



Creating Pito'enua: a Cook Islands Model of Health and Wellbeing

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Kōrero 'Akatomo'anga Abstract

Pito'enua is a conceptual framework for understanding health and wellbeing in the Cook Islands. This paper discusses its genesis, including an extensive consultation process. Pito'enua as a model, continues to be utilised two decades after it was first developed, showing its versatility and ongoing relevance. We discuss how and why the concept of Pito'enua came about during a project to develop a culturally appropriate philosophy on which to establish a national education curriculum in the Cook Islands. Nationwide consultation was used to understand Cook Islands indigenous views related to health and wellbeing and to develop a Cook Islands model for health and wellbeing. 'Pito'enua', a term articulated in a proverb from a traditional orator, became the conceptual foundation for the curriculum and ensured that the new curriculum was suitable for the context. The process facilitated a pathway to synthesise diverse understandings of health and wellbeing held by Cook Islanders.

Tuatua 'Akamata'anga Introduction

This paper addresses repeated requests to document the genesis of Pito'enua, a Cook Islands model of health and wellbeing. Despite the project being completed some time ago it is hoped that this explanation will be useful for those working and researching within the Cook Islands and Pacific health and wellbeing spaces. Indeed, many years after the development of the concept of Pito'enua the model continues to be used as a wellbeing framework and evolved into a tool applicable beyond its original scope of health education. In 2023, it was incorporated as the foundational thinking for other aspects of education in the Cook Islands; for example the framework for Individual Education Plans within Inclusive Education, being utilised by school counsellors, and in some schools, the framework that acts as the underlying concept for a whole school philosophy (Mokai, 2023). Most recently the model has been incorporated into Cook Islands national teams utilising Pito'enua to structure training and teamwork campaigns as

well as leadership life coaching training (Wallbank, 2025).¹²

The Cook Islands context

The Cook Islands is an independent nation situated in the South Pacific Ocean, northeast of Aotearoa | New Zealand (ANZ), between Tahiti and Fiji (See Figure 1).

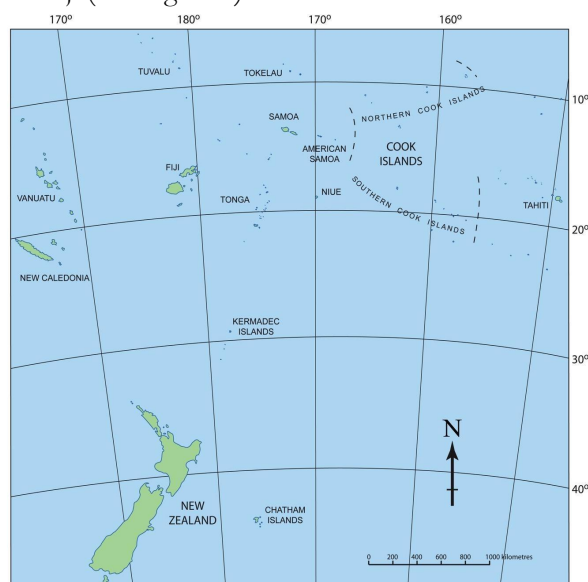


Figure 1. *The Cook Islands in Relation to NZ (Sefton, 2010a).*

The country is a 'large ocean state' (Reeves, 2012) comprising 15 islands spread across 2.2 million square kilometres of ocean, see figure 2. Approximately 14,987 people populate the country (Cook Islands Ministry of Finance and Economic Management, 2021). Most residents are Cook Islands Māori, and a significant diaspora of more than 100,000 Cook Islanders are living in ANZ and Australia.

Historically, Ariki | paramount chiefs were the leaders of the Cook Islands. In pre-Christian times, the spiritual and physical dimensions of life were inextricably linked, involving many rituals, rites, ceremonies, and prayers associated with everyday experiences (Buck, 1939; Crocombe & Holmes, 2014). Arriving in 1821, the London Missionary Society missionaries from French Polynesia (formerly Tahiti and the Society Islands) introduced Christianity and within a short time Christianity had a strong influence

which persists in contemporary society. Given the significant proportion of the population who are members of a Christian-based religion, adherence to Christianity has become a central tenet of everyday life.

