MINISTRY OF YOUTH DEVELOPMENT
TE MANATŪ WHAKAHIATO TAIOHI

Administered by the Ministry of Social Development

FINAL REPORT:

Ākonga Youth Development Community Fund Evaluation Framework and Youth Development Opportunities

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Ākonga Youth Development Community Fund Evaluation Framework and Youth Development Opportunities

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Executive Summary

The unpredictable nature of the COVID-19 pandemic and its associated lockdowns has affected young people's ability to engage with learning and training. The Ākonga Youth Development Community Fund (the Ākonga Fund), administered by the Ministry of Youth Development - Te Manatū Whakahiato Taiohi (MYD), was developed to support the engagement and re-engagement of vulnerable ākonga (learners) with training and education aspirations through community providers. In 2021, Big River Creative (the Research Collective) was contracted to conduct a research evaluation that sought to understand how providers were:

- Fostering stronger connections with whānau, iwi, community, and other support services
- Utilising these linkages to increase engagement in learning and/or improve their future aspirations (e.g. ākonga have transitioned to further training or employment as a result of participating in Ākonga funded initiatives).
- Focusing on key cohorts:
  - Māori
  - Pacific
  - Rainbow
  - Ākonga with disabilities.

The Research Collective designed a research programme that leaned heavily on Pacific and Indigenous research methodologies. The research was also guided by domestic and international youth development and empowerment literature to address three research questions determined by the Research Collective and MYD collaboratively. The research team visited a total of 6 providers located in Whangārei, Tāmaki Makaurau-Auckland, Rotorua, Lower Hutt (2x) and Ōtautahi-Christchurch, engaging with ākonga, kaimahi, programme directors and parents in different locations. Overall, the Research Collective found that all providers were working with a sound understanding of core Youth Development principles and their programme interventions were designed to serve the specific communities they were embedded within. Providers also faced many challenges which included unstable funding situations that relied on competitive funds when made available, such as the Ākonga Fund, and there was a high turnover of staff that impacted their ability to maximise the full potential of their programme interventions from their perspective.

This executive summary highlights the major findings of this research in relation to the articulated research questions listed below with full contextualised findings in the main body of this report.

RESEARCH QUESTION 1.

How have providers fostered stronger connections with whānau, iwi, community, and other support services?

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS IN RESPONSE TO QUESTION 1:

1a. Providers used whakawhanuaungatanga with a purpose to craft quality relationships.

The Research Collective found all providers designed programme content to centre around whakawhanaungatanga as their starting point, with a clear purpose to connect to young people. Whakawhanaungatanga was used as a springboard for developing further youth empowerment activities and connections to whānau, community and iwi in many cases.

1b. Providers fostered various connections to schools and teachers.

All providers we visited were very well-connected to schools and teachers in their catchment areas, who often acted as feeders into their programmes. Providers also suggested that these relationships were mainly positive. While certain providers reported some difficulties with re-connecting ākonga to certain schools, providers often worked with teachers to ensure academic progress and checks were coordinated to keep ākonga engaged with education and training priorities.

1c. Providers leveraged connections with community, support services, and agencies to support ākonga on Ākonga Fund supported programmes.

All providers had strong connections with various support services and agencies that ākonga were either referred from or to, so that they could access additional wellbeing support when needed. This included food support, with certain providers being able to use a one-stop-shop model of care to

One programme supported by The Fund is a collaboration between two providers, which highlighted the spirit of collaboration that providers shared to be an important part of their work culture.

1d. Providers promoted meaningful and generative connections with whānau and iwi.

All providers we visited emphasised the importance of bringing the whole family along the journey with ākonga, and even offered opportunities for parents to participate in programme activities in different contexts. Providers often picked ākonga up from homes and from parents, building trust through offering services to ākonga families, not just ākonga on their own.

1e. Providers actively sought to develop connections between ākonga and peers.

We found providers adopted the cohort building approach as the best way to build strong, positive, and supportive relationships with their peers in their programmes. We saw this in many guises throughout the life of the research project and we specifically observed it taking place organically in settings like van rides and shared transportation moments to and from programme activities. These opportunities allowed ākonga who carried less positive relationships from school to work through their differences and develop important friendships with fellow ākonga in the

RESEARCH QUESTION 2.

How have providers fostered the meaningful inclusion of ākonga voice in programme design and delivery?

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS IN RESPONSE TO QUESTION 2:

2a. Providers intentionally included ākonga voice through whakawhanaungatanga activities and regular check-ins.

Kaimahi and providers demonstrated on many occasions in whakawhanaungatanga activities how they valued ākonga voice through acknowledging their mana in the space and offering them opportunities to voice their dissatisfaction or affirmation of programme activities. This was also achieved through regular one-on-one check-in sessions we witnessed being practised across many different providers. These check-in sessions allowed for progress checks and programme recalibration in moments where ākonga felt that the programme content was not working well for them.

2b. Lack of clarity around role of formal ākonga feedback mechanisms.

Although providers were actively incorporating ākonga feedback during programme sessions, there did not appear to be many formal mechanisms for ākonga feedback to be incorporated into the initial programme design. Where feedback forms were used, there was no explicit articulation of a process in which that feedback was systematically taken on and reported back to ākonga. This includes the way programme proposals have been designed in many cases. This is not to say no mechanism for feedback existed. Providers did make use of the learnings garnered from previous programmes they had run, which included conversations with ākonga, their whānau, and other key stakeholders who participated on these programmes to craft approaches for programmes that were supported by the Ākonga Fund.

2c. Building trust with ākonga to empower their voices.

Kaimahi played a pivotal role in empowering the voices of ākonga to be meaningfully included in influencing the delivery of the programme. Many ākonga felt cared for and supported by kaimahi, which allowed them to open up to kaimahi in different contexts. This level of trust created opportunities for kaimahi to address education and training opportunities, or to encourage ākonga to re-engage with their studies in a positive way.

RESEARCH QUESTION 3.

How have providers utilised linkages to increase engagement in learning and/or improve future aspirations (e.g. ākonga have transitioned to further training or employment as a result of participating in Ākonga funded initiatives)?

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS IN RESPONSE TO QUESTION 3:

3a. Providers made use of existing connections to open pathways for ākonga.

Providers used their existing networks to connect ākonga with career and training opportunities on their programmes through COVID-19 impacted years. This included pathways to alternative learning and employment opportunities, where providers offered multiple options for ākonga to transition into work, or re-engage ākonga with local schools.

3b. Providers leveraged the power of connection to help build competencies in learning and training for ākonga.

Providers understood connection to be the basis of all youth empowerment. Through the cultivation of trust and connection between kaimahi and ākonga, we were able to see how ākonga developed confidence in different areas, enabling kaimahi to encourage ākonga to try different things and learn new skills. This helped ākonga develop a positive association with learning by succeeding in tasks outside conventional classroom settings. Kaimahi and programmes emphasised connections between ākonga, their surrounding environment and community to underscore their importance within their whānau, local neighbourhoods, and culture.

3c. Providers leveraged trust built through connection to build ākonga skill sets through motivation.

As a result of programmes being designed in a way that highlights connection through whakawhanaungatanga, ākonga and kaimahi developed a high degree of trust, as they often came from the same neighbourhood and ethnic/cultural background. This allowed ākonga to bring their whole selves into programme activities. This basis of trust was leveraged by kaimahi to encourage ākonga to see education and training as a vehicle for their dreams, motivating many to engage actively in learning.

3d. Providers helped to develop ākonga competencies through role modelling.

