with other value frameworks, including those developed by the educational provider.

Role of the Practice Lead and site-based Design Group members

The introduction of the Whakamana Tangata Practice Lead (Kaiwhakaue[15]) role was a pivotal factor for the implementation of the practice approach. The Practice Lead, embedded within the Design Group, shared real-world insights with the Design Group. Regularly mentored by a Design Group member, the Practice Lead facilitated adaptations of the approach, gathering practical insights and feedback from colleagues. Collecting views from rangatahi, through the use of creativity and arts, enabled the transformation of Whakamana Tangata tools into a language that was more accessible to rangatahi. In particular, the Practice Lead assumed a critical role in offering on-site guidance, mentoring, training and support to residential kaimahi, shepherding the implementation within the residence.

> He connects really well with all the staff and with leadership. He makes it real. He makes it something that people want to engage with. So, I think that person is really key… (Te Maioha kaimahi)

Along with the Practice Lead, two site-based Design Group members contributed to an enhanced understanding and implementation of Whakamana Tangata values and practices within the residence. They assisted in developing professional capacity within the residence while serving as a valuable knowledge and learning resource for the Design Group.

Challenges and barriers to implementing and embedding Whakamana Tangata

The implementation of Whakamana Tangata coincided with a period marked by significant transitions and legislative reforms in the youth justice sector. Notable changes included the implementation of Section 7AA of the Oranga Tamariki Act[16] and the inclusion of 17-year-olds in the youth justice system, alongside structural changes at Oranga Tamariki. Concurrently, new frameworks and programmes were introduced at youth justice residences across

the country, which imposed additional expectations on staff during the rollout of the new practice approach. Some kaimahi were initially sceptical about the long-term sustainability of the approach. Some expressed confusion and uncertainty as they navigated through the diverse sets of values adopted at the site:

> Is this something that's going to be around? Because, after being around for so long, I want to know what I am going to put my energy into. Is this something else that's going to change in two years, and we're going to be adapting to something else? (Te Maioha kaimahi)

A few kaimahi perceived Whakamana Tangata as a soft option for addressing harmful behaviour, while others resisted the approach, believing they were already doing it in practice.

To address these challenges, concerted efforts were made to align Whakamana Tangata values with those already in place. Nevertheless, as with any new practice approach, instilling confidence and integrating it into day-to-day routines requires time. The application of Whakamana Tangata faced particular difficulties due to the raft of internal and external changes occurring simultaneously. One kaimahi highlighted the difficulty of "maintaining fidelity within a flexible environment, given the constant changes" as a key concern.

High staff turnover and the recruitment of new kaimahi further complicated the implementation and integration process. Additionally, Oranga Tamariki has come under some intense media scrutiny. All these factors contributed to a complex implementation environment, resulting in the extended timeframes observed for kaimahi to apply the new practice approach effectively.

Whakamana Tangata as a culture and practice shift for Te Maioha

The integration of Whakamana Tangata into the residential culture and day-to-day practices of kaimahi has become increasingly evident. This shift was demonstrated by the growing number of kaimahi who have applied Whakamana Tangata values, principles, and tools in their practice. Moreover, significant efforts had been made to adapt tools and site processes to better align with Whakamana Tangata.

Practice changes were noticeable in the manner in which kaimahi engaged and communicated with rangatahi and their peers. Kaimahi have progressively adopted more restorative-relational and less directive language and communication when engaging with rangatahi. For example, they have encouraged rangatahi to participate in conversations using open-ended questions, as well as inviting reflection on their behaviour. This communicative approach has also been increasingly reflected in the way kaimahi worked, fostering an environment that supported kaimahi to explore new ways to engage with each other.

The use of te reo Māori, along with Whakamana Tangata values and concepts, has helped locate kaimahi within te ao Māori. Kaimahi have expressed appreciation for the authenticity and genuineness of Whakamana Tangata, viewing it as a way of thinking that resonates with their work and offers guidance for their practice.

A survey conducted among 47 kaimahi, capturing their experiences with Whakamana Tangata training and practice application, revealed that 94% of kaimahi applied the principles and values of the approach, to some extent, in their practice. More than half indicated that they consistently used the principles and values, with 45% doing so most of the time and 15% adhering to them all the time. The relatively small proportion of kaimahi fully integrating the approach suggests that its implementation remained an ongoing process at the time, highlighting potential challengers in embedding the practices comprehensively.

Numerous respondents acknowledged that the application of Whakamana Tangata had contributed to a shift in their mindset concerning their practice. Increasingly perceived as a *way of being*, kaimahi expressed that Whakamana Tangata raised their consciousness of working in mana-enhancing ways (55%)[17]. Furthermore, it underscored the importance of genuinely listening to rangatahi (49%) and facilitated a deeper comprehension of their needs (47%). Kaimahi also found that Whakamana Tangata equipped them with tools and practices to engage more effectively with rangatahi (47%), and offered a value- and principle-based framework for respectful engagement with them (43%).