In 1888, the Cook Islands was colonised by Britain and declared a protectorate of the British Crown, and in 1901 the country was annexed to ANZ. The postcolonial period for the Cook Islands began in 1965 when the country became self-governing in free association with ANZ. Being 'in free association' with ANZ describes the unique arrangement between these two countries that allows Cook Islanders to maintain ANZ citizenship while at the same time being free to make their own laws and control their own constitution (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2021).

The impacts of colonisation did not end when the colonising body withdrew (Childs & Williams, 2013). The concept of neo-colonialism described argues that 'Western powers were still intent on exercising and maintaining maximum indirect control over erstwhile colonies via political, cultural and above all, economic channels' (Childs & Williams, 2013, p. 5). In the name of 'development', agencies such as the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC) and United Nations organisations including United Nations Fund for Population Fund (UNFPA), United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the World Health Organization (WHO), and others involved with health and education in the Pacific, continue to exert neo-colonial influence (Vai'imene, 2003). During 2003-4 New Zealand Aid supported the Cook Islands Ministry of Education to develop a Cook Islands Ora'anga e te Tupu'anga Meitaki | Health and Physical Wellbeing Curriculum (Cook Islands Ministry of Education, 2006). An ANZ consultant was contracted to undertake this development work. As previously mentioned, postcolonial critiques censure much development work as characterised by exclusionary and western-centric ideas (Anae, 2010; Anae, et al, 2001; Nieuwenhuys, 2013; Smith, 2004; Weber-Pillwax, 2004).

¹Cook Islands Māori is the first language of the Cook Islands, words are not italicised in relation to English. Cook Islands Māori translated into English words use a | to not favour one language over another. After the first translation in text Cook Islands Māori words are used and appear in the glossary.

² With continuing and unresolved debate about what Māori name the Cook Islands should take to replace the one assigned through colonisation, the authors continue to use Cook Islands until a consensus is reached by Cook Islanders.

Consequently, the aim of the second author, as the newly appointed expatriate Papa'a (European) curriculum developer, was to work collaboratively with Cook Islanders to ensure the curriculum reflected Cook Islands understanding(s) of health and wellbeing.



Figure 2: The Cook Islands (Sefton, 2010b)

Author positionality

The first author, an ANZ-born Cook Islander, was integral to this project through his role as lecturer in Health and Physical Education at the Cook Islands Teachers Training College and through his commitment to integrate authentic Cook Islands understandings within the curriculum. Being a Cook Islander, but also new to living in the Cook Islands, he had some insider / outsider considerations to be mindful of (Smith, 2012). Together, we quickly grasped that almost all of the educational materials in the Cook Islands, as part of the Realm of ANZ, were slightly modified (if modified at all) from ANZ resources and, unsurprisingly, local teachers wanted a curriculum that represented Cook Islands cultural contexts and understandings. To this end, an invitation was made to key stakeholders in health and wellbeing in Rarotonga to become part of a consultative group that would support the development of the curriculum. Key stakeholders included representatives from all organisations or individuals working in health education, health promotion, sport, or physical activity from the Cook Islands community. This group was key in

guiding understandings within the curriculum development process.

The second author writes 'While I am 'outside' this indigenous setting as a Papa'a | European, there are a number of ways that I possess an 'insider's' perception (Smith, 2012) as I have been involved with Cook Islands contexts for more than 40 years. I married a Cook Islander in 1988 and am a mother, grandmother, and aunt of Cook Islanders. Through these connections I was drawn to understanding what would best support teaching and learning in the Cook Islands, and how to make a difference on the health and wellbeing for future generations. As a teacher and health educator working in the Cook Islands I also wanted to know what might be the best approach to enable Cook Islands youth to learn life-long, health-enhancing behaviours. As a curriculum developer and implementer, I wanted to ensure that what was shared with teachers and other health educators, was accurate and would meet the needs of what youth considered important as well as being culturally appropriate.

Undertaking this work, I was particularly conscious of being a non-indigenous advisor / researcher, working within an Indigenous setting and acknowledged the potential for misinterpretation of data due to cultural nuance. Therefore, it was imperative for me to be open in all areas of my work including information gathering, as well as the interpretations made of findings, checking with participants in the consultation and collaboration, that interpretations of data had been perceived in the way(s) intended (Weber-Pillwax, 2004).