Competencies and motivation to develop a work and education plan for ākonga come through the role modelling offered by kaimahi and mentors. It was clear that for ākonga, having kaimahi and mentors that looked and talked like they do was important to help develop meaningful connections and motivation for ākonga to strive toward developing skills and training plans to achieve their goals. These goals were shared with kaimahi and co-designed through all programmes that we visited.

KEY OUTCOMES FOR ĀKONGA

Based on our findings and observations, we observed seven key outcomes for ākonga who participated in provider programmes during the life of the Ākonga Fund. These outcomes were leveraged by providers to further enhance ākonga development and include:

- Building confidence
- Fostering relationships with peers, whānau and community
- Connecting and strengthening their cultural identity
- Developing and harnessing transferable skills
- Developing motivation to engage in their schoolwork, training programmes, etc.
- Having a renewed outlook, purpose, and plans for their future.

PRIORITY COHORTS.

It is evident through providers that we visited that their programme content was well-designed to include Māori and Pacific values, practised using Te Ao Māori, te reo Māori and Pacific values and cultures. We found that providers were adept and had strong representation of Māori and Pacific kaimahi in their teams. They affirmed the cultural backgrounds of their ākonga through various mechanisms such as language, art and cultural customs. In contrast, we found little explicit focus in provider programmes including Rainbow+ ākonga and ākonga with disabilities. However, providers operated with open hearts and welcomed ākonga of all backgrounds, which included ensuring their ability to create accessible accommodations when necessary for ākonga who required them. For providers, there was a desire to learn how to better support ākonga from these backgrounds, with the issue of disclosure being a complex area for Rainbow+ ākonga that providers were attempting to navigate.

MEA'ALOFA: THE ĀKONGA YOUTH EMPOWERMENT FRAMEWORK

As a reciprocal gift for providers and MYD, the Research Collective developed three frameworks that draw on existing youth empowerment and development literature as well as observations from our site visits with providers. The first framework, the Community Ākonga Empowerment Framework (CAEF) celebrates the uniqueness and journey of the work our providers do to engage vulnerable ākonga with training and education goals. The second, the Youth Voice Framework (YVF) encapsulates how providers are empowering ākonga voice in their programmes, and how this can be further enhanced. The combination of these two frameworks come together to make the Ākonga Framework gifted here.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on these key findings, the case studies, data analysis and existing youth empowerment literature, the Research Collective offer MYD these Key Recommendations, which are fully contextualised in the main body of the report:

1. **Continue** to enable greater collaboration and partnership between providers in the same region/area.
2. **Consider** finding ways to offer better training and career development pathways for kaimahi to be able to stay in the youth empowerment sector.
3. **Encourage** providers to make more explicit how their programmes are incorporating ākonga voice and feedback at the programme conception and design phase.
4. **Encourage** and further develop the relationship between schools, providers and kaimahi.
5. **Continue** to develop programme design from the bottom-up and within local contexts. There is no silver bullet or standardised programme that can be scaled up without sacrificing the uniqueness of local conditions.
6. **Support** providers and kaimahi in their aspirations to better incorporate the needs of Rainbow+ and ākonga with disabilities into their programme design and delivery.
7. **Develop** more streamlined and core funding infrastructures so providers do not need to constantly apply for multiple funding streams around projects to support their programmes.

Background

Following the immense disruption to the lives of ākonga due to the unpredictable nature of the COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns, ākonga engagement with learning and training was severely impacted (Flack et al., 2020). Furthermore, associated lockdowns generated negative outcomes on young people's mental health and overall wellbeing in Aotearoa-New Zealand (Gasteiger, 2021). This has been linked with higher incidences of anxiety, depression, suicidality, and family violence in the lived experience of young people (Every-Palmer et al., 2020). All these factors heightened the risk of lowered engagement with learning and training for young people as educators scrambled to find new ways to deliver training and education materials often in hybrid form (online and in-person) (Thornton, 2021). However, the sudden shift to mostly hybrid learning through schools and education providers also pointed to the way inequalities could exacerbate existing disparities in Aotearoa-New Zealand, along the lines of ethnicity, class, the rural-urban divide, among many other factors (Mutch, 2021). As a significant digital divide still exists within Aotearoa-New Zealand (Sylvester, Toland & Parore, 2017) valid concerns were raised around how the impact of the pandemic and lockdowns were also likely to disadvantage ākonga from specific demographic and socioeconomic backgrounds, those most vulnerable to incidences of social and economic deprivation (Thomsen et al., 2021).

Considering the likelihood that more vulnerable ākonga were likely to be further impacted by the sudden shock of the pandemic, MYD took action to enable community youth development providers to support the engagement and re-engagement of ākonga through the interrupted schooling and training years. In 2020/2021, MYD established the Ākonga Fund in partnership with the Ministry of Education, as a time-limited investment from the COVID-19 Response and Recovery Fund. The Ākonga Fund was created for youth providers to deliver programmes to ākonga aged between 12–21 years who have been adversely affected by COVID-19 to continue in their education journey. In 2021, the Research Collective was contracted by MYD to conduct a research evaluation of the Ākonga Fund, specifically around how certain community providers, who have been successful in receiving support for their initiatives, have been able to meet the Ākonga Fund's stated goals.

This evaluation would have a qualitative focus to complement other reporting mechanisms that were a part of the providers' contracts. This research would seek to understand how providers were:

- Fostering stronger connections with whānau, iwi, community, and other support services
- Utilising these linkages to increase engagement in learning and/or improve their future aspirations (eg ākonga have transitioned to further training or employment as a result of participating in Ākonga funded initiatives).

Furthermore, existing literature and emerging anecdotal evidence suggested that Māori and Pacific ākonga were more vulnerable to the pressures brought on by the pandemic than mainstream (Cheung et al, 2022). As such, MYD encouraged providers to think specifically about how their programmes were engaging with Māori and Pacific ākonga. This vulnerability stemmed from achievement gaps, and a history of Aotearoa-New Zealand's education system under-servicing Māori and Pacific (Thomsen et al., 2020). Additionally, Rainbow+ ākonga were likely more vulnerable to the impacts of the pandemic, as much international literature suggested that many young Rainbow+ people around the world were at a higher risk of experiencing lockdowns in unsafe home environments and unable to receive gender-affirming care in other contexts (Pacelely et al., 2021; Stehr et al., 2022). Literature suggested that for the disabled community, their vulnerability to the impacts of the pandemic correlated to a greater likelihood of mortality due to compromised immunity and other increased risk factors (Shakespeare et al., 2021; Turk & McDermott, 2020), with a raft of literature connecting the pandemic to increased levels of mental distress, posing further danger for ākonga with neurodivergent conditions (Desh-Munshi et al., 2021).

In acknowledging that the pandemic was likely to disproportionately impact marginalised and multiply-marginalised groups, providers were also asked to focus on supporting these key cohorts through their programme interventions submitted for funding under the Ākonga Fund:

- Māori
- Pacific
- Rainbow+
- Ākonga with disabilities.

Research Objectives

Unlike conventional evaluation projects, the Research Collective, through multiple conversations with MYD, were given a capacious brief that sought to understand the successes of selected youth development providers in Aotearoa-New Zealand to develop an Ākonga Framework tailored to the Aotearoa-New Zealand context. The Research Collective focused on working with select providers who have received support from the Ākonga Fund to learn what made their practices unique and differentiated from learning institutions and alternative education programmes. To deliver on this brief, the Research Collective designed a research framework that leaned heavily on Pacific and Indigenous research methodologies that centres on participants' worlds as told through their own words and expressions, locating their worldviews as sites of knowledge generation. By drawing on existing literature, considering the specific goals of the Ākonga Fund and drawing on the values that underpin youth empowerment principles in the Aotearoa-New Zealand context, the Research Collective based their research programme around three key research questions:

1. How have providers fostered stronger connections with whānau, iwi, community, and other support services?
2. How have providers fostered the meaningful inclusion of ākonga voice in programme design and delivery?
3. How have providers utilised linkages to increase engagement in learning and/or improve future aspirations (e.g. ākonga have transitioned to further training or employment as a result of participating in Ākonga funded initiatives)?

