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TE WHARE WĀNANGA O TE KURAHUNA
MAHI A ATUA

TĒNEI TE PŌ NAU MAI TE AO- TRANSFORMATION IN ACTION

Mahi a Atua:

Committed to developing indigenous systems for positive community outcomes.

Te Kurahuna and Mahi a Atua: Walking in the Footsteps of our Ancestors

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Be brave, be bold, be curious, and embrace the potential of Mahi a Atua and Te Kurahuna!

The pūrākau of Mataora, tells the story of an ariki (high chief) who had believed he was not accountable to anybody. However, guided by the love he had for his wife, Niwareka, Mataora became a kaitiaki for changing attitudes, beliefs and behaviour; firstly his own and then actively influencing changes in those around him. Guided by the knowledge embedded in the pūrākau of Mataora, Te Whare Wānanga o Te Kurahuna understands genuinely addressing equity for Māori requires an uniquely transformative Indigenous approach. Te Kurahuna is the kaitiaki of Mahi a Atua: a 'way of being' which privileges Indigenous knowledge and practice as the basis for addressing institutional racism, strengthening best practice, and realising equitable outcomes for Māori.¹

Directly responding to evidence presented across multiple reports, inquiries and reviews that institutional racism must be addressed in order to realise equitable outcomes for Māori², alongside overtly operationalising the necessary paradigm shift to whānau ora and whānau-centred practice, Te Kurahuna and Mahi a Atua are centrally positioned to realise the systemic innovation and transformation across sectors which has long been called for. This paper, part of the *Tēnei te Po Nau Mai Te Ao - Transformation in Action Series*³, provides an overview of Te Whare Wānanga o Te Kurahuna and Mahi a Atua.

Activating Collective Consciousness

Improving equity requires urgent improvements in the way the system in its entirety delivers for Māori.⁴ However, genuine transformation centred on enhanced rangatiratanga and mana motuhake requires more than just the addition of Kaupapa Māori services. The overwhelming message provided to the 2018 Government Inquiry into Mental

Health & Addiction was a new approach to mental health and addiction in Aotearoa was needed.⁵ Underpinned by an entire paradigm shift, Te Whare Wānanga o Te Kurahuna aspires to realise a collective consciousness able to shift institutional racism and effect transformative systemic change.

Operating at both the individual and systems level, Te Kurahuna is growing a critical mass of Mataora; 'change agents', able to influence and embed sustainable transformative change.⁶

Genuine system transformation requires a workforce willing and able to work collaboratively and move beyond what are now considered to be outdated professional boundaries and scopes of practice:⁷ if inequities are to be addressed, there is no room for working as we always have.⁸ Puaotekātu emphasised over 30 years ago that the community workforce was best placed to meet whānau needs.⁹ Communities positioned as 'champions of change' continue to be the biggest untapped wellbeing workforce resource,¹⁰ with increasing recognition that solutions do not result from the technical skills of mental health clinicians, but from whānau themselves.¹¹

Operating at both the individual and systems level, Te Kurahuna is growing a critical mass of Mataora; 'change agents', able to influence and embed sustainable transformative change.¹² At an individual level, Te Kurahuna and Mahi a Atua emphasise being accountable for one's own actions, with institutional racism firstly addressed by Mataora actively reinstating, embedding, and practicing Indigenous knowledge across every element of their personal and professional spaces.¹³ At a systems level, Te Kurahuna optimises collective workforce capacity and effectiveness by validating and maintaining mātauranga Māori knowledge and practices, alongside developing a collective confidence to change service environments by supporting the application of Indigenous knowledge and practice in service delivery to whānau.¹⁴

Mahi a Atua wānanga reach across the community, recognising that anyone has the potential to be an agent of change.

The development of a Mataora workforce is not discipline, profession, sector or role specific, with the potential of Mahi a Atua to

not only help whānau, but actively inform transformative change across health, education, justice, and social sectors, well recognised.¹⁵ Nor is Mahi a Atua training and practice limited to Māori only. Mahi a Atua wānanga reach across the community, recognising that anyone has the potential to be an agent of change.

It is this aspiration for collective consciousness, and the recognition of the collective power of individuals to effect systemic change across systems, that differentiates Te Kurahuna and Mahi a Atua from other culturally derived therapies or individually focused competency programmes.