Health education approaches

Pacific health and wellbeing models have been widely recognised as essential for developing understandings needed to support effective health interventions and considerations for Indigenous people (Durie, 1994, 2004; Panapa, et al, 2021; Parsons, 1985; Pere, 1988; Puluotu-Endemann, 2001; Smith, 1999). At the time of this project there were several recognised Pacific Indigenous health and wellbeing models being used in health settings to inform practice. In ANZ, models being used to represent Indigenous understandings of health were: Fono Fale (Puluotu-Endemann, 2001) using a metaphor of a Samoan fale | house; Whare tapa whā (Durie, 1994) using a metaphor of a whare | traditional meeting house; and Te wheke (Pere, 1988) using a metaphor of a wheke | octopus. These cultural

frameworks were typically developed due to concerns that the prevailing dominant approaches to health and wellbeing were Eurocentric and not reflective of the worldviews, beliefs and knowledge systems of Indigenous and Pacific people living in ANZ. Pacific scholars agree that no single model can provide cultural context for all Pacific cultures (Veukiso-Ulugia, Nofo'akifolau, & Fitzpatrick, 2023) and extensive literature review yielded no pre-existing Cook Islands-specific models. While the authors considered there could be similarities between the principles and values represented in these models to Cook Islands understandings of health and wellbeing, these models were developed for Indigenous peoples outside of the Cook Islands context and therefore were not considered applicable.

Given the use of another model well used in health education settings across many countries, the Ottawa Charter (World Health Organization, 1986), which the Māori and Pacific models mentioned above had synergies with, we decided to consider the use of the four dimensions of health in the Ottawa charter to code data collected during the development phase of this project. The four dimensions in the Ottawa Charter are Mental and Emotional, Physical, Social, and Spiritual dimensions of health (World Health Organization, 1986).

'Akaruru | Data Generation

Initially, the research concentrated on determining whether there were any existing ideas related to a Cook Islands concept or model of health on which to base the curriculum. This part of the project entailed a review of all relevant Cook Islands research, literature, and historical documents in the Cook Islands archives as we endeavoured to find existing Cook Islands ideas related to health and / or wellbeing that could form a suitable base to develop this new curriculum from.

Alongside this document review, semi-structured interviews were undertaken with representatives of every key stakeholder involved in health and wellbeing, in a broad sense, across the country. These interview transcripts would be used to identify the aspirations and concerns regarding health and wellbeing of all organisations involved in health and wellbeing across the country. Interviews were held with representatives of the following organisations:

- Cook Islands Red Cross

- Te Marae Ora | Cook Islands Ministry of Health – Health Promotion, Nutritionist, and Community Health teams
- Cook Islands National Olympic and Sports Committee
- Maraurau o te pae api'i | Cook Islands Ministry of Education
- Te Tango 'Akarangatira Ora'anga | Cook Islands Ministry of Internal Affairs
- Cook Islands Family Welfare Association
- Cook Islands Child Welfare Association
- Cook Islands National Youth Council
- Te iti Vaine o te Kuki Airani | Cook Islands National Council of Women

Additionally, the review incorporated examining Cook Islands health research and statistics connected to the health status of māpū | youth (Cook Islands Government & UNICEF, 2004; Cook Islands Ministry of Health, 1995a, 1995b, 2003). These data contributed to identifying which contexts of health were important to incorporate into subjects that should be addressed in the curriculum.

Months of investigation resulted in not being able to find any previously developed model, framework, or concept of Cook Islands health that had been written about or shared orally. It could be that a previous model has been lost to modern day knowledge, or perhaps there had not been the need for a model in the past. Consequently, a project was designed to develop a culturally appropriate model, from the sand up. This model of health would form the patu'are | the foundation stone of the curriculum document to ensure that Cook Islands values, beliefs and cultural understandings were central within the document. It would also serve to ensure the contexts addressed by the curriculum were appropriate to māpū needs.

Gathering understandings of Cook Islands health through listening to the views of people across the Pā 'Enua | country was imperative to the development of the Cook Islands model as we worked in a spirit of tā'okota'i | collaboration with each of the island communities. Research literature strongly supports this stance when working with Indigenous communities (Futter-Puati & Ma'ua-Hodges, 2019; Ma'ua-Hodges, Personal Communication, 2016; Moreton-Robinson, 2006; Smith, 2012; Weber-Pillwax,

2004; Wilson, 2008). Two areas of particular importance to our work were ensuring relationships were always respectful and hearing from māpū to gather their voice/s. The Cook Islands is a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (United Nations, 1989). Article 12 of the UNCRC (1989) states that young people have the right to participate in matters that affect them; a philosophy this project upheld. Such an approach is also supported as a best practice within the Pacific (Farran, 2016; Secretariat of the Pacific Community, 2015; UNFPA, UNESCO, & WHO, 2015).