Developing our Approach

In seeking to build the theoretical approach that would guide the research evaluation, the Research Collective drew insights from a range of youth empowerment models both internationally and domestically, focusing on specific literature and models that had the most potential to add value to this project. Our starting point was the Youth Development Strategy Aotearoa - Action for Child and Youth Development (2002) (YDSA), which was published by MYD more than 20 years ago. From there, we followed relevant citations and undertook a literature search through the search engines Google Scholar and Scopus to identify models of youth empowerment. Our initial searches yielded hundreds of sources, each referring to youth empowerment through a range of terms such as: youth development, participation, resilience, adolescent health and wellbeing among many others. We decided to focus our attention on sources best aligned to the objectives of the research evaluation, incorporating both youth empowerment and youth development literature into our review. This project ultimately honed in on models that are youth empowerment-focused, considering the extensive youth development focus that already exists in Aotearoa-New Zealand. With empowerment and participation being two different concepts, the former offered us the most value in developing our approach and focus.

Initially, one of the most cited youth participation models we encountered was Hart's Ladder (1992). This model is founded on the key principle that behind youth empowerment is motivation: young people are able to design and manage complex projects together if they feel some sense of ownership in them. There are eight levels of participation in Hart's ladder. Notably, Hart's ladder of participation is constrained by how it addresses only a rather narrow range of ways that most children in the world participate in their communities (Hart, 2008). In addition, its presumed hierarchy ignores the contexts in which participatory activities occur. It is possible to gain a different perspective on the value of 'lower' forms of participation by using a contextual lens. While we found the ladder a useful visual and cohesive tool to inform our thinking around our approach, we found that the focus on linear, sequential steps did not properly address the reflective thinking needed to incorporate deeper principles and values of youth empowerment that we were to find in more recent models.

Another model that the Research Collective found instructive was Shier's Pathway to Participation model (2001). This model provides a progressive ladder of child and youth participation encompassing five levels and three stages of commitment. Building on the foundational work of Hart (1992), it poses 15 sequential questions which serves to guide practitioners in reviewing how their programme engages and empowers youth participation and involvement.

We also drew inspiration from Wierenga's (2003) star model, which emphasises meaning, control and connectedness as essential elements of youth participation programs. To ensure that the three central elements of youth participation practice are met, the model acknowledges the need to transform relationships between the young people involved. Wierenga's star model is extremely useful but is embedded within

the Australian context and applied to youth participation in general without referring specifically to Aotearoa-New Zealand.

Another model that informed our approach is Lundy's (2007) model which outlines a well-described framework for offering youth agency by ensuring their own voices are heard and taken into consideration. A combination of these principles with other principles of youth empowerment literature contributed to the development of The Research Collective's own YVF presented later in this report.

The ability for young people to meaningfully participate in decision-making processes in matters affecting their lives is linked to a range of factors beyond a given context. These include their personal characteristics; the motivation and perceptions of caregivers; family members, and other relevant adults, such as professionals in the education, welfare, and justice systems; as well as the relevant regulatory structures at the organisational, local, and national levels. Although some scholars have addressed certain factors or focused on specific aspects of youth participation, a broader theory explaining the multiple layers of personal, family, communal, national and international conditions affecting youth participation is still missing (O'Connor, 2011; Deane & Dutton, 2020; Walsh & Black, 2023).

Several studies have confirmed in recent years that youth thrive when provided with opportunities to exercise responsibility, leadership, initiative, and agency (Larson, 2000; Lerner et al., 2005; Wood et al., 2009). To work effectively with young people, youth organisations are increasingly adopting power-sharing approaches based on child rights (Hart, 1997) and positive youth development theory. Traditional youth programs are primarily focused on problem prevention, programmes are run by adults, and young people are primarily seen as the recipients, and their voice in programme design and delivery are rarely incorporated. A power-sharing approach, however, recognizes youth as major stakeholders in society with knowledge, skills and ideas that make them important actors in developing healthy communities (Blanchet Cohen et al., 2012). As such, we understood that a power-sharing approach needed to not only happen between ākonga and providers, but also between providers and agencies, as well as other stakeholders such as schools, alternative education providers and organisations with the resources to be able to support ākonga empowerment programmes.

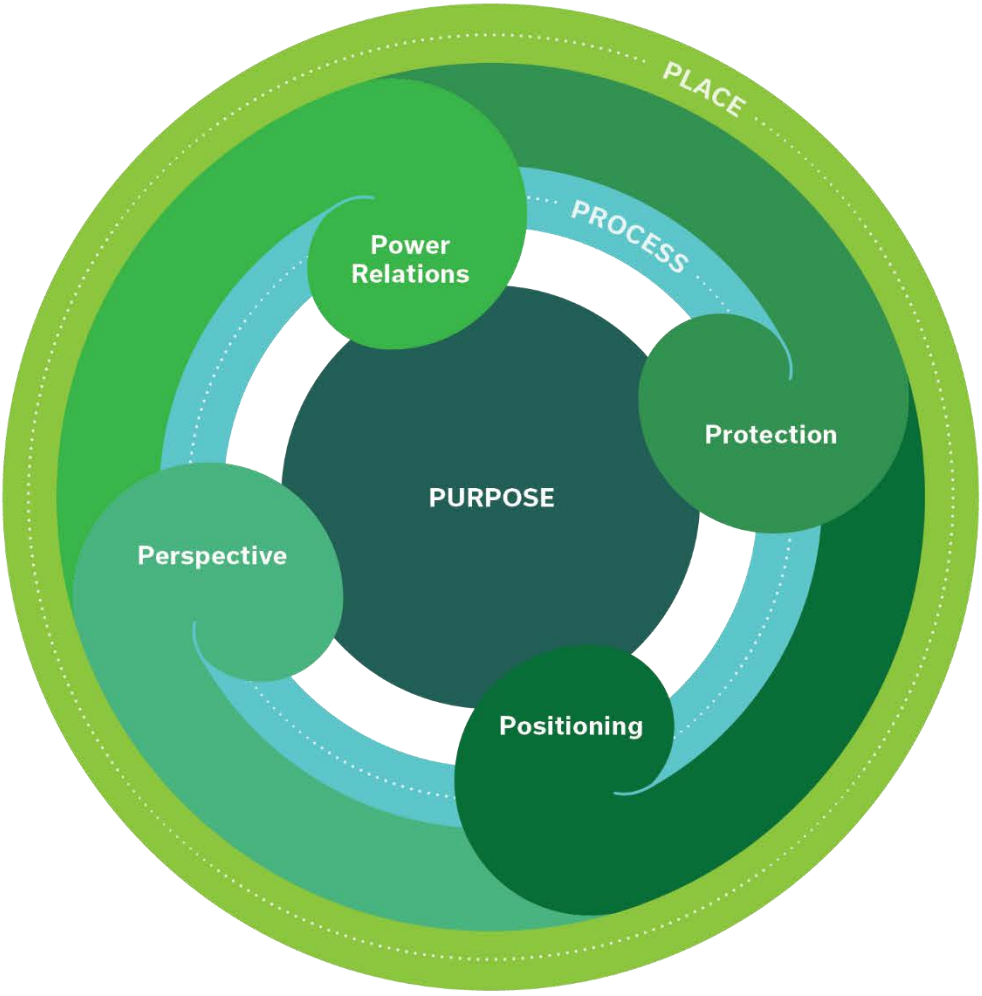
In this vein, the Research Collective looked to Bronfenbrenner's foundational work (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) around the concept of a social ecology or ecologies. Bronfenbrenner's work has been widely used in youth scholarship. Social ecologies understand social relations as relations that are shaped by interrelated, interwoven and interdependent actors, practices and forces. They may also describe the sites and actors young people regularly engage and interact with (Walsh & Black, 2023). This approach can also be used to highlight the multi-layered social and environmental factors, whether isolated or related, that build young people's resilience to deal with adverse circumstances (Ungar et al., 2014, quoted in Walsh & Black, 2023). The social ecologies framework, we believe, demonstrates strong congruence with the Whāriki/FALA research approach, which is discussed in the proceeding section, that highlights the relationalities that govern all social actors in each society.

