



ORANGA WHAKAPAPA

Case Study of a Manurewa Marae initiative in
collaboration with The Cause Collective





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**THE GREATEST GIFT WE
CAN GIVE TO RANGATAHI
IS A STRONG CULTURAL
FOUNDATION, ROOTED
IN TE AO MĀORI, THAT
WOULD SUPPORT THEM
NOT JUST TODAY BUT FOR
A LIFETIME.**

Kei ngaa whaanau o ngaa uri, i uru mai ki roto i te kaupapa nei, teenaa koutou. Teenaa koutou i ou koutou whakaaro mo ou uri mo te kaupapa hoki. Mei kore ko koutou, kaore te kaupapa i tutuki.

E ngaa ringa haapai o Taamaki ki raro, tenei maatou e mihi ana.
Toi Mauri Ora, Te pu a nga maara, Kingdomfit, MAK Dojo Manurewa,
Ngaati Foodies, The Cause Collective, Maataatoa Time to train, Raukura
Hauora o Tainui, Panapa Charters, Te Huinga Kaahu Adventures, Groove
Kuttz Academy, He Poutama Rangatahi, Ngaa Kete Waananga Solutions,
Maa Te Huruhuru, Marcus Winter, Ngaa Whare Watea Marae and
Manurewa Marae.

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THE PROBLEM

Colonisation has deeply impacted the identity and worldview of Māori¹, creating a legacy of displacement and resilience. Many Māori experience a profound sense of disconnection from their whenua, which is central to Māori culture. This loss affects their sense of identity, as traditional connections to ancestry, land, and cultural practices are eroded in urban environments far removed from the lands their ancestors once called home.

The cultural gap caused by colonisation has led to a diminished understanding of language, customs, and values, which are essential for grounding identity within a Māori worldview. For many Māori, urban society feels misaligned with indigenous ways of understanding family, land, and genealogy, creating a duality that can complicate their sense of belonging.

For rangatahi Māori, the issue of cultural gaps plays a crucial part in formative development and can affect wellbeing, identity and sense of belonging during a time when their growth shapes who they are and informs the pathways they take.

Despite these challenges, Māori exhibit strong resilience, forming a unique identity that bridges Māori heritage and multicultural urban influences. Many actively seek to reconnect with their roots by engaging in cultural spaces within the city, such as kapa haka, youth programmes, and Māori-led community initiatives. The growing movement to reclaim tūrangawaewae demonstrates indigenous determination to redefine cultural identity in an urban context, bridging the divide between ancestral values and modern realities. Through these efforts, Māori are working to restore their place in the world, embracing a future rooted in cultural pride and resilience.

What's holding the problem in place?

Rangatahi Māori in South Auckland face a multitude of interconnected challenges that profoundly affect their identity, sense of belonging, and overall well-being:

- Many rangatahi lack connection to their pepeha, often due to generational detachment and limited cultural knowledge at home. This absence of cultural grounding affects their sense of belonging and confidence.
- Youth from gang-affiliated families often adopt a tough mindset, reinforcing gang values and limiting their view of alternative pathways. The cycle of gang allegiance is difficult to break without exposure to new perspectives.
- Unstable or unsupportive home environments hinder personal growth. Without positive role models or guidance, many rangatahi prioritise survival over education or personal goals.
- A mindset focused on survival, often inherited from generations of poverty, limits aspirations. Lacking resources and role models, rangatahi struggle to envision a future beyond immediate needs.
- Bullying, common among isolated or marginalised youth, is intensified by a lack of supportive adults or coping mechanisms. Many rangatahi withdraw feeling as if they have no one to trust.
- Drugs and alcohol are often seen as coping mechanisms, especially for those who grow up around normalised substance abuse. Without healthier outlets, rangatahi turn to substances for stress relief or peer acceptance.
- A lack of cultural grounding leads to feelings of disconnection and a loss of pride in heritage. Generational trauma often prevents parents from passing down Māori customs, language, or values.
- Cycles of hardship create feelings of hopelessness for many rangatahi, who struggle to envision a hopeful future. Without role models or encouragement, their view of the world remains limited.
- The accumulation of these struggles leads to severe mental health challenges, with some rangatahi experiencing suicidal ideation. Without safe spaces to discuss their pain, many carry these burdens alone.
- Rangatahi raised by grandparents experience love but may also feel misunderstood due to generational differences, leaving them feeling isolated as they navigate modern challenges.