Relationships are important in the Cook Islands. Being able to guide focus group discussions in a way that valued community responses needed to be undertaken through sensitive and respectful practices that ensured the relationships with and between all of participants stayed intact. Cook Islands researcher Teremoana Ma'ua-Hodges expects that the values of 'akangateitei | respect and assertiveness, will always be shown between the researcher and participants (Futter-Puati & Ma'ua-Hodges, 2019). Therefore, 'akangateitei was an imperative element woven throughout focus group discussions. Respectful practice has always been something integral to the way(s) the authors conduct their work and indeed, live their lives. However, respectful and reciprocal practice(s) have not always underpinned the ways that research has been undertaken in the Cook Islands (Futter-Puati, 2010; Newport, 2019).

Historically, research in the Pacific, as with many/most other indigenous communities, has been undertaken with 'observation' followed by 'commentary' without reciprocity. In other words, studies have been done *on* people, rather than *with* them (Chilisa & Tsheko, 2014; Marshall, 1971; Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008). With these culturally important aspects of the research in mind, data was generated using focus groups across the country with semi-structured discussions which included a group activity. Travel to two of the 12 inhabited islands proved too difficult to arrange due to travel restrictions. Focus groups were held with participants from:

- 12 student groups across schools to ascertain māpū voice
- 12 teacher groups
- 7 community groups (both youth and adult groups)

- 4 Non-Government Organisations with a youth focus
- Initial teacher education students

Our participatory focus group discussions were venues for reciprocal exchanging of ideas about health and wellbeing. As a Papa'a working in partnership with Cook Islanders *in* the Cook Islands, this consultative and collaborative process enabled the gathering of rich and deep understandings of the 'politics of location' (Rich, 2003). Participants worked in small, self-selected groups to ensure they were comfortable and emotionally safe. A strategy that was particularly productive was to have groups working around large pieces of paper prepared with the outline of a human body on each (see figure 3). Groups were asked to brainstorm answers to the question:

What does 'being healthy' mean to you [as a Cook Islander]?

Answers to the question were written on the *inside* of the body outline. The aim of this activity was that these ideas generated would help identify what a Cook Islands concept of health was - through the lived realities and understandings of what Cook Islanders 'being healthy' looked like. This information formed the basis of the goals of the curriculum document. After collation and analysis, these ideas formed the concepts and contexts which the new curriculum would focus on. A second question was then posed for participants to brainstorm:

What makes it hard for people to be healthy [in the Cook Islands]?

Responses to the second question were written on the *outside* of the body outline on the large pieces of paper supplied. These answers offered insights that included their views about not just the Cook Islands but also their specific island context e.g. What makes it hard to be healthy in the outer islands such as Atiu / Manihiki etc. providing specific data according to the Cook Islands and the Pā 'Enua. Our plan was that this part of the activity would illustrate the barriers and/or the social determinants that Cook Islanders experience related to health and wellbeing. This data would inform what skills the curriculum would need to address so that māpū could learn to successfully navigate the barriers to wellness. See figure 3 example of one sheet.

