



# The Role of Kaumātua in Māori Health Workforce Development

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## Abstract

In Aotearoa (New Zealand), Te Rau Ora is a national centre for Māori health and wellbeing, that highly values *Kaumātua* (respected elders) who enrich the organisation through their wisdom, presence, and dedication to supporting Māori workforce development. In this article, staff reflect on their own experiences and feedback about the work of two *Kaumātua*, with more than 60 years working in the mental health and wellbeing and Māori health workforce training arenas. Examples from their work delivering *wānanga* (traditional learning opportunities) across Aotearoa includes for the workforce employed and training in Māori suicide prevention and postvention, for and with *whānau* Māori (families) and *hāpori* Māori (communities). Privileging *kaupapa Māori* (philosophy) introduces other Māori concepts such as use of *marae* (tribal gathering venues) as the preferred location for training; *pūrākau*, sharing stories; *oranga*, the creation of life; *Ibi*, the essence of life; *Mana*, enhanced with personal

development; *wehi*, a response of awe, *Ihowai* that is a reflection space and time and; *Makurangi*, perfection. Training that is based on foundational Māori values of *tika* (correct), *pono* (truth) and *aroha* (love) use content drawn from *Mātauranga Māori* (knowledge) and *Tirohanga Māori* (perspectives). Key concepts from Durie's *Te Whare Tapa Whā* (four-sided house) model of Māori wellbeing includes speaking directly about *tinana* (physical) wellbeing, *wairua* (spiritual) matters and links it to *hinengaro*, (mental) health and wellbeing. The employment of *Kaumātua* in the delivery of *wānanga* by Māori, with and for Māori, is a vital tool for building Māori workforces and wellbeing.

**Keywords:** Iwi, *kaumātua*, *kaupapa Māori*, *kura kaupapa Māori*, *mātauranga Māori*, Te Ao Māori, *wānanga*, *whānau*

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## Introduction

*Kaumātua* are respected Māori tribal elders who, with their knowledge, can guide their people into the future. *Kaumātua* are valued by their people for their wisdom and integrity (Chalmers, 2006). Often viewed as Māori leaders, especially when they are native language speakers, or specialists in

their field, Kaumātua provide guidance with custom and *whānau* (family) tradition (Durie, 2001). In Aotearoa New Zealand, Kaumātua are often employed within health services to improve the responsiveness to Māori needs, by ensuring the significance of Māori culture, language, custom and relationships is incorporated in the delivery of care (Ahuriri-Driscoll et al., 2015). Kaumātua are also employed by organisations to teach and impart valuable knowledge, to strengthen the Māori health workforce which develops Māori centred wellness approaches for Māori communities (Ihimaera, 2008). Te Rau Ora values Kaumātua, as they have enriched the organisation through their wisdom, presence, and dedication to supporting Māori workforce development. All staff benefit in different ways, learning through the guidance and mentorship of our Kaumātua.

A key aspect in Māori health workforce development is to establish training programs by Māori for Māori (Ministry of Health, 2020). A Māori led training program means it is designed, developed, and delivered by Māori and its purpose is to benefit Māori (Jansen et al., 2002). Māori led training can be delivered in any location. However, training programs that are Māori led are preferred to be delivered on *Marae* (traditional meeting place), because it is on marae that participants are immersed in a Māori cultural and physical environment. Learning through a Māori worldview, while on a Marae, emphasises and grounds the cultural understandings from the learning experience. The marae environment also fosters opportunities for the application of traditional forms of teaching and learning, by using Māori processes, in a Māori environment, that is controlled by Māori (Jansen et al., 2002).

At the time of this article Ronald Baker and Koromiko Richards were employed as Kaumātua for Te Rau Ora and were delivering *wānanga* (traditional learning opportunities) across Aotearoa with a range of topics such as Māori suicide prevention and wellbeing. This article aims to document the relationships that these Kaumātua have developed and how this has informed a *Mātauranga Māori* (knowledge) health workforce development programme that is building the capacity and capability of wellbeing amongst Māori. Starting with a brief description of Te Rau Ora, discussion of some of the Māori

mental health needs and how these two Kaumātua are engaging with Māori health workforces and their local communities.

## Te Rau Ora

Te Rau Ora is a national centre for Māori health and wellbeing established in 2002 in Aotearoa New Zealand, with a vision for a future where whānau are thriving, self-determined and well. Formerly Te Rau Matatini, rebranded in 2019, Te Rau Ora operates in a unique and important niche in the Aotearoa New Zealand health and wellbeing landscape. Te Rau Ora's mission is 'to transform the Māori health workforce to achieve our vision of flourishing whānau' and improve Māori health more broadly through contributions of leadership, education and training, and evidence from research and evaluations. Strengthening the Māori health workforce is a strategy aiming to eliminate health inequities, bias, racism, and discrimination against Māori (Te Rau Ora website).