All the models discussed have something to offer those seeking guidance toward greater youth involvement and development. However, as Cahill and Dadvand (2018) argue, these models presuppose that participation is inherently good, and that providing 'voice' or 'agency' will enable 'empowerment'. Their critique is that these models do not account for the potential that there may be unintended negative consequences within participatory projects. In other words, simply participating does not equal empowerment and can be harmful if practices are not reflexive and agile. Further, they suppose that there is a need for a framework which focuses on the fluid nature of participation, with its ongoing responses to context, circumstances and to the shifts in relational power dynamics that can evolve, ebb, and flow within a given venture. Their suggestion is an approach that is informed by concepts of empowerment, voice, identity, and agency, as well as by researchers who have addressed the relationship between the methods and the outcomes of participation.

Cahill and Dadvand (2018) draw on critical theory to develop what they term as a thinking tool to invite critical thinking and practice to unpack some of the complexities associated with youth participation. Their model is termed the P7 model that is proposed as a machine-like image that captures the dynamic interaction between each of the seven domains. The seven domains being: purpose, positioning, perspective, power relations, protection, place, and process. The goal being to encourage thinking-with-theory, in assisting people to engage with the ways in which positioning, power, and privilege can influence participatory opportunities.

An illustration of the interconnections between the proposed domains can be found in their paper and is repurposed here. The image places purpose at the centre. The purpose of an initiative is understood to orient all other domains. The intersecting gears in the machine-like image are used to illustrate the way all domains interlock and are impacted by what happens in another. The example they offer is that if power relations are managed well, diverse perspectives will be included and valued. To ensure that young people are not just recipients or instruments of the project, but also integral to its design, conception, and execution, efforts should be made to position them as contributors and partners. It is important to identify the domain of protection so that ongoing attention is given to the social, political, and material safety of all participants within the project and in the surrounding area. Process is a connective circle that captures the ongoing production of participation. Keeping process in mind reminds us that participation methods must fit the purpose and achieve integrity between methods and outcomes. Place reminds us that context matters, since context carries cultural traditions and expectations, as well as economic, geographic, social and political histories. Place-based approaches can highlight the ways in which the locale itself may present a number of barriers and enablers that may determine what can be achieved through participatory processes.

FIGURE 1:
Adaption of Cahill and Dadvand (2018) Framework



PLACE:
How will you respond to context and culture?

PROCESS:
What methods will you use to foster interaction?

PURPOSE:
What contribution do you aim to make?

Perspective:
How will you embrace diversity and difference?

Power relations:
How will you build inclusion and respect?

Protection:
How will you ensure safety?

Positioning:
How will young people get to contribute?

In taking all these models and thinking tools into account, The Research Collective returned to New Zealand's own youth empowerment approaches, from which the literature review journey began: the YDSA. This strategy articulated principles that were a guide for government and society around how to best support young people aged between 12–24 to develop the skills and attitude required to take part positively in our society. This strategy and its specified principles are widely recognised as the pillars for policy and practice within the youth development sector in Aotearoa-New Zealand. A review of the YDSA carried out by Ara Taiohi in 2018, reaffirmed youth development practitioners' support of the relevance of these principles to Aotearoa-New Zealand (Deane & Dutton, 2020). The strategy articulates six core youth development principles:

1. Youth development is shaped by the 'big picture'
2. Youth development is about young people being connected
3. Youth development is based on a consistent strengths-based approach
4. Youth development happens through quality relationships
5. Youth development is triggered when young people fully participate
6. Youth development needs good information.

In addition to the YDSA, we were aware that the Five C's model of positive youth development is also a highly referred to approach in Aotearoa-New Zealand. This approach outlines five psychological, behavioural, and social characteristics that are indicative of youth empowerment which include competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring/ compassion (Lerner et.al., 2005; Lerner, 2009; Abdul Kadir & Mohd, 2021). Competence relates to having a positive view of one's actions in domain specific areas including social, academic, cognitive and vocational. Social competence pertains to interpersonal skills (e.g. conflict resolution). An individual's cognitive competence refers to their ability to make decisions (e.g. decision making). Academic competence refers to the individual's educational performance measured by grades, test scores, school attendance etc. Vocational competence involves work habits and career choice explorations. Another element of the model is confidence and relates to the young person's sense of overall positive self-worth and self-efficacy; this is a holistic sense of self-esteem, as opposed to domain-specific beliefs. Connection is the third element and pertains to positive bonds with people and institutions that are reflected in the multi-faceted exchanges between the individual and peers, family, school, and community in which both parties contribute to the relationship.

The fourth element, character, relates to the individual having respect for societal and cultural rules, and a sense of right and wrong (morality), and integrity. Last but not least, caring and compassion relate to a sense of sympathy and empathy for others. According to Lerner (2004), when all five of these elements are present in a young person, a sixth element emerges which is contribution. That is, a young person enacts behaviours indicative of the five C's by contributing positively to self, family, community and ultimately society at large. The Five Cs became highly instructive for the Research Collective, as we found much congruence between this approach and the principles articulated in the YDSA. We subsequently used this to shape the types of questions we were to ask in the field, in developing our two question rubrics that we took to the research field. We looked for these ideas and values when analysing the data we gathered from our site visits. Much of the way we structured and designed the final Ākonga Framework draws from the Five Cs and all the previously reviewed models.

In considering both the focus priorities and strategic goals of the YDSA, as well as taking lessons gleaned from international literature, the Research Collective was mindful that this specific fund was targeted to ākonga who were already disengaged from school and training. Many of these ākonga were also from marginalised communities and were experiencing various forms of deprivation and even violences in their lives.

Thus, we understood our remit to be one that focused on how providers were working with disengaged ākonga in seeking to re-connect them with educational and work opportunities. The literature that we had reviewed and the range of powerfully articulated models, although incredibly helpful, would require some adjustments to reflect the criticality of the space in which providers were working within. While we already understood our task as being multifaceted in that we wanted to identify how our community providers were filling a gap in the support of ākonga, we also wanted to demonstrate the principles of sound youth empowerment beyond youth development. Thus, the focus on the project was to also help develop an ākonga framework based on field reflections and existing literature around youth empowerment that can help providers continue to build progression pathways for vulnerable and disengaged ākonga. We also wanted to develop a practice that was reflexive, rich in purpose, agile, and sensitised to the context in which ākonga were living and negotiating their lives.