> I believe that, most importantly, it has educated me and influenced my practice to be increasingly more mana enhancing and gave examples of this to which I can now carry out and be aware of on the floor. (Survey quote)

In relation to their working relationship with peers, kaimahi emphasised that the practice approach helped them communicate more effectively with their colleagues (49%), show respect for points of view different from their own practice (47%), and engage in reflective practice conversations with their peers (45%). It also increased their knowledge regarding how to handle difficult situations and conflict (43%).

Kaimahi commented on a shift towards more frequent use of restorative, reflective practices instead of reactive responses. Such practices contain hui whakapiri, kōrero whakapiri and noho mauri, as briefly described above.

> I think just the general feel and practice; I just remember maybe three years ago there was a lot of incidences – staff were involved more often than they ever should be, and […] well, not often were the boys heard. They weren't asked what

actually happened. It was, "No – you did this – goodbye – you're in secure"; that kind of feeling. It was a lot more common. It's great to see that kind of stuff doesn't happen now. (Te Maioha kaimahi)

A common example of implementing Whakamana Tangata in daily work involved using the hui whakapiri process, with emphasis placed on the preparation and follow-up phases to ensure effective practice.

Kaimahi found that restorative practices, such as hui whakapiri, were beneficial for rangatahi due to their structured format, use of plain language, and incorporation of Whakamana Tangata values. These practices helped rangatahi engage more constructively with one another and supported them in reflecting about the harmful event and its impact, thereby enhancing their abilities for self-reflection and emotional self-regulation.

Furthermore, kaimahi emphasised the growing importance and practice value of noho mauri for rangatahi to prevent further escalation of conflicts. This practice allowed them to reflect on their behaviour and, subsequently, engage in a restorative conversation to explore ways to repair the harm caused. Remarkably, kaimahi noted a shift, with several rangatahi taking the initiative to take part in noho mauri over the course of the pilot, a development not observed prior to the introduction of this approach.

> It's much more positive. The relationship, so time out is not perceived now as a punitive process where you've been naughty so you've got to go to timeout, but actually, this is a really important time for us to unpack what's going on for you today and how can we help you and how can we support you, so that has definitely changed. (Te Maioha kaimahi)

Rangatahi experiences with and views on Whakamana Tangata

As previously mentioned, the evaluation included only a small number of rangatahi. Therefore, alongside their input, kaimahi perspectives were also considered regarding the value of Whakamana Tangata for rangatahi.

A total of 14 rangatahi participated in the evaluation, either through interviews or focus groups. Seven rangatahi engaged in interviews, sharing their experiences with Whakamana Tangata practices and their thoughts on its values and principles. Of these, six had previously participated in a hui whakapiri, while one had engaged in a noho mauri.[18]

The responses to hui whakapiri were mixed. Four out of the six rangatahi who had taken part in a hui whakapiri acknowledged its value reporting that it provided them with opportunities to set aside differences, engage in dialogues, and resolve problems with each other. However, two rangatahi did not find the experience beneficial. The one rangatahi who had participated in a noho mauri described it as a way to be "given some space", but expressed frustration at missing out on scheduled programmes.

The Whakamana Tangata values that resonated most with rangatahi were mana, ara tikanga and piringa. These values were notably applied, for instance, when helping others to get along with each other, encouraging rangatahi to participate in activities, and making others feel welcome.

Rangatahi who participated in the focus groups (N = 7) observed a shift in kaimahi practices. For instance, when conflicts or incidents arose, they were given the opportunity to calm down before engaging in explanatory discussions with kaimahi. Moreover, rangatahi noted that kaimahi did not automatically resort to sending them to the secure unit,[19] instead, they were given the chance to de-escalate, reflect and engage in a conversation with each other.

This was particularly noticeable to rangatahi who had stayed in youth justice residences other than Te Maioha.

> I had [a] confrontation with another young person in another unit and they didn't use those over there. They were going to resort to sending me to secure, but then [the kaimahi] came over and said "Let's try a different way", and put the Whakamana Tangata in play. And just leave us down in the wing for a little bit and calm down and let us talk, me and the other young person…, rather than sending us to secure straight away. So it was better we didn't go to secure. (Rangatahi, focus group)

Furthermore, rangatahi appreciated receiving the tools and strategies to better manage situations and resolve issues with their peers. They valued the opportunity to voice their opinions and were encouraged to consider alternative responses when faced with challenging situations. Nevertheless, it is important to note that placements in youth justice residences are typically too brief to significantly impact long-term behavioural change.