## Māori Mental Health Needs

Māori experience significantly higher rates of mental distress, higher rates of suicide and greater prevalence of addictions than non-Māori. While the prevalence of mental distress among Māori is almost 50% higher than among non-Māori, Māori are 30% more likely than other groups to have their mental illness undiagnosed and have their health needs unmet (Patterson, Durie, Disley, & Tiatia-Seath, 2018). The Inquiry into Mental Health and Addiction (2018) found that whānau need access to their traditional practices for healing and daily life and that a continuum of care is required that is collaborative and integrated, provided via a health system which is caring, flexible, trusted and non-judgemental. A Kaupapa Māori (critical) analysis of the Inquiry highlighted, that for Māori mental health and wellbeing, there is a need to recognise the impacts of cultural alienation and generational deprivation, affirmation of indigeneity, and the importance of cultural as well as clinical approaches, emphasising ties to whānau, *hapū* (kinship group) and *imi* (tribal nations) (Department of Internal Affairs, 2019). The Māori health workforce are a critical part of that care for Māori, and Kaumātua make an important contribution.

## The Role of the Kaumātua in Te Rau Ora: Developing Mātauranga Māori Wānanga

Kaumātua are an integral part of Māori health and social care services in Aotearoa New Zealand and have been an important part of Te Rau Ora for more than twenty years. This article has a focus on two staff members, respected Kaumātua Ronald Baker who in 2023 was awarded the NZOM for services to Māori mental health for more than 60 years, and Koromiko Richards. Te Rau Ora draws on their wealth of experiences and wisdom from working in Māori mental health, supporting whānau through trauma, and fostering whānau wellbeing. The Kaumātua are dedicated to connecting whānau, hapū, iwi and *hapori* (communities) with cultural knowledge and processes, that continue to be applicable to life's issues.

People who participate in Te Rau Ora wānanga led by these Kaumātua come from a variety of backgrounds and may be seeking knowledge for personal and or professional development reasons. The wānanga provided by Ronald and Koromiko privilege *Māori kaupapa* (philosophy) and cultural concepts which are imperative to Māori health and wellbeing and cannot be undermined by dominant non-Māori views on health.

Kaumātua are seen as a connection to *Te Ao Māori* (world) including *wairua* (spiritual) worlds. They will often use *pūrākau* (stories) as a tool for teaching and imparting knowledge. Pūrākau are shared in a form of oral history that relates to life in the past and present. In one example, Ronald uses a pūrākau from his Ngāti Porou iwi that is located in *Te Tairāwhiti* (the coast where the sun shines across the water), on the east of the North Island. The Seven Principles of Life were carved by Iwirakau, Ronald's *tīpuna* (ancestor), about 450 years ago, into a Pare (lintel with customary carvings) that covers the top of an entrance way of a *whareni* (traditional meeting house). Ronald's narrative from the carvings describes the framework of the Seven Principles to include *Oranga* (life), the creation of life with whānau involvement; wānanga including the discussions of birthing and naming customs; *Ihi* (essence of life) an energy; *Mana* an enduring heritage from

birth enhanced with personal development; *Webi*, often a response of awe to *ihi*, and informing warning strategies; *Ihowai* that is a reflection space and time and; *Makurangi*, perfection.

Kaumātua teachings promote the Seven Principles of Life and support the view that through open and direct communication it is possible to acquire Te Makurangi, known as perfection, or to be the best that a person can be. Ronald believes all Māori inherit innate features of mana at birth. Through interaction and conversation in wānanga, participants become aware of their own mana, or abilities, which is enhanced by sharing about key aspects of a person's own life journey. Ronald and Koromiko extend on this initial framework to increase the awareness and knowledge of mātauranga Māori by interweaving local Iwi knowledge and contemporary views of health and wellbeing.

### Reflections

In preparing this article, the team shared their observations of wānanga that have been delivered by Ronald and Koromiko. They focused on the differences between Māori cultural wānanga versus non-Māori learning methods.

The topic of suicide prevention is a complex one, and requires careful delivery, especially when working with Māori communities, many of whom have experienced major losses. Ronald will often share personal stories that are relevant to the group or the setting. These stories focus on local Māori knowledge or people he has known and shares different scenarios of overcoming challenges. Koromiko has a direct and straightforward style in her teaching and healing work. Her style is more direct and straight to the point. Koromiko will encourage people to spiritually reflect as she reminds them of the spiritual elements always present in one's life. Some participants will share their own pūrākau about their experiences and losses associated with suicide.