Research Methodology

To carry out this research, The Research Collective used the Whāriki/FALA research framework designed by Malaga Research, which is a participatory, immersion approach, grounded in Pacific research ethics (Thaman, 2003; Thomsen, 2020; Sisifa & Fifita, 2021). It is a research approach that also draws parallels with kaupapa Māori research (Cram, et al., 2015) and developmental evaluation theory. The Whāriki/FALA framework is grounded in Pacific research ethics and was used to align the research project to the realities of the diverse and divergent communities ākonga came from and providers were working in. The Whāriki/FALA framework focuses on relationality as a site of knowledge generation. In other words, focusing on understanding how relationships and context can be evaluated and understood as a way to respond to prescribed research questions. The framework operated from a place of alofa/aroha/'ofa, mana-enhancing generous interactions built on connection and trust in the authenticity in participant words as the tool of truth-meaning. This approach is flexible and agile, allowing a holistic view of the context research is being conducted in by treating all parts of the Whāriki/FALA as connected and mutually reliant.

FIGURE 2:
Whāriki/FALA

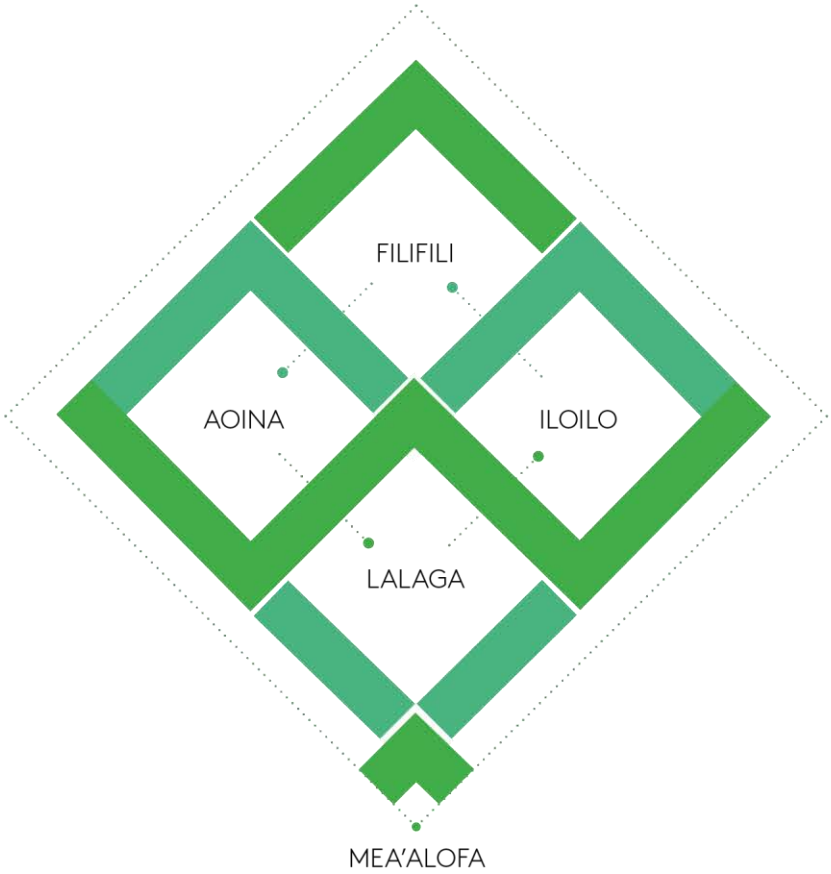
Filifili:
Selection, planning and recruitment

Aoina:
Data collection

Iloilo:
Data analysis

Lalaga:
Research outputs and stories

Mea'alofa:
Sharing and dissemination of knowledge



AOINA A1: ESTABLISHING VĀ

The Whāriki/FALA framework is a participatory research approach that emphasises the need to develop meaningful relationships with participants. In our context, providers are the main links to ākonga and their whānau involved in ākonga development programmes provided by the Ākonga Fund. The first set of visits to the pre-selected and recruited participant providers was about developing connections, relationships, and trust with providers. It was also about developing a stronger sense of the profile of providers themselves, mapping key relationships, situating ourselves as the Research Collective, ethically and transparently as a means to build trust.

The Research Collective met with each of the selected providers before any data gathering activities took place. Initially, it was planned that we would visit each provider in-person to establish vā, or relational connections, which can be likened to whakawhanaungatanga or establishing relationships. Unfortunately, due to the impacts of COVID-19 and various lockdowns, we had to perform the majority of the Aoina 1 phase online via Zoom.

AOINA A2: DATA GATHERING

Following the establishment of relationships, a holistic data gathering strategy approach was implemented by the Research Collective. In line with the Whāriki/FALA research framework, the data we gathered came from four research activities:

- Key informant interviews/talanoa with ākonga (rau/lau 1)
- Focus groups with ākonga (rau/lau 2)
- Key informant interviews/talanoa with providers/kaimahi (rau/lau 3)
- Participant-observation activities (rau/lau 4).

During these visits, we gathered information in a holistic interactive way that included following a programme session from beginning to end. When working with ākonga and kaimahi around key informant interviews, we used a rubric that we had developed that sought to focus on the key elements and goals of the research evaluation.

Community Ākonga Empowerment Rubric

The Community Ākonga Empowerment Rubric (CAER), which guided the questions and queries we offered in the field, deployed three Cs: competencies, connection, and contributions. This rubric was derived from the YDSA and was flexible enough to encompass the reflexivity articulated in the P7 model (Cahill & Dadvand, 2018). We believe that this allows our community providers a way to articulate what it is that they do, which is unique to them, and the skills and services that they offer, which are not easily replicated by education providers. Running across the three stages of commitment in the rubric are the themes and values of whakawhanaungatanga, language, identity, culture, self-esteem and belonging (articulated as central to youth development by youth empowerment literature in Aotearoa-New Zealand). These were also emphasised in our analytical approach.

The questions offered in the rubric were the key touchpoints in which an interview or talanoa protocol was developed by the Research Collective as we entered the field. This allowed our researchers to craft a range of questions that would build a picture of how the three Cs were being developed by Ākonga programmes. Further, the ascending levels gave us the opportunity to ascertain the intensities and differences between how programme design and delivery engaged with key stakeholders and ākonga. Ultimately, the descriptive nature of the questions in the rubric left space for providers and ākonga to reflect on their own practice and experiences, providing opportunities for critical self-evaluation. The broadness of the questions also necessitated providers and ākonga articulate their experiences and engagement with the programme design in detail.

Community Ākonga Empowerment Rubric

WHAKAWHANAUNGATANGA, LANGUAGE, IDENTITY, CULTURE, SELF-ESTEEM,

DEGREES OF ĀKONGA EMPOWERMENT	COMPETENCIES	CONNECTIONS	CONTRIBUTIONS
LEVEL 4	How does your position as a community provider allow your programme to develop ākonga competency in understanding their training and aspiration goals in responsibility to peers, whānau, communities, and society?	How does your position as a community provider allow your programme to enable and facilitate meaningful connections between ākonga, peers, whānau, communities, and wider society?	How does your position as a community provider allow your programme to empower ākonga to make meaningful contributions to the lives of their peers, whānau, communities, and society at large?
LEVEL 3	As a community provider, in what unique-to-you ways does your programme develop ākonga competency in understanding their training and education aspirations as a responsibility to peers, whānau, and their communities?	As a community provider, in what unique-to-you ways does your programme enable and facilitate meaningful connections between ākonga, peers, whānau, and community?	As a community provider, in what unique-to-you ways does your programme empower ākonga to make meaningful contributions to the lives of their peers, whānau, and communities?
LEVEL 2	How does your uniquely community embedded program develop ākonga competency in understanding their education and career aspiration as a responsibility to peers and their whānau?	How does your uniquely community embedded programme enable and facilitate meaningful connections between ākonga, peers, and whānau?	How does your uniquely community embedded programme empower ākonga to make meaningful contributions to the lives of their peers and whānau?
LEVEL 1	As a community provider, what unique key competencies does your programme provide to engage ākonga and stay connected to their career and education aspirations?	As a community provider, how does your programme provide a unique connection to ākonga's peers outside of schools and formal education settings?	As a community provider, how does your programme contribute to individual ākonga aspirations for their future that are different from what ākonga receive from their schools or educational training establishments?