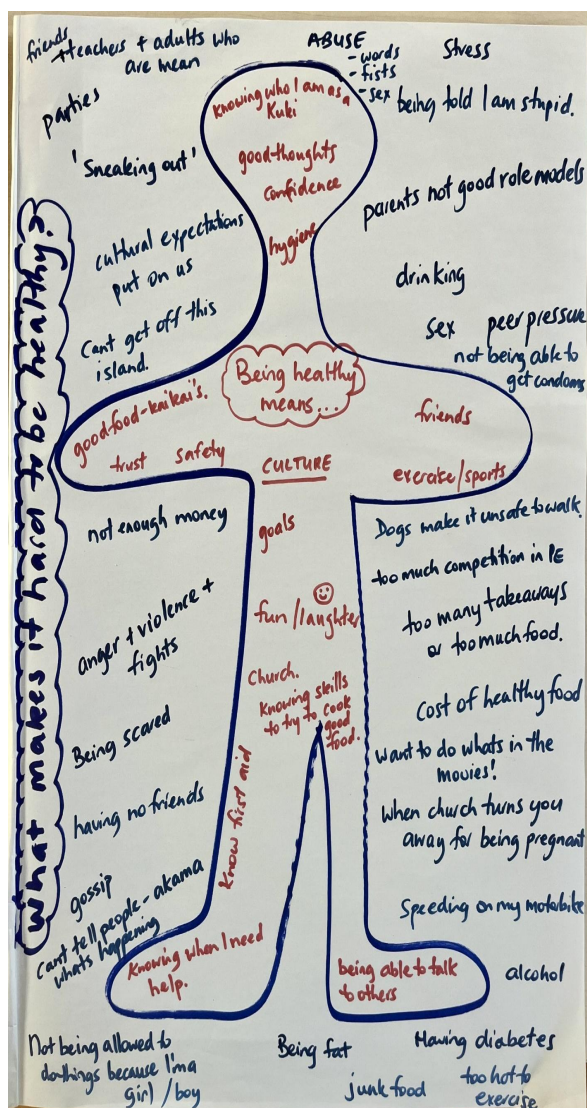


Figure 3. Example of group activity during the consultation process

Once all ideas from each group were documented on the body outline sheets, participants were then asked to colour code their responses using the four World Health Organisation (1986) dimensions of health. These had been translated into Cook Islands Māori: *tū manako* | mental and emotional; *kōpapa* | physical; *vaerua* | spiritual; and *kōpu tangata* | social dimensions of health. We wanted to see if these dimensions might be applicable in this context and the curriculum development work. What became evident through these processes and subsequent analyses was that some aspects identified by participant groups were not covered by these four dimensions. For the Cook Islands the process indicated that, in this context, a fifth dimension of health was needed: *Aorangi* | environment.

Ko'i Ko'i | sorting and gathering patterns from the data

Developing the contextual understandings from which to draft the curriculum took a year of consultation and collaboration with stakeholders living in ten of the twelve inhabited islands. The data generated identified contemporary understandings of Cook Islands concepts of health and wellbeing, alongside the identification of the barriers and social determinants Cook Islanders constantly faced related to their health and wellness. We now had extensive data to analyse and process to inform the next phase of the development of the curriculum. Emerging understandings of how the contexts of health identified through the data generation might connect to five dimensions of health were also evident.

The data obtained through the body outline activity was analysed through a Cook Islands research framework which is known as the Tivaevae Research Model developed by Cook Islander Teremoana Ma'ua-Hodges in the early 2000's (Futter-Puati & Ma'ua-Hodges, 2019; Ma'ua-Hodges, Personal Communication, 2016). (Note: Publication of the Cook Islands Research Model known as the Tivaevae Research Model did not eventuate until 2019).

The tivaevae research model includes a process known as *koi koi* | sorting and gathering of patterns (Futter-Puati & Ma'ua-Hodges, 2019; Ma'ua-Hodges, Personal Communication, 2016). We processed the drawings each group had completed for consistent and recurring themes. It became clear there was consensus from *māpū* regarding the necessity of skill acquisition across five key domains. These were identified as:

- *tū manako* | mental health
- *kai ora'anga* | food and nutrition,
- *api'i'anga tupu'anga kōpapa* | sexuality,
- *kōpapa mātutu* | physical activity, and
- *kōpapa tiaki* | body care.

These contexts were subsequently woven together according to the needs identified by *māpū* through the analysis of the data.

What became clear through the voices of our participants was that learning needed to be contextualised to the Cook Islands and that teaching pedagogies should embrace an indigenous strength-based approach (Cook Islands Ministry of Education, 2006). While the

contexts for teaching and learning emerged from the data generated, we faced challenges in identifying a contextually relevant philosophy or Cook Islands model of health which could become the patu 'are | foundation to underpin the teaching and learning encompassed within the curriculum document.

Pito'enua

As we continued our search for the patu 'are, James (first author) discovered a nakunga | wise phrase by the mataiapo | chief of Vaka Titikaveka (a tribal area in Rarotonga) - Puati Mataiapo, in the book, *Akono'anga Māori: Cook Islands Culture* (Crocombe & Crocombe, 2003). He posited that this nakunga offered an appropriate philosophical foundation for the curriculum.