These issues collectively create a cycle of disconnection, limited aspirations, and reduced resilience, highlighting the critical need for supportive, culturally rooted programmes that address identity, mental health, and personal growth.

BACKGROUND

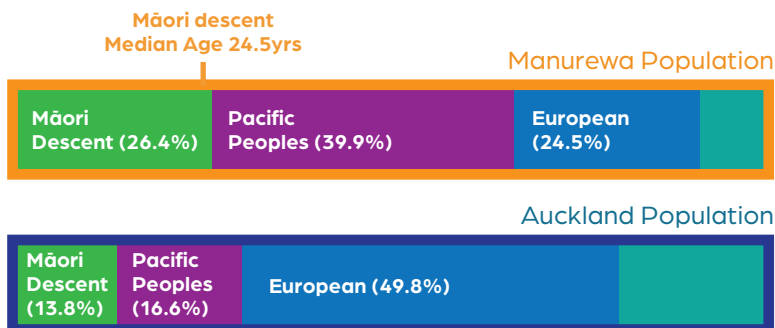
Manurewa is a vibrant suburb in Tāmaki Makaurau known for its proud community and deep historical roots. Known traditionally as Te Manurewa o Tamapahore, this area has been inhabited since the 13th century and holds immense cultural importance for Ngāti Te Ata Waiohua.

The landscape is marked by two significant mountains, Matukutūruru and Matukutūreia, which were once home to the pā of this region’s early inhabitants. The legends and stories of this area live on, resonating through its people and providing a strong cultural foundation that endures across generations.



Demographics

Manurewa’s current demographic profile reflects a uniquely youthful and diverse population, with a substantial representation of young Māori and Pacific Island residents. According to Census 2023 data²:



Projections indicate that over the next five years, Manurewa will experience the fastest growth rate in Māori youth populations across any district in New Zealand. This significant growth underscores the increasing demand for youth-centered initiatives that align with the values and aspirations of the community.



THE SOLUTION

Community Insight and Kaumātua Wisdom

Manurewa Marae stands as a beacon of cultural and community support, championed by the wisdom of local kaumātua. The kaumātua of Manurewa Marae have long held that the future lies with rangatahi and the continuation of cultural knowledge and community values rests on nurturing the next generation.

The Marae provides essential support to urban tamariki, helping them connect to their cultural roots and sense of belonging. Through initiatives like Ngā Rangatira o te Naaianeī – “The Leaders of Today” – the community fosters an environment of love and belief in the potential that rangatahi are the custodians of tomorrow.



Implications for Youth Initiatives

The high representation of Māori and Pacific youth in Manurewa indicates an urgent need for targeted rangatahi initiatives that honor cultural values and foster pathways to leadership. Manurewa Marae remains dedicated to uplifting tamariki through cultural education, connection to ukaipō (origin), and the transmission of ancestral knowledge as a powerful model for other communities. Programmes like these not only reinforce a sense of identity and resilience but also invest in the long-term well-being and leadership potential of rangatahi, equipping them to carry forward the legacy of their people.

THE APPROACH

Ngā Rangatira o te Naiaianei is a groundbreaking rangatahi initiative designed to explore and cultivate the hearts and minds of Māori youth through a Māori worldview. This approach provides rangatahi with the opportunity to grow into adulthood while carrying the mana of their ancestors, and acknowledging them as the change-makers of tomorrow. Guided by the whakatauki “Tukuna te Rangatahi kia tū, kia whanake” – “Allow the youth to rise and grow” – this initiative embraces the strength and wisdom inherent in their heritage.