In a mental health context, this includes: the regulated clinical workforce such as general practitioners, psychiatrists, psychologists, counsellors, nurses, social workers, occupational therapists, and midwives; the non-regulated health workforce such as cultural advisors, community and peer support workers; and those outside of both - managers, administrators, educators, artists, and whānau members: anyone wishing to become part of a transformative collective consciousness to address institutional racism is welcomed by Te Kurahuna.¹⁶ It is this aspiration for collective consciousness, and the recognition of the collective power of individuals to effect systemic change across systems, that differentiates Te Kurahuna and Mahi a Atua from other culturally derived therapies or individually focused competency programmes.

Paradigm Shift

Aligned with Kaupapa Māori, whānau ora and cultural safety theory, and drawing on the work of the British Psychological Society (BPS) who propose alternatives to psychiatric

The Mahi a Atua wānanga process is recognised as an innovative and powerful means by which whānau have the opportunity to not only understand and articulate their experiences and distress, but also develop agreed upon pathways to wellness via a culturally narrated lens.¹⁷

classification and diagnoses systems,¹⁸¹⁹ the multi-level movement to collective consciousness facilitated by Te Kurahuna occurs via an ongoing process which examines and critiques the structural variables underpinning inequity. Central to the training provided by Te Kurahuna is that dominant disease-focused psychiatric classification systems continue to minimise psychosocial causal factors, in the process concealing links between people's experiences, distress and behaviour, and their social, cultural, familial and personal historical context.²⁰ Acting as a barrier to whānau actively making choices about their own pathways forward, dominant diagnostic classification systems position whānau as dependent on expert advice and 'treatment', with decisions about how to classify a person's behaviour and experience routinely imposed as an objective fact, as opposed to being shared in transparent and open ways.²¹

Consistent with whānau ora and whānau-centred practice, Te Kurahuna positions whānau voices, aspirations, self-determination and transformation at the centre. The Mahi a Atua wānanga process is recognised as an innovative and powerful means by which whānau have the opportunity to not only understand and articulate their experiences and distress, but also develop agreed upon pathways to wellness via a culturally narrated lens.²²

Te Kurahuna training emphasises the 'myth of meritocracy' which argues against the assertion that achievement results only from individual capability and merit. The individual focus underpinning 'meritocracy' results in individuality being promoted above collective responsibility and care. Te Kurahuna recognises that systemic change entails the workforce understand ways in which historical factors have contributed to structuring

opportunity that in turn unfairly disadvantage Māori.²³ This includes a critique of the power relations responsible for the deliberate and systemic marginalisation of mātauranga Māori and the resulting inequitable outcomes for Māori communities.²⁴ An understanding of those factors then needs to be woven into therapeutic relationships with whānau, with a critical component of the paradigm shift sought by Te Kurahuna being whānau awareness of the wider context in which their distress is positioned is consciously enhanced.

Te Kurahuna utilises relevant pūrākau as an Indigenous resource to support not only reflection in relation to one's own position regarding racism, but to also create possibilities which actively address racism.²⁵

As the kaitiaki of Mahi a Atua, Te Kurahuna specialises in both the initial training, and the ongoing professional and personal development of the Mataora workforce. Central to Te Kurahuna training is an active and often challenging process of critical self-reflection and a self-assessment of privilege and bias. Of necessity, particularly for those trained within dominant biomedical paradigms which serve to support and sustain ingrained systemic racism,²⁶ this includes an examination of one's own contribution to institutional racism. With a focus on growing a curiosity about racism, understanding responses to discussions about racism, and exploring the impacts of racism on Indigenous wellbeing, Te Kurahuna utilises relevant pūrākau as an Indigenous resource to support not only reflection in relation to one's own position regarding racism, but to also create possibilities which actively address racism.²⁷

... both Māori and non-Māori refer to their own practice and identity transformations which have occurred as a result of undertaking Te Kurahuna training.²⁸

Comprising more than a static model, framework, or intervention, Mataora trained in Mahi a Atua not only become competent in the therapeutic application of Indigenous narratives, they are also equipped with innovative ways of operationalising this knowledge within their workplaces. This in turn provides a tangible pathway by which to effectively address institutional racism.²⁹ Integral to this is that both Māori and non-Māori refer to their own practice and identity transformations which have occurred as a result of undertaking Te Kurahuna training.³⁰

For Mataora who were Māori, there was a sense of liberation in being able to work in ways which felt 'normal'; build on a wealth of existing skills; and gain more confidence in the application of mātauranga Māori models.³¹ Non-Māori Mataora gained confidence through being provided with an entry point, alongside processes by which they were able to effectively engage with Māori whānau. For those with no previous training in a Western psychological paradigm, Mahi a Atua served to expand their therapeutic scope.³² These outcomes demonstrate how Te Kurahuna contributes to what Tina Ngata describes as 'healing of the system, healing of practitioners, and healing of those who wield power'.³³