Youth Voice Rubric

Central to youth empowerment are principles around meaningful inclusion of youth voice. We used CAER in tandem with a YVR, from which we were able to develop the CAEF and YVF, overlaid to develop the Ākonga Framework in subsequent sections below. This allowed us to understand the interrelated role of meaningful inclusion and elevation of youth voice in the delivery of ākonga empowerment initiatives. This YVR focuses on a holistic understanding of youth voice, which we also articulated under three Cs in the CAER infrastructure. Both the CAER and YVR provided guidance in analysing the data we gathered in the field, but also provided an analytical strategy for working with the data we were generating. We used responses from ākonga to build the YVF in the latter section of this report.

Youth Voice Rubric (YVR)

WHAKAWHANAUNGATANGA, LANGUAGE, IDENTITY, CULTURE, SELF-ESTEEM,

DEGREES OF INCLUSION	COMPETENCIES	CONNECTIONS	CONTRIBUTIONS
LEVEL 4	Does the provider collaborate with you in a meaningful way to co-design and co-create your education and training plans? In what ways?	Has the provider/ programme co-designed/ co-created with you a strategy to better connect you with your peers, whānau, communities and wider society? How have they done this?	Does the provider enable you to co-design your educational and training plans to acknowledge how your voice contributes to the advancement of peers, whānau, and communities and society at large?
LEVEL 3	How are your competencies, views, and voice incorporated into the action plan for your education and training aspirations?	Has the provider meaningfully included your voice in developing their programme and activities to connect to your peers, whānau, and communities?	How has your voice been included by providers when exploring your potential to contribute to your peers, whānau, and communities?
LEVEL 2	Do you feel your voice is valued by providers in developing your action plan for your education and career aspirations?	Does the provider demonstrate the value of your voice and views when developing connections with peers and whānau? In what ways?	How does the provider/ program value your views and opinions in acknowledging the contributions you make to your peers' and whānau's overall development and wellbeing?
LEVEL 1	Do you feel that the provider listens to you in relation to your career, education, and training aspirations? In what way have they shown this?	Has the provider enabled you to use your voice to develop meaningful connections with peers?	How does the provider/ programme include your views and opinions in discussing contributions to you and your peers' development?

ILOILO: DATA ANALYSIS

All the data that was gathered from the field was compiled, sorted, categorised, and analysed by the research leads using a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) approach and was subsequently organised into a thematic talanoa (Thomsen 2019; 2020; Thomsen et al., 2021). In addition, we took a small film crew and recording devices to each of the site visits to ensure that we had digital records of the conversations and a visual record of the space and site visits. The rubrics, which also informed the research protocol in the field, allowed us to generate data which focused specifically on the ways providers and ākonga were able to experience both the articulated values and experiences that were tied to the three Cs. The use of thematic analysis helped the Research Collective identify the most common and significant thematic findings across the six providers selected, with the thematic talanoa helping us to ensure case studies could demonstrate complexity and the specificities of each provider context could be told through their own words in this report.

MEA'ALOFA

The final stage of the Whāriki/FALA research process is to gift the findings, or the mat created through the research activities, to MYD. Further, we also offer these as gifts of knowledge that we generated collectively with them, to providers, ākonga and their families. As part of the Whāriki/FALA framework, this gifting must be done in the appropriate way. We share our research findings in this report in narrative form to allow full context where possible, and we offer this in a way that preserves and enhances the mana of all providers. In filming each of the site visits, the Research Collective has also prepared videos and vignettes for both MYD and the providers (attached to the final report), with three visual graphics tied to the models we present at the conclusion of this report. Following the submission of this report to MYD, the Research Collective will visit each of the providers to offer them a copy of the report, as well as to share with them the frameworks and models that have been developed through the observation of their programmes as a tribute to providers for the work they have shared with the Research Collective.

Recruitment and selected

The Research Collective liaised and consulted with MYD to select potential with providers to consult and participate in the research evaluation. Given the diversity of providers working under different sets of conditions (environmental, community etc), and the diverse needs of ākonga (driven largely by socio-economic background and differing lived experiences), it was important to capture the innovative and, in some cases, customised approaches to youth development and empowerment that providers were engaging in. Together, we decided that six providers would offer the most optimal cross-section of the country, with one national provider and five regional providers.

The Research Collective reviewed the proposals from all 28 funded projects and providers and in consultation with MYD reached out to six we both agreed upon. They represented a geographic cross-section of the country. The Research Collective completed multiple site visits and virtual meetings with providers, generating data through observation, talanoa/kōrero and through reviewing existing documentation provided to the research team. The focus of site visits was to develop deep, qualitative insights into how providers were delivering on youth empowerment goals articulated in the Ākonga Fund's original RFP. The selected providers were:

- Te Ora Hou Ōtautahi – Ōtautahi Christchurch
- Billy Graham Youth Foundation – Naenae (National provider)
- Ignite Sport Trust – Lower Hutt
- Te Rūnanga o Ngāti Whātua – Te Tai Tokerau/Kaipara
- South Seas Healthcare Trust – Tāmaki Makaurau/Ōtara
- Te Waiariki Purea Trust and Rotorua Youth Centre Trust – Rotorua.

Ethical considerations

Before entering the field and initiating data collection processes with providers and ākonga, the Research Collective sought ethics approval from the Ministry of Social Development to ensure research engagement aligned with the Ministry values of:

MANAAKI – we care about the wellbeing and success of people.

WHĀNAU – we are inclusive and building belonging.

MAHI TAHI – we work together, making a difference for communities.

TIKA ME TE PONO – we do the right thing with integrity.

In preparation for entering the field and speaking with providers and ākonga, and adhering to MSD's ethics processes, participant information sheets and consent forms were developed and used to ensure participants were made aware of the process, of how information will be used and disseminated, and to know their privacy and rights to accessing insights they shared with the Research Collective. Aside from provider names, we have de-identified all participants to preserve confidentiality as best as possible throughout the report. Ākonga and kaimahi who appear in the videos have consented for their names to be used in that format and it was made clear that their participation in the research evaluation was without prejudice. We believe MYD offers this platform for sharing stories in good faith for ākonga, kaimahi, and providers.

Our ethics application was reviewed and successfully endorsed by the Ministry of Social Development Ethics Review Panel, and we were given permission to conduct field work in September 2021. Following meetings and virtual whakawhanaungatanga after ethics approval was given, site visits commenced on 10 March 2022, with the final site visit completed on 12 Decemeber 2022.

Limitations

As the Research Collective took a Pacific Indigenous research approach focusing on developing deep, qualitative insights through talanoa, there were inherent limitations that we also acknowledge to what can be "known" through this process. Namely, there were no quantitative metrics deployed, which, to a certain extent, restricts the generalisability of the findings; suggesting that understanding the importance of the context in which data was generated, collected, and interpreted takes on heightened significance. Furthermore, as the Research Collective moved across regions with certain members of the research team present at different site visits, this also affected the interpretation of findings on a subjective level. To overcome this, two research leads were present at all site visits and led the coding and interpretation of the data generated, whilst cross-referencing each other's work for reliability. Another limitation in the research approach was associated with the numerous delays to planned site visits due to COVID-19 and other significant national events. As such, there was a timing discrepancy between site visits that may also impact the data collected, with there being a full six-month span between the different site visits. It is recommended that this report and its findings be read within these methodological constraints.