Taka'i koe ki te papa 'enua
Akamou i te Pito'enua,
A'u i tō'ou rangi

You step onto solid land,
Affix the umbilical cord,
And carve out your world
(Puati Mataiapo, 1990)

In this nakunga Puati Mataiapo is describing the importance of being strongly connected to tribal and ancestral lands to prosper. He signifies the importance of this connection in enabling self-reliance and confidence through understanding cultural identity and advocates that connection to ancestral lands will enable Cook Islanders to flourish. The authors recognised the nakunga as a vehicle for conveying critical and culturally relevant considerations of health and wellbeing. To be well, it is imperative to have a strong sense of who you are as a Cook Islander. Understanding all that these kinds of knowledges encompass would contribute to an improved sense of self-worth as Indigenous Pacific people (Bourke et al., 2018; New Zealand Ministry of Health, 2023). The nakunga also supported a key theme of the curriculum that all the teaching and learning should connect to Cook Islands Indigenous worldviews.

As a result, the concept of Pito'enua became the Cook Islands patu 'are and foundational philosophy linking Cook Islands culture, traditions, and values to guide all aspects of teaching and learning within the Cook Islands Health and Wellbeing curriculum. Once

Pito'enua became the patu 'are of the curriculum we then started to weave the health and physical education contexts, levels of the curriculum, and the underlying philosophies of the curriculum together. Figure 4 represents how these concepts were eventually woven together to form interconnecting and multidimensional ways of thinking about health and physical education through socio-ecological and socio-cultural perspectives. We also considered the curriculum learning from a development standpoint with early teaching and learning initially connected to learning skills to manage personal health and wellbeing. As they develop, they start to take into consideration the needs of others, and this leads to interacting with various players within their communities. The successful delivery of the curriculum would also be reliant on supporting teachers to become knowledgeable of four important interwoven concepts: pito'enua, health promotion, attitudes & values, and society & environment.



Figure 4: Moenga | mat (Cook Islands Ministry of Education, 2006 p. 10)

To help understand these interwoven concepts, the weaving and structure of a moenga | sleeping mat was used (see figure 4). The weaving of a moenga involves intellectual, traditional, and spiritual knowledge as well as physical and creative skills. It takes time and patience, incorporating individual and co-operative work with 'uānga | children, kōpu tangata | extended family and utilising long held peu Māori | traditions of indigenous knowledge. Kōpu tangata plant and take care of the trees from

which the moenga is woven. The family together cut and prepare the plant ready for weaving, and then traditional, alongside contemporary skills, are used to do the weaving. Using this analogy in the curriculum, we proposed that Cook Islands māpū grow and develop in comparable ways (For more about moenga see Cook Islands Ministry of Education, 2006, p. 5). After conceptualising the moenga as a tool for teachers to help them understand the interconnectedness of the underlying theories of the curriculum document, we realised we needed to do something comparable to conceptualise the nakunga as a tool that would support teachers, as well as students, to tangibly connect health and wellbeing to the philosophical concepts held within pito'enua.

As we were lecturing concurrently in the health and physical education papers at the Cook Islands Teachers Training College, we asked the students in our class to undertake a task working cooperatively in small groups, to create a metaphor which Cook Islanders would identify with that they felt represented the concepts held within pito'enua. They were also tasked with trying to incorporate the five dimensions of health determined by participants (Futter, 2009; World Health Organization, 1986). A variety of metaphors were shared by the students for all to consider: an 'onu | turtle; a tiare | national flower of the Cook Islands; a vaka | outrigger canoe, and an 'eke | octopus. Each group explained their thoughts and considerations relating how each representation connected to pito'enua. After much discussion and reflection with various stakeholders, it was decided the vaka would be used as the metaphor to represent the Cook Islands concept of health and wellbeing. The vaka metaphor was then piloted with various groups to ascertain if others also connected with its use to represent and support understanding of the patu 'are of the curriculum. We had some extraordinary responses from teachers in particular. The strong emotional response from some participants, including tears, validated the cultural resonance of the Pito'enua concept and the vaka metaphor. These strong responses confirmed that we had landed on our philosophy and the metaphor most appropriate to represent conceptual understandings of Pito'enua to Cook Islanders. Figure 5 illustrates how Pito'enua is explained in the curriculum document. The top left image is from the original Ministry of Education document however, since it is unclear

when reproduced, this more detailed account of the illustration was developed when supporting an honours student to show more clarity for the reader (Macleod, 2025).