Mahi a Atua: A Way of Being

A 'way of being', as opposed to a therapy or technique,³⁴ Mahi a Atua focuses on reinstating and embedding Indigenous knowledge systems, which then lays the foundations for deliberate and intentional systemic transformation.³⁵

First created in the 1990's, Mahi a Atua originated as a way of meaningfully engaging

with Māori whānau. In 2014, evolving beyond solely that of a therapeutic practice, Mahi a Atua, in explicitly referencing the direct connection between institutional racism and inequity for Māori, began to focus more specifically on the creation of intentional pathways of systemic transformation across DHBs, health providers, iwi, education, social, and art sectors; and the wider community.³⁶

Mahi a Atua does not simply replicate the existing system of competency acquisition. From a Kaupapa Māori theory perspective which asserts recognition, affirmation, and validation of Māori worldviews, it is clear Māori practitioner workforce development is not simply about the acquisition of technical skills, but forms part of a wider liberation movement built on our own methods and mechanisms of critique, measurement, and judgment.³⁷

... generic elements across the stories are able to demonstrate not only the spectrum of family and social issues faced by our earliest ancestors, but also the strength and resilience of the Atua as they made sense of their realities, re-balanced, overcame struggles, and enacted pathways to resolution and well-being.³⁸

A 'way of being', as opposed to a therapy or technique,³⁹ Mahi a Atua focuses on reinstating and embedding Indigenous knowledge systems, which then lays the foundations for deliberate and intentional systemic transformation.⁴⁰ Grounded in Indigenous ontology and epistemology, Mahi a Atua is founded on 'He Oranga Whakapapa' which acknowledges everything has an origin that can be traced back to these pūrākau.⁴¹ Operationalised with whānau in a wānanga process, the pūrākau provide snapshots of 'mental states of being' and 'responses to distress and dis-ease' as illustrated by the archetypal characters of the Atua Māori.⁴² Whilst pūrākau versions vary depending on

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which Iwi, community or individuals are sharing the story, generic elements across the stories are able to demonstrate not only the spectrum of family and social issues faced by our earliest ancestors, but also the strength and resilience of the Atua as they made sense of their realities, re-balanced, overcame struggles, and enacted pathways to resolution and well-being.⁴³

Mahi a Atua training is founded upon three matapono (principles): *Tenei te pō, nau mai te ao* (Indigenise your Spaces); *Ka mā te ariki ka mā te tauira* (Remain an Active Learner); and *Hongihongi te wheiwheia* (Embrace Negative Feedback).⁴⁴ It is through the daily application of these Mahi a Atua matapono that Iwi, communities, providers, and workforces are able to collectively rethink and find ways out of dominant prescribed narratives, thus providing pathways to transformative solutions genuinely able to improve equity for Māori.⁴⁵

Tēnei te Pō, Nau mai te Ao: Coming in from the dark, welcoming the light

An authentic connection to Indigenous knowledge is at the heart of the Mahi a Atua process. With its conceptual translation of 'indigenise your space', this principle drives the objective of introducing mātauranga Māori into one's daily personal and professional life, rethinking one's usual way of being.⁴⁶

... pūrākau are utilised as a way to frame, analyse, and discuss modern situations, with whānau gaining an understanding of the characteristics, roles and responsibilities of the various Atua. This in turn facilitates a shift in perspective, thinking, understanding, and ultimately healing, for whānau.⁴⁷

Mataora are trained to embed Mahi a Atua principles in their lives as they prioritise oranga whakapapa (bringing our stories to life), and share pūrākau, via the many different mediums available.⁴⁸ Carefully selected pūrākau are introduced in wānanga, with whaiora and their whānau contributing to the pūrākau as they are able.⁴⁹ Using a range of tools such as words, images, and narratives, whānau in distress are creatively supported to reconnect and build a relationship with the pūrākau and their own stories. In this way pūrākau are utilised as a way to frame, analyse, and discuss modern situations, with whānau gaining an understanding of the characteristics, roles and responsibilities of the various Atua. This in turn facilitates a shift in perspective, thinking, understanding, and ultimately healing, for whānau.⁵⁰