Findings

The findings of this research evaluation are presented here in the form of case studies in a thematic talanoa (Thomsen 2019; 2020; 2021). A thematic talanoa combines the research analytical method of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) with the values of Pacific research methodologies espoused through the methodology/ method of talanoa (Vaioleti 2003; Sisifa & Fifita, 2021). A thematic talanoa is constructed through following the process of thematic analysis, where a researcher will use Pacific cultural sensitivities to contextualise the generated themes into a cohesive and informed narrative. These thematic narratives are built around the words of research participants, where researcher interpretations are grounded in the meaning given by participants, which acts as the bond between different themes. Not only is the thematic talanoa intended to present recurring and most present themes the researcher was able to find in the data, but ensure they are re-placed into the full context in which they were encountered.

Furthermore, thematic talanoa takes into full consideration Pacific research ethics, which puts the role of culture, family, language, identity, relationships, connection, and service to others at the centre of the research engagement. A thematic talanoa is iterative and encourages the researcher to make transparent their role in the data generation process. Further, it invites the reader to engage with the findings in a type of reflexive questioning dialogue; recognising that knowledge in qualitative research is generated through field interactions but is validated and absorbed and made sense of by readers who use their own knowledge and expertise to ascertain the significance of the findings. In this way, a thematic talanoa in the form of a case study provides windows into the way living processes are occurring in the field and is most useful in providing insights into connective relationships between people, organisations and wider society. It is a critical approach, as it seeks to uncover and elevate authentic contributions from people and groups that often have their voices sidelined by inequities in society. By following a thematic talanoa approach, we believe that the Research Collective presents a set of findings that are rich, deep, contextual, and tied to the realities of ākonga and providers in a way that enhances their mana.

FINDINGS: THE CASE STUDIES - THEMATIC TALANOA

The thematic talanoa that unfolds in this section builds chronologically and follows the pattern of our visits from the first provider we visited to the last. The unit of analysis in this case are the provider programmes, which are engaged with through the responses of ākonga, kaimahi, and staff. At all six providers, our focus was on interview data generated through talanoa, combined with participant-observations, which form the basis of the following findings.

1.

CASE STUDY ONE

Te Ora Hou Ōtautahi

Based in Ōtautahi-Christchurch, Te Ora Hou Ōtautahi (Te Ora Hou) is an organisation whose mission as published on their website is to: "outwork our mauri both collectively and individually, through serving our community by operating relationship-focused projects that contribute to the needs, concerns and wellbeing of the most vulnerable in our local communities, particularly Māori young people and their families." In 2020, Te Ora Hou was successful in receiving support for their Te Ora Hou Christchurch Ākonga Support Programme from the Ākonga Fund. This funding supports programme activities such as a COVID-19 hui with rangatahi, whānau, and communities regarding the impact of COVID-19 on their education aspirations. Further, mentoring blocks are delivered to rangatahi for two years and assigned appropriate mentors work 1:1 with each rangatahi enrolled in the programme. Mentors are charged with facilitating individual learning plans and establishing suitable goals, whilst supporting rangatahi after exiting the programme. Ākonga are also provided with a participant survey at the end of their time within the programme. The Ākonga Fund helps to support their programme targeted at ākonga aged between 12–21.

Te Ora Hou's Ākonga funded programme utilises TOHATOHA as their guiding framework, an approach that means to share, disperse and distribute, lovingly and wisely. Te Ora Hou describes it as an intentional generosity based in positive relationships to unlock the potential that exists within every developing person – an approach that seeks to encourage and develop Māori ways of working with rangatahi drawing from the experience, knowledge and understanding of youth work practitioners. Utilising kaupapa Māori principles of development, TOHATOHA acknowledges the journey of tamariki tu taitamariki tu rangatahi tu rangatira.

Early on in the programme design phase, Te Ora Hou identified online gaming as a medium to foster better ākonga engagement, particularly during the impending lockdowns which occurred during the life of the programme. Many of the ākonga are avid online gamers, where they use these platforms to establish connections with other gamers through games such as 'Ghost of Tsushima' and 'Call of Duty'. Although some of the kaimahi are not gamers themselves, they saw the value in using these platforms as a way of better connecting with ākonga and using them to get ākonga to tap into some of the other programme activities on offer. During one of the lockdowns, kaimahi set up a gaming challenge where ākonga would battle against another ākonga or kaimahi to gain points with the winner receiving a small gift. They would use this challenge to open and close their sessions which helped to draw in participants to the online session. This proved successful, as ākonga spoke to these challenges as being fun and helping them take their minds off the things they were going through at the time.

In June 2022, three members of the Research Collective and an additional camera operator visited Te Ora Hou's Papanui site, where we were greeted

by the administrative team. The team gave us a tour of their Papanui location, which gave us insights into the types of activities that ākonga could be exposed to, which included a variety of sport and physical activities. There was a strong sense that Te Ao Māori informed their identity as a provider, with Māori motifs and language present through artwork and design. The Research Collective held talanoa with both kaimahi and ākonga, through both Aoina phases.

BUILDING CONFIDENCE TO SUCCEED

> "Well, I went home and my mum said that I will get picked up to go to this after-school program. And then after school, I went with [name redacted] and she showed me to [name redacted] and then [name redacted] introduced herself and then we just got in the van. If I wasn't at Te Ora Hou, I would actually be sitting in my bed. Because they're starting to feel like my family, they remind me, like, just not to be shy and like, say, like being myself, it makes me feel comfortable."
>
> – TE ORA HOU, ĀKONGA 1

Ākonga 1 is currently attending a local intermediate school and prior to attending Te Ora Hou's programme was struggling with motivation at school and at home. Since participating in Te Ora Hou's Ākonga Fund programme, Ākonga 1 has developed a higher degree of comfortability in interacting with other people, which has helped to develop their confidence. It was clear in our talanoa that this was because of an environment that had been crafted by Te Ora Hou where they felt the team were becoming part of their family. Te Ora Hou's programmes have a strong focus on whakawhanaungatanga to build trust between providers, ākonga, and kaimahi.

For Te Ora Hou's kaimahi, whakawhanaungatanga, embedded within tikanga Māori, is an important way to build confidence in ākonga around developing pathways forward. In particular, we found a strong awareness among all kaimahi working on Te Ora Hou's Ākonga funded programme that this whānau environment they were crafting would be key to unlocking young people's motivation to develop competencies in the education and training space. Embodying the value of acting like whānau was also understood to be instrumental in developing stability in the programme structure to support ākonga holistically with their mental health. A key challenge Te Ora Hou and other providers were navigating was the impact of difficult socio-economic conditions ākonga were likely to have experienced, exacerbated by the impacts of COVID-19. This approach for Te Ora Hou was informed by kaimahi who were from target cohort communities. For instance, Kaimahi 1 of Pacific descent, had been involved with Te Ora Hou as a young person. As such, they were able to provide some context regarding the need for this focus on stability.

1. CONT.

> "Because when I was growing up, you know, vulnerabilities are not really a big thing [discussed] at home and mental health is not a big thing at home. It's nothing at home. They don't value your mental health or anything like that. But when we were in a space like that [Te Ora Hou] having that stability and having them, you know, because we set up our kaupapa and it was like this kaupapa we had to follow every week; and that was the space that would keep us safe and that was a space that would tell me that it's okay, to be vulnerable, it's okay to tell them everything that's going on up here because they've been showing up and they've been doing the work that, you know, they've been... I'm walking like the talk, I say."
>
> – TE ORA HOU, KAIMAHI 1

In this way, what we found with Te Ora Hou, much like other providers who were focusing on developing target cohort competencies, was the urgency to take care of pastoral needs and manage the impacts of instability in many homes that ākonga were being drawn from. In other words, being able to lead and develop educational and training aspirations required other aspects of ākonga lives to be supported and nurtured first. This was very much the case at Te Ora Hou, where all of their kaimahi were adept at drawing on lived experience to inform their praxis of empowering ākonga to develop competencies. This challenge was amplified by the impacts of COVID-19, which required agile and survival-mode responses from Te Ora Hou, in seeking to directly serve the immediate subsistence needs of ākonga and their whānau.