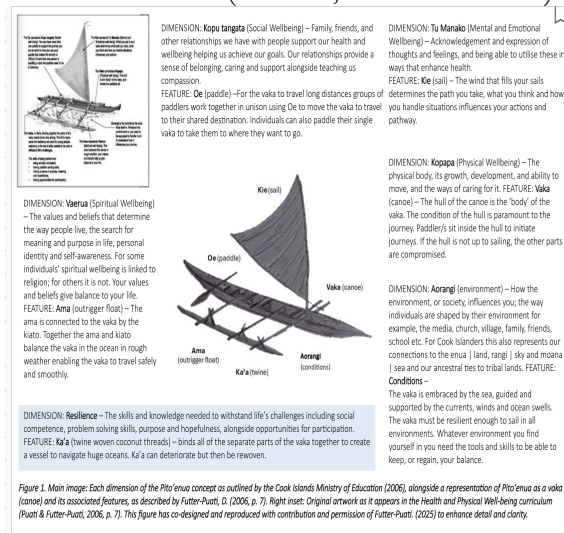


Figure 5: Cook Islands concept of Pito'enua (Cook Islands Ministry of Education, 2006, p. 6; Macleod, H, 2025).

More than two decades since its inception, Pito'enua continues to be used as an instrument which shapes health and wellbeing practices in the Cook Islands. While documenting its genesis is crucial, examining the model's enduring utility and evolution is equally valuable. While it is now quite common to use metaphors / nakunga / whakatauki in health, education, and research, in the early 2000s this was less common and was seen as innovative. A noteworthy observation for the authors, is that the concept of Pito'enua has continued to be a useful tool and that it is now being used within other spaces outside of health and physical education and in a variety of ways. A few examples of these are now shared.

The model has been used as a best practice model for an Indigenous understanding of global school health promotion (Futter, 2009, p. 390; Bay & Mora, 2016; Whitman & Aldinger, 2009, p. 70). Primary and secondary schools are using the model as the lens, or structure, through which they develop and base their school strategic plans to ensure their teaching and learning programmes promote wellbeing and are holistic (M. Mokai, Personal Communication, 2023; T. Wynn, Personal Communication 2015).

Within school health promotion at the national high school in Rarotonga the counsellors now use wooden vakas as a hands on but metaphorical

tool for māpū to manipulate as they help students conceptualise an intervention plan using the five dimensions of health- see figure 6.



Figure 6. Wooden vaka used for counselling put to work alongside Pito'enua as a tool for understanding personal wellbeing (M. Henderson, Personal Communication, 2022).

Within a New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade funded research project looking to build the capacity of teachers in Inclusive Education within the Pacific region, the model is being used as a scaffold for culturally appropriate framing of Individual Education Plans (IEPs) within inclusive education in Cook Islands schools (Futter-Puati, 2023). As this framework has been trialled, teachers have provided feedback that using Pito'enua to think about the design of IEPs asked them to (re)consider the way they view their children and in what ways they can plan to more holistically support their inclusive education students in their classrooms and schools. See figure 7 as an example of the template used to stimulate thinking for how the five dimensions of Pito'enua are considered within an IEP format.



Figure 7. Blueprint Cook Islands inclusive education template for designing of individual education plans (Futter-Puati, 2023).

In 2024 the national Cook Islands rugby league coaches began to use pito'enua to frame their coaching and team building programmes. The 2024 Pacific Championships players booklet uses pito'enua and the metaphor of the vaka to bring connectedness and resiliency to the teams. President of Cook Islands rugby league shared with the team the following statement:

Our tribe is not just those related by blood—it's everyone standing beside you today, fighting for the same goal [of winning the Pacific Championship] ... It's those who lift you when you falter and push forward when you tire. When we think of winning this championship, we must see ourselves as one vaka, navigating the rough seas and the storms together. Each one of you holds a paddle, representing not only your strength but the strength of every ancestor who came before you. Our success lies in our ability to paddle in unison, in harmony, to remain united, and to keep our eyes firmly on the destination. You're playing for your tribe and most importantly, for future generations who will look up to you. Every tackle, every try, every drop of sweat is part of a legacy that connects back to the vaka of your ancestors. Carson, Charles (2024).