Reflecting the broad applicability and accessibility of Mahi a Atua, the ability to access this culturally located frame of reference is not reliant on familiarity with mātauranga Māori. Te Kurahuna recognises there are many versions of pūrākau which can be discussed, ranging from a simplified account to more detailed descriptions of roles, responsibilities and relationships of the many Atua. In this way, those with greater access to traditional knowledge are supported to grow their knowledge, whilst those who are less connected to their Indigenous identity are supported to develop stronger cultural connections.⁵¹

Ka mā te ariki, ka mā te tauira: As the teacher is enlightened, so is the student

The principle of *ka mā te ariki, ka mā te tauira* privileges Indigenous ways of learning, ensuring a focus on developing active learners who are both responsive to whānau and the community, and open to other perspectives. In this way, consistent with the fundamental principles of cultural safety, change and accountability is firstly located within oneself.⁵²

The process of wānanga, a taonga tuku iho (gift from the past), is central to Mahi a Atua.⁵³ Forming the basis of therapeutic contact and purposefully used at every stage of the whānau journey towards wellbeing, Mahi a Atua wānanga are a deliberate process of coming together which recognises that gaining clarity about future directions requires a strong connection to the past, whilst staying present in the moment.⁵⁴ Mahi a Atua wānanga in mental health settings are facilitated by an 'Ue'; a multi-disciplinary team who, depending on the specific needs of the whānau, may include those with mental health backgrounds such as clinical specialists, social workers, advocacy-support workers, cultural advisors and tohunga, as well as those outside of the mental health system, such as artists.⁵⁵

Pūrākau provide whaiora and whānau the opportunity to externalise an issue or situation, and by looking through a different lens, contextualise, organise, communicate, and ultimately heal a problem within the context of their own reality and what matters most to them.⁵⁶

Reflecting the paradigm shift away from a biomedical diagnostic model, the deliberate and innovative multi-disciplinary lens of the Ue operates from a whānau-centred narrative orientation which prioritises working collectively to explore the socio-cultural contexts in which issues reside, as opposed to focusing on identifying internal deficit or dysfunction.⁵⁷ Pūrākau provide whaiora and whānau the opportunity to externalise an issue or situation, and by looking through a different lens, contextualise, organise, communicate, and ultimately heal a problem within the context of their own reality and what matters most to them.⁵⁸ With whānau assisted to develop meaningful responses to distress and dis-ease in this way, the 'diagnosis' and the psychiatric format becomes somewhat secondary to the process of privileging and reinstating the Te Ao Māori voice and finding culturally relevant meaning.⁵⁹

... the Mahi a Atua wānanga process openly recognises the collective nature of distress.⁶⁰

Because Mahi-a-Atua is connected to whakapapa, relationally Mahi a Atua belongs to both the Māori Mataora and whānau.⁶¹ Mahi a Atua wānanga emphasise āta whakarongo (active listening), kōrero (discussion), co-creativity, and reflective communication in order to weave together the many points of view about their distress and create new shared understandings in which everyone contributes important threads.⁶² In taking this approach, the Mahi a Atua wānanga process openly recognises the collective nature of distress.⁶³ With whānau positioned as the experts of their own experiences, Mataora learn to be active participants in a process of sharing aspirations, with both parties giving and accepting koha within the relationship.⁶⁴

... it is assumed that strengths will always be present within whānau even in times of distress, and that whānau are more likely to find, draw upon and mobilise their own resources and strengths when pre-planned therapeutic interventions are absent

Walking in the footsteps of our ancestors is not a rigid prescription.⁶⁵ Because the nature of distress for each whānau is different, no conclusions are drawn prior to wānanga.⁶⁶ Mataora listen for information and clues around the whānau connection to pūrākau. Again guided by the underpinning principles of whānau ora and whānau-centred practice, it is assumed that strengths will always be present within whānau even in times of distress, and that whānau are more likely to find, draw upon and mobilise their own resources and strengths when pre-planned therapeutic interventions are absent.

Without reference to an internalised deficit model, the emphasis within the Mahi a Atua

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wānanga process is on finding meanings which can create a shift in awareness and perspective, both individually and collectively.⁶⁸ Integral to the wānanga process is that reflective talk can assist in tolerating uncertainty; and when uncertainty is shared it can lead to being together differently. This in turn provides a space for whaiora and whānau to explore culturally and spiritually acceptable pathways of resolution, many of which can be found in everyday life practices and events.⁶⁹

Within a mental health context, Multi-Disciplinary Team meetings (MDTs) are positioned as the primary organisational and service delivery model for community mental health services. Although premised upon an inherent assumption that MDTs improve quality of care by incorporating diverse professional perspectives into care planning, MDTs can also be poorly managed, and lack clarity and purpose.