Conclusion

Whakamana Tangata has emerged as more than just a programme or framework; for both kaimahi and rangatahi, it has introduced a shift in thinking about engagement with each other, emphasising restorative practice and te ao Māori values.

The application of Whakamana Tangata values and principles, as reflected in specific tools and practices, has fostered a culture that promotes a more respectful, relational and dialogical approach in interactions with rangatahi. The findings suggest that Whakamana Tangata has encouraged kaimahi to actively listen to rangatahi and promote their participation in decision-making processes. This shift has contributed—at least to some extent—to

a deeper understanding of the needs of rangatahi, reinforcing their sense of being valued within the residential environment.

Furthermore, there is emerging evidence that Whakamana Tangata has facilitated the early stages of a shift toward a more respectful and positive team culture. Kaimahi have reported increased confidence in engaging in open and courageous conversations while respecting differing perspectives. The practice approach has also supported reflective practice among kaimahi and provided them with options to engage more respectfully and collaboratively with their peers.

Within a relatively short implementation period, Whakamana Tangata has become part of the fabric of Te Maioha. Despite the complexities and challenges associated with its implementation, there is good evidence supporting its positive impact on kaimahi, with emerging indications of benefits for rangatahi. However, at the time of the evaluation, Whakamana Tangata had not yet been fully embedded across the residence, nor was it consistently applied. Nevertheless, early indications suggest promising progress toward deeper integration into everyday practice.

Following its introduction at Te Maioha, the practice approach has been progressively rolled out at the remaining four youth justice residences. Restorative practices have begun to take shape at multiple sites. To address challenges in embedding Whakamana Tangata and to strengthen kaimahi understanding, continuous professional development has been established. Additionally, a permanent Kaiwhakaue (Practice Lead) position has been created in all (bar one) residences, providing structural support for the ongoing integration of the approach. Further efforts could be made to enhance whānau engagement in Whakamana Tangata practices, particularly to support rangatahi in their transition back to their communities. Strengthening this

aspect would further promote the enduring sustainability of the approach.

Notes

[1] The authority to establish a secure youth justice residence, and their purpose, is set out in section 364 of the Oranga Tamariki Act 1989. Two youth justice residences are located in Auckland, and one each in Rotorua, Palmerston North and Christchurch. Alongside these youth detention facilities, Oranga Tamariki operates a small number of secure care and protection facilities.

[2] In 2023, the Office of the Children's Commissioner was disestablished and in its place a Children's Commissioner created.

[3] The reports can be found at https://www.manamokopuna.org.nz/publications/?search=state+of+care.

[4] More precisely, the data cover the period from July 1, 2017 to June 30, 2024.

[5] For a more recent discussion on the meaning of restorative justice, we refer to various authors' contributions to *The International Journal of Restorative Justice* 2023, (*6*)3, "Special issue on the evolving meaning of restorative justice: A discussion".

[7] Ara signifies a way or path, and tikanga means to do things correctly. Ara tikanga expresses the call to a new pathway.

[8] Mana is the respect people deserve from others and give to others. It is the inherent dignity that all people are born with. As a practice, mana is about giving and showing respect.

[9] Tapu signifies something sacred or precious. It also describes the boundaries needed to protect the mana of people or significant objects or places.

[10] Mauri ora expresses the vitality and fullness of an active life (Moorfield, 2011). It provides people with a sense of control over themselves and the capacity to deal with their environment.

11 Piringa is generally thought of as having a safe place, haven or refuge (Online Māori Dictionary).

12 The description of the five values is based on the explanation provided by the Design Group in *Kete Tuatahi (Kete One)* (Oranga Tamariki, 2020a) and *Kete Tuarua (Kete Two)* (Oranga Tamariki, 2020b). For more details on the values and principles see Oranga Tamariki, 2020 and 2020a.

13 The evaluation was conducted by [authors], see report on the pilot evaluation (authors, 2021).

14 As such, it integrated elements of formative and summative evaluation.

15 Extended kinship group, tribe, nation.

16 The Māori word kaiwhakaue can be translated as steersman, waka steerer.

17 The section underlines the commitment to the Treaty of Waitangi. It emphasises that Oranga Tamariki must give regard to the three core legislative principles mana tamaiti, whakapapa and whanaungatanga, and ensure that these principles inform policies, practices and services.

18 Kaimahi could select multiple responses.

19 A hui whakapiri is a facilitated restorative process, while a noho mauri refers to a time-out procedure designated to give rangatahi time to calm down and de-escalate, as previously described.

20 Youth justice residences have an area (unit) that is designated for secure care. Young people can be admitted to this area if they meet the grounds set out in section 368 of the Oranga Tamariki Act 1989. The use of secure care is carefully regulated in the legislation.

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