Initially launched as a pilot project, Ngā Rangatira o te Naiaianei worked alongside 23 rangatahi, helping them unlock their potential as leaders within their whānau and communities by actively engaging them in the below activities:

- Learning of theirs and Manurewa’s pepeha to foster cultural connection to their whakapapa, and the whenua they are on.
- Mihi and karanga practice to increase knowledge of tikanga Māori and to support confidence building.
- Engagement and learning of toi Māori to encourage participation and appreciation of Māori traditions.
- Obtaining personal life skills e.g. driver licenses to support personal and professional growth.
- Obtaining passports to support aspirations of travel.

Over a 20-week period, the programme grew into a kaupapa Māori model that approaches development holistically, centering on self-identity, cultural reclaiming, and leadership from a Te Ao Māori (Māori worldview) perspective.

Participation overview

23 participants (21 Māori, two Pacific) were supported by a collaborative network of 17 community organisations. This collective involvement created a rich environment for cultural and personal growth, with diverse perspectives from participants and substantial backing from local organisations, each bringing unique resources and support to the initiative.

A DISTINCT APPROACH TO YOUTH DEVELOPMENT ROOTED IN TE AO MĀORI

At the heart of Ngā Rangatira o te Naiaanei lies a transformative approach to youth development that prioritises the unique needs and strengths of rangatahi by providing intensive support and empowering young people from diverse backgrounds to thrive.

As rangatahi engage with the programme, they discover the intrinsic value of their culture, enhance their social behaviours, and cultivate resilience, all while building meaningful connections with themselves, their peers, and their community.

This kaupapa Māori approach is distinguished from conventional youth programmes, which often rely on rigid, metric-driven frameworks. Instead, the work is centred around the principles of aroha, pono, and tika, integrating Māori values and practices into every aspect of engagement.

By making Te Ao Māori the foundation methodology, rangatahi are empowered not only to achieve success but to flourish as confident young leaders with a deep sense of identity, culture, and belonging. Through this innovative approach, Ngā Rangatira o te Naiaanei nurtures the potential of our youth, helping them to navigate their journey with strength and purpose.

These key aspects are:

Culturally Driven Delivery and Language Emphasis

- **Te Reo Māori as the Foundation:** Unlike a western approach that overlooks language as a critical component of identity, Ngā Rangatira o te Naiaanei heavily integrated te reo Māori into every aspect of delivery. This consistent use of Māori language not only strengthened linguistic skills but also reinforced cultural pride and connection among rangatahi.
- **Constant Teaching of Tikanga:** Western models typically focus on practical life skills or career development. Ngā Rangatira o te Naiaanei emphasised tikanga as fundamental. Through daily teachings about tikanga, it helped rangatahi understand and embody Māori values, gaining a deeper understanding of cultural responsibilities and guiding them towards a meaningful future.

Whānau–Oriented Engagement and Responsibility

- **Relational Approach Over Formality:** Rather than the formal mentor–mentee structure common in Western programmes, Ngā Rangatira o te Naiaianei treated each rangatahi as part of an extended family. This whānau–based approach created an environment of genuine care, aroha, and mutual respect.
- **24/7 Support and Guidance:** Western models often work within strict schedules and office hours, but Ngā Rangatira o te Naiaianei offered around–the–clock support, illustrating their deep commitment to each rangatahi’s wellbeing. This availability reinforced the message that they were valued and always supported, rather than confined to programme hours.

Holistic Evaluation and Empowerment

- **Customised, Non–Western KPIs:** Unlike the KPI–focused approach of many Western programmes, which often emphasise measurable outputs like job placements or academic achievements, Ngā Rangatira o te Naiaianei developed their own Māori–centric KPIs by evaluating each rangatahi based on their wairua, hinengaro, tinana, and whānau, ensuring a more holistic and meaningful assessment of their development and wellbeing.
- **Empowering Language and Expectations:** Ngā Rangatira o te Naiaianei addressed the youth as rangatira, encouraging them to step into a leadership mindset. While Western programmes might use terms like “participants” or “youths”, Ngā Rangatira o te Naiaianei set an expectation of maturity and leadership from the start. Rangatahi were encouraged to step up, and any child–like or tamariki behaviour was called out constructively, guiding them toward self–awareness and growth.