### On the Marae

Having the wānanga at the Marae provides a conducive Māori cultural learning experience for Māori which is non-threatening and easy for attendee participation. Once the correct cultural

protocols of *powhiri* (welcome) and *whakamhānau* (introduction) are completed, Māori participants feel relaxed and respond well to the wānanga delivery and the small group work during the day.

### **Kaumātua Facilitation of Wānanga**

When Kaumātua work as a facilitation team, they utilise their knowledge and apply a style that is embedded by foundational Māori values of *tika* (correct), *pono* (truth) and *aroha* (love). They are able to use humour to complement serious matters and enable poignant discussions and challenging conversations in a safe way. With confidence they facilitate wānanga that are about the people in the group and impart an understanding of health and mental health matters from Māori views. There is a care and understanding demonstrated by Ronald and Koromiko, who can talk to the wairua (spiritual) needs and solutions for the whānau and the Māori workforce.

### **Wānanga Content**

Both Mātauranga Māori and *Tirohanga Māori* (perspective) content is dominant throughout the wānanga. With the experience of both Kaumātua, there is a weaving of content that introduces new knowledge about mental health, suicide prevention, trauma and the systems with which Māori have engaged. Ronald and Koromiko encourage the whānau and community to *amhi* (cherish) and support those in distress and promote that there are various solutions that are possible to achieve wellbeing. Their strong endorsement is for a Māori cultural wellness system, which draws from the concepts of *tikanga* (correct ways) and *tangihanga* (traditional funeral rites for the dead involving whānau and mourners).

### **Direct Kōrero (talk)**

Ronald and Koromiko are experienced with a long history of working with people yet know when to push the boundaries safely because they know the parameters and know when these should be (or need to be) pushed with participants in wānanga. Kaumātua are invaluable and can offer perspectives that no-one else can. There is a respect younger people have for Kaumātua, so when they talk about things that matter, people will listen.

### **Wairua in Wānanga**

Ronald and Koromiko have a wairua (spiritual presence) that can be confronting or challenging, yet connected and safe. Sharing pūrākau as narratives from the physical and spiritual dimensions, that stem from Te Ao Māori would not be an easy task if one has not lived it. However, these two Kaumātua can speak directly about tinana (physical) and wairua (spiritual) matters and link it to, hinengaro, mental health and well-being, in a way that enhances the learning experience for participants (Durie, 1985).

It is common at wānanga for participants to share their own personal challenges and losses. Generally, participants feel safe to share these experiences with Ronald and Koromiko. Ronald is conscious of this privilege and includes the participants without imposing his perspectives, adeptly draws out their stories, all the while monitoring the people and maintaining the flow of the wānanga content. Ronald is aware of what, and how he presents concepts, in order for participants to stay focused and safe. This is something that cannot be taught, it has to be informed by experience.

Koromiko has a unique ability of settling the calm in the storm. She shines through the power of her verbal expressions which help when subjects or discussions from participants may become intense. Koromiko often will offer *karakia* (prayer) and strong sense of wairua (as spiritual connection) throughout the wānanga. Without these cultural and spiritual dynamics, the content delivered in wānanga will only be content and not an experience. Their approach brings to life the importance of tikanga Māori and mātauranga Māori within suicide prevention and postvention activities and honouring Māori traditions of care based on tikanga and mātauranga and culturally Māori ways of being.

### **Supporting Kaumātua**

Kaumātua are often in high demand and are well known for supporting others. However, Kaumātua are able to thrive when they feel supported themselves (Simpson et al. 2021). Support for Kaumātua includes aspects such as ensuring they have the support they need to do the job they are employed and desire to do. This may mean they have a support person (such as a

family member, or someone with whom they feel comfortable) to be their driver, to provide technological support, or support with communication so that a younger audience can understand and relate. Their health needs to also be considered, as Kaumātua will often sacrifice their own needs for others. So, consideration around providing them with long breaks or rest periods, and to make sure they are able to access food and medication requirements, if necessary, needs to be planned. Importantly Kaumātua should be paid as correct acknowledgement for their contributions.

### Continual Kaumātua Learning

Kaumātua still have a huge capacity to learn, which also keeps their minds active. Active discussion and interaction with younger people build strong relationships, trust, and a sense of worth. It is important to acknowledge the guidance and knowledge Kaumātua share as a *taonga* (treasure), so they know their contribution will continue to have impact for coming generations.

## Conclusion

The employment of Kaumātua in the delivery of wānanga to Māori is vital for building Māori workforces and wellbeing. Kaumātua provide unique methods of learning that are based in mātauranga Māori with the recognition that the power of Māori healing and wellbeing resides within Māori people.

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