Figure 8 illustrates the use of Pito'enua within the team training booklet given to all players.



Figure 8. Cook Islands Rugby League Players Booklet, 2024 (pp 5-6)

A final application of Pito'enua within emerging contexts is its implementation as the foundational

wellbeing framework for a leadership coaching programme. This initiative specifically supports Māori, Pasifika, and other minority groups navigating predominantly Western organisational environments (Wallbank, 2025). The programme design recognised that many individuals are often required to leave parts of themselves at the door, despite organisations increasingly seeking diversity of thought. While many workplaces are still early in their journey toward true inclusion, Pito'enua provided a culturally grounded framework that enabled individuals to initially understand and strengthen themselves before engaging in coaching toward their desired destinations. Utilising familiar Pasifika concepts and holistic wellbeing pillars, the model enables participants to identify specific dimensions of the self requiring attention. This reinforces the principle that individual wellbeing and cultural alignment are precursors to professional confidence and integrity. Consequently, participants are better equipped to integrate their authentic identities into the workplace while progressing toward their self-defined professional objectives.

Openga | Conclusion

In summary, understanding the importance of language and cultural identity to health and wellbeing, this project set out to understand Cook Islanders world views upon which to found a health and wellbeing education curriculum for the Cook Islands Ministry of Education. The authors wanted to develop an authentic curriculum that was culturally relevant, context specific, useful to inform practice, and beneficial to end users – teachers and māpū in schools. With these goals in mind, we set about finding or developing a Cook Islands concept of health and wellbeing upon which to form the patu 'are of the curriculum. Using a traditional nakunga by Puati Mataiapo we designed the curriculum to thread Pito'enua through the lived experiences of health that participants shared with us. In doing so, the education curriculum was founded on an authentic, reflective of context, culturally relevant model of health and wellbeing which we called pito'enua. Twenty years on, as testimony to ensuring connection to Cook Islanders world view, the concept of Pito'enua continues to be used in schools and classrooms but has also been utilised and extended out of the discipline of education and put to work into other spaces such as counselling, sports, coaching and training.

Pito'enua 'E ara tupuna, 'E ara tangata (Pe'e)

'Ātui'ia te pito.
Te moana roa o te ara-tupuna,
Ki te ara roa o te ara-tangata...
Tuputupu'ia tupua!
'E vaka tere, 'e vaka tangata
Tārai'ia, tere'ia, tū'oe'ia
Tapu, tapu, tapu rava e
Avaikinui - I...o...e!

Your journey is imbued
With the essence of your ancestors.
Potential to shape your path as you go...
Growth growing from potential
Shape it, use it, direct it
Sacred, transcendent, spiritual journey
To Avaikinui – I...o...e!
(Uri-Puati, 2026)

Glossary

'Akangateitei	Respect and assertiveness
'Akaruru	Data generation
Ariki	Paramount chief/s
Api'i'anga tupu'anga	Sexuality education
kōpapa	
Eke	Octopus
Kai ora'anga	Food and nutrition
Ko'i Ko'i	Sorting and gathering patterns from the data
Kōpapa	Physical
Kōpapa mātutu	Physical activity
Kōpu tangata	Social, also extended family
Kōpapa tiaki	Body care
Kōrero	Abstract
'Akatomo'anga	
Maraaurau o te pae api'i	Cook Islands Ministry of Education
Mataiapo	Chief
Moenga	Sleeping mat
Nakunga	Wise saying or proverb
'Onu	Turtle
Openga	Conclusion
Pā 'Enea	Country or outer islands
Papa'a	European
Patu 'are	Foundation stone
Pito'enua	Health and wellbeing
Te iti Vaine o te Kuki Airani	Cook Islands National Council of Women
Te Marae Ora	Cook Islands Ministry of Health

Te 'Akarangatira Ora'anga	Cook Islands Ministry of Internal Affairs
Tiare	Flower, or national flower of the Cook Islands
Tū manako	Mental and emotional
Tuatua	Introduction
'Akamata'anga	
Vaerua	Spiritual
Vaka	Outrigger canoe
Vaka Titikaveka	Tribal area of Titikaveka

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