Experiential and Hands–On Learning

- **Physical and Mental Resilience through Full–Contact Activities:** Rather than restricting activities to safe, low–risk ones, Ngā Rangatira o te Naiaianei used full–contact activities like mau rākau and karate. This approach not only taught critical thinking and self–discipline but also helped rangatahi gain confidence and resilience. These activities emphasised mental and physical strength, aligning with Māori values of holistic development.
- **Starter Packs and Gym Memberships:** Each rangatahi received a starter pack with essentials and a one–year gym membership, a unique feature of Ngā Rangatira o te Naiaianei’s programme. These resources were intended to provide them with the tools and support to pursue physical health and confidence, unlike Western programmes that might limit material support or use standardised incentives.

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Kaupapa-Driven Wānanga and International Exposure

- **Frequent Wānanga as a Core Methodology:** In contrast to Western workshops focused on skill-building or career prep, Ngā Rangatira o te Naiaianei held frequent wānanga (learning forums) as sacred spaces for cultural learning and personal reflection. This environment allowed rangatahi to dive into deep discussions, share stories, and gain insight into themselves and each other, reinforcing a strong cultural bond.

- **Cultural Exposure through Global Travel:** One of the most transformative aspects was taking a select group of rangatahi to Japan to perform kapa haka. This broadened their horizons and deepened their pride in Māori culture. This type of exposure is rare in Western programmes, which limit cultural exposure to local settings. By giving rangatahi a global platform, Ngā Rangatira o te Naaianeī highlighted the strength and value of Māori culture on an international stage.



Commitment to Māori-Led Partnerships

- **Exclusive Collaboration with Māori Organisations:** Ngā Rangatira o te Naaianeī worked only with organisations that nurture a holistic approach, ensuring a supportive network aligned with Māori values and perspectives. By doing so, the programme ensured rangatahi received guidance and opportunities rooted in shared cultural understanding, and a sense of unity and support that is often missing in Western-aligned programmes where partnerships may lack cultural insight or sensitivity.

In summary, the approach of Ngā Rangatira o te Naaianeī was different from Western models, prioritising a whānau-centered, culturally immersive experience nurturing the whole person – wairua, hinengaro, tinana, and whānau. By rooting their work in kaupapa Māori values and practices, Ngā Rangatira o te Naaianeī nurtures a profound and authentic growth for rangatahi, enabling them to thrive with a strong sense of identity, resilience, and leadership.

IMPACT

Working with rangatahi in Ngā Rangatira o te Naiaianei was a transformative experience for both the young leaders and the facilitators involved. The programme had a profound impact of grounding rangatahi in their cultural identity, traditions, and values. This cultural foundation served as a powerful counter to the disconnection often felt in urban settings influenced by colonial legacies, creating a safe space where rangatahi could embrace their Māori identity and thrive as leaders in today's world.

The programme enabled growing pride in being Māori in the participants with many having limited understanding of what it meant to be Māori, often viewing their identity as secondary. However, through engaging with te reo Māori, kapa haka, tikanga, and wānanga, they began to see their heritage as a source of strength and empowerment. Witnessing this transformation was inspiring for facilitators, reinforcing the importance of a programme rooted in Māori values and principles.

A pivotal moment in this journey was witnessing rangatahi connect with their pepeha and whakapapa. For many, this marked the first time they deeply engaged with their ancestral lines and origins.

Understanding their pepeha and whakapapa instilled in them a sense of belonging that extended beyond South Auckland, giving them a renewed pride and a sense of responsibility to carry forward their ancestors' legacy. It validated the importance of equipping rangatahi with these tools, which serve as anchors in navigating the complexities of urban life.

Practical activities like mau rākau and martial arts, which not only provided physical benefits but also supported critical thinking and resilience were incorporated throughout this programme. These strategic exercises required mental presence and quick decision-making, allowing rangatahi to approach life challenges as puzzles rather than obstacles. Observing their ability to apply these critical thinking skills in various aspects of their lives at home, and among friends demonstrated the depth of impact achievable through a culturally aligned approach.