Mataora are liberated via the use of this Indigenous system as they are supported to work towards addressing issues at systemic, practitioner and whānau levels.⁷⁰

Huaki Pouri is an alternative Indigenous approach to MDT meetings. Based on the principle of always remaining an active learner, Huaki Pouri is an Indigenous derived conceptual term indicating flexible thinking which derives from our pūrākau orokohanga. Meeting weekly in Huaki Pouri facilitates teamwork and collective thinking, allowing Mataora to both share information as well as seek diverse input, in the form of 'koha wonderings' from colleagues. Mataora are liberated via the use of this Indigenous system as they are supported to work towards addressing issues at systemic, practitioner and whānau levels.⁷¹

Hongihongi te wheiwheiā: Inhale the unusual

Integral to Mahi a Atua training is embracing a culture of feedback, with *hongihongi te wheiwheiā* emphasising the importance of a workforce who always strive to understand how to do better. With outcomes for whaiora and whānau positioned as the most important factor in Mahi a Atua wānanga, Te Kurahuna emphasises the importance of developing a culture of feedback individually, collectively, and organisationally. Directly informed by Hinekaurohia, the Atua of healing and reflection, Mataora are trained in the practice of reflective transparent discussion, constantly seeking feedback from whānau and colleagues regarding their performance.⁷²

The principle of *hongihongi te wheiwheiā* operationalises transparency, openness and inclusivity which ensures whānau are fully involved in both the interpretations of their experience, and in recommendations for pathways going forward.⁷³ Positioning whānau as the valued experts of their own experience, alongside growing a culture of feedback, empowers Mataora to remain curious, imaginative and deliberate in their practice.⁷⁴ Reflecting the interconnectedness of the Mahi a Atua matapono, intertwined with embracing negative feedback is the concept of 'failing successfully', that is, the need to continuously remain an active learner.⁷⁵

Stressing the importance of practice-based evidence to support ongoing evaluation, the FIT model places service effectiveness, as judged by whaiora and their whānau, at the centre.

A core element of operationalising *hongihongi te wheiwheiā* is training in the routine use of Feedback Informed Treatment (FIT). Stressing the importance of practice-based evidence to

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support ongoing evaluation, the FIT model places service effectiveness, as judged by whaiora and their whānau, at the centre. Supported by a virtual centre of excellence, FIT provides a valid and reliable measure of alliance and outcome, as well as an effective framework by which to enhance collective potential, as Mataora gather information and constructively critique in real time whether their practice is having a positive impact for the people they are working with.⁷⁶ The FIT process is supported by platforms able to store real-time data (e.g. MyOutcomes) which assists practitioners predict the plan of action for each whānau, as well as make critical adjustments to these plans when needed.⁷⁷

At a higher level, Mataora are continually monitoring for factors that facilitate or act as barriers toward achieving health equity for Māori, thus promoting a culture of organisational feedback. Viewed more broadly in terms of its contribution to wider systemic transformation, FIT also serves to develop, grow and embed an organisational culture of routine evidence-based evaluation of practice quality, effectiveness and ongoing learning.⁷⁸

Conclusion

Seeking systemic transformation through a uniquely Indigenous workforce development paradigm which activates a collective consciousness, Te Kurahuna has evolved Mahi a Atua far beyond that of a culturally appropriate service model or workforce. Its key point of difference is the development of the Mataora workforce: change agents operating from Indigenous paradigms and

worldviews who reach across all parts of the community.

Built on well-established theoretical and practice-based foundations of Kaupapa Māori, whānau ora, and cultural safety, Te Kurahuna, as the kaitiaki of Mahi a Atua, challenges the dominance of a monocultural, bio-medical, deficit-oriented paradigm of mental health and wellbeing; decenters the professional workforce; and facilitates a focus on the wider systemic factors needing to be addressed in order to address equity for Māori.

Integral to this is the independence of Te Kurahuna from mainstream institutions, particularly in relation to ensuring attention remains directly focused on addressing institutional racism in order to realise equity for Māori.

Te Kurahuna sits at the heart of growing and sustaining a critical mass of Mataora; 'change agents', able to influence and embed sustainable transformative change.⁷⁹ Integral to this is the independence of Te Kurahuna from mainstream institutions, particularly in relation to ensuring attention remains directly focused on addressing institutional racism in order to realise equity for Māori. As the transition to a fully Indigenous system progresses, continued focus on the development of leadership able to champion ongoing skill development and fidelity with Mahi a Atua principles and operational practices and processes is critical.

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