A key focus of the programme was instilling the value of tikanga, the cultural practices that guide Māori behavior and ethics. Through daily teachings, rangatahi learned that tikanga is not merely a set of rules but a living practice reflecting ancestral values. This understanding empowered them to lead with respect and integrity, qualities they might not have fully recognised in themselves before. Internalising these teachings will help them maintain a strong sense of self in environments that may not always honour their cultural values.

Central to the approach was the concept of whānau. Rangatahi were treated as family, providing support and guidance akin to that of a caring relative. Over time, they came to appreciate the importance of whānau, not just as blood relatives but as an essential community and support network. Many expressed feeling seen and valued for the first time, realising that whānau is both a source of strength and an anchor. Rangatahi began to understand whānau as an unbreakable bond guiding them through life, enriching their existence.



What Impacted Us

The programme was never just about delivering content; it was about creating a space where young Māori could reconnect with who they are and find a place in the world that is true to their heritage. In the process, Manurewa Marae deepened its own understanding of what it means to lead with aroha, pono, and tika. Witnessing the incredible potential of a youth programme designed from the inside out – not measured by Western KPIs but by a commitment to wairua, hinengaro, tinana, and whānau, was transformational.

Each success story was a reminder of the strength in these principles and the need for more spaces that respect and reflect Māori identity. The experience taught Manurewa Marae that the greatest gift we can give to rangatahi is a strong cultural foundation, rooted in Te Ao Māori, that will support them not just today but for a lifetime.

Key Milestones

Throughout their journey with Ngā Rangatira o te Naaianei, rangatahi achieved significant milestones that deepened their connection to Māori culture and facilitated personal development. These included:

- Learning their own pepeha, facilitated the acknowledgement of their ancestry and connection to the land while additionally learning the pepeha of Manurewa which anchored them within their community, fostering a strong sense of belonging.
- These foundational aspects of Māori identity were crucial in helping them appreciate their roots and place in both the ancestral and local landscapes.
- Public speaking and oratory skills were also developed as rangatahi learned to deliver a mihi and, for some, a karanga. This experience boosted their confidence in ceremonial contexts and allowed them to embody their roles as cultural ambassadors. They further enriched their understanding of traditional knowledge by exploring the maramataka and its relevance to personal wellbeing and environmental awareness. Coupled with foundational insights into rongoā Māori, this knowledge equipped them with holistic health practices that emphasise the healing properties of native plants.
- Engagement with toi Māori provided the rangatahi with opportunities to express their creativity and connect with cultural symbols. They practiced traditional forms of expression such as weaving and carving, which deepened their appreciation for their heritage and its significance. Alongside these cultural experiences, they gained a comprehensive understanding of the pōwhiri (traditional welcome ceremony) process, with some taking on leadership roles in facilitating these ceremonies, showcasing their knowledge and respect for Māori customs.
- The programme also emphasised practical life skills, encouraging each rangatahi to create detailed path plans for their future, outlining their goals and actionable steps. This process enhanced self-awareness and critical thinking, equipping them to actively shape their futures. Furthermore, obtaining learner and restricted driver licenses marked significant milestones towards independence, allowing them to support their families and access greater employment opportunities.
- Lastly, ten rangatahi obtained passports, symbolising their readiness to engage with the world beyond Aotearoa. This achievement opened doors to international travel, including a group trip to Japan, where they could experience and showcase Māori culture on a global stage. Overall, these milestones illustrate the holistic approach of Ngā Rangatira o te Naaianei, nurturing rangatahi as they grow in cultural identity, practical skills, and leadership, ultimately paving the way for a future filled with pride and purpose.

Conclusion



Ngā Rangatira o te Naiaianei demonstrates how a culturally immersive, kaupapa Māori approach can empower urban rangatahi to thrive. By integrating language, cultural practices, and holistic support, the programme has helped South Auckland youth reconnect with their heritage, build resilience, and step confidently into leadership roles. This case study highlights the potential of such initiatives to make lasting, positive changes in the lives of Māori youth, ensuring that their legacy continues to flourish.

¹ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03036758.2019.1668439>

² <https://knowledgeauckland.org.nz/media/ue0jopqq/manurewa-2023-census-summary.pdf>



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