> "So, during the pandemic, that didn't hold us back because the majority of our kaimahi were frontline workers, so we were able to, you know, in collaboration with our hapori team, able to give kai boxes and we'll go over to our rangatahi. And we will specifically hand over kai to our rangatahi and whānau that were in need of it, the internet, all those things that prevented our rangatahi from losing out in education. We were able to, you know, be in the gap for them [providing things to help with] social distancing, hand sanitizer, masks - [we] will chop up the kai and we'll have a good old laugh for about solid hour because they're [ākonga and whānau] dying to have that one-on-one interpersonal kōrero with somebody that's real, not someone that's behind the screen. So those van visits were really special for us during the pandemic."
>
> – TE ORA HOU, KAIMAHI 2

Whilst navigating through these baseline challenges around wellbeing, Te Ora Hou reported that they still had managed to meet their target ākonga number through the year. They also reported that many of their ākonga were dealing with high anxiety in group settings, though they were still able to bring a handful across to the Abel Tasman National Park for a confidence building and connection building visit. This was a visit that developed ākonga competency around physical challenges, environmental awareness, and their understanding of their relationship to the whenua. In dealing specifically with ākonga engagement with education and training plans, Te Ora Hou focused their programme on assisting ākonga in transition from intermediate to high school to develop goal-setting competencies. They encouraged ākonga to write down their dreams and through this, identified what roadblocks they may encounter, and worked with ākonga to develop strategies to overcome them in the upcoming years. This allowed ākonga to be fully involved in co-creating plans for their own successes and challenged ākonga to think long-term about their futures and in turn shape future iterations of programme design and delivery. Although this may have been part of the Ākonga Fund's requirements, we were encouraged to see providers implement individualised plans and feedback with ākonga enthusiastically.

ĀKONGA VOICES IN PROGRAMME DESIGN

> "The biggest challenges rangatahi say sometimes is that something is boring or stink, and so we need to do lots of prep to make sure we have lots of options for games and activities, and we have to build the encouragement to participate and push past some of those wanting to opt out. As a team we have deep debriefing and keep refreshing what would be cool. The young ones coming today are all fresh to these ideas we get to play with and we also refine based on each rōpū. We also vary what we do based on what the rangatahi love, one boy loved pets so we visited the SPCA because he loved it."
>
> – TE ORA HOU, KAIMAHI 3

For ākonga involved in Te Ora Hou's programme, developing competencies for education and development is determined by connection with ākonga interests and their own safety and security first. As such, capturing ākonga voice was important to how programme design shifted in moments where they could sense ākonga were not as engaged. For them, this meant drawing on their own experience as youth workers, but also listening intently to feedback given to them regarding some of the activities they had designed previously. This also extended to locations where they would take ākonga as part of their programme activities.

1. CONT.

> "I've never really been that far outta town, I went to Auckland once for a vacation. I hadn't been to that park or lots of places. I game a lot, anything really, 'Ghost of Tsushima', 'Call of Duty'. This programme means I can go to all those new places like the Margaret Mahy Playground. I have a best friend from 2020 I met through COVID lockdown gaming, he is in Hamilton and we hang out a lot and that is a great thing."
>
> – TE ORA HOU, ĀKONGA 2

Considering the many issues that ākonga carried with them due to instability and disadvantages at home, confidence in being able to explore what activities brought them joy was one way in which we were able to understand the way ākonga voice was integrated in plans to develop their own competencies and motivations toward education and training. In this excerpt, we see the way that Te Ora Hou allowed ākonga to be involved in the way programme content was designed and delivered, in that, ākonga were often given the opportunity to communicate what it was that they wanted to participate in. As a result of Te Ora Hou's programme, Ākonga 2 was able to visit places that they may not have had an opportunity to in their everyday circumstance, connected to their interests, and develop connections with other ākonga they grew positive relationships with, via the medium of gaming.

This agile approach we found to be appropriate, as it was one way in which community providers like Te Ora Hou were offering a different entry point to youth development and empowerment from what is delivered through school classrooms. By listening to ākonga interests, this ākonga was able to build connections and confidence by engaging in an activity that they felt connected to and brought them joy. This was valuable in developing ākonga motivation to be able to participate more actively in school as a result. For instance, when speaking with Ākonga 3, they explained to us how the fun they were having on the programme made a difference to how they were participating in school. The question we posed to Ākonga 3 was: what did they like about the programme that Te Ora Hou offered them?

"It's a good place and feels like home. The kinds of things that we do here are boxing, play[ing games]. Like last week, we're playing on the PlayStations and that was cool. And watching all the kids playing Xbox. I like the way they pick up kids from school and drop them off. What I've learned is more about sports. My brother used to always take me out and do basketball, practice skills, and taught me how to do layups 3s and under legs. [And] I practise at school a lot every day and and every lunch morning tea and sometimes after school. Today's my favourite day because we get to do boxing. It's been a long time since I did boxing, since I was **five,** and Te Ora Hou makes me feel happy."

– TE ORA HOU, ĀKONGA 3

Although the reference offered by Ākonga 3 was not tied directly to performance academically at school, what this excerpt demonstrates is that an important linkage exists between activities that are being provided at Te Ora Hou's project, and the behaviour of ākonga in the school environment. The motivation that ākonga were generating through Te Ora Hou was being replicated in a desire to practise and develop greater competency whilst at school, and at the same time allowing ākonga to draw on memories with a whānau member (brother) and helping to keep that connection for ākonga alive in their memories. Granted, this does not guarantee that an ākonga will be able to succeed more academically either, but what it does provide is a key ingredient for ākonga to make steps toward development of future pathways and engagement with learning/ training: motivation and structure. This has been an issue that was highlighted by all providers and has been flagged as a major threat to the development of our young people during COVID-19.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CONNECTIONS AND CONTRIBUTING TO WHĀNAU AND WIDER COMMUNITY

As alluded to in talanoa reported earlier, for Te Ora Hou, developing connections began with their own relationships with ākonga. As all kaimahi had lived experiences that aligned in many ways to those ākonga that they were serving through their programme, it was clear that they took the importance of demonstrating manaakitanga very seriously. This began at the very start of programme activities where ākonga were picked up in vans that were driven by kaimahi, and dropped back to their homes at the end of sessions.

The impact of this was obvious. Ākonga immediately felt important and valued in many cases, and it also set up a routine where whānau could see, kanohi-ki-te-kanohi, who it was they were trusting their children's development with. Te Ora Hou have been working in the Ōtautahi-Christchurch area for 30 years, and we were to learn that this practice of picking up and dropping off ākonga is something that began with the organisation's establishment.

1. CONT.

"We park the van in a visible place at the entrances to the school and when they are all leaving we say hi to the rangatahi and chat and build and maintain wider whanaungatanga. Normally we have two vans. Sometimes we do separate tāne things and wāhine things to support some of those specific conversations and spaces that we hear and see are needed. We also have good communication when the rangatahi jump in the van. We tell them who we are picking up and help build our whakawhanaungatanga. If a rangatahi doesn't come, or we don't hear from them, we are able to go visit them and their whānau at school and so we can check in and support."

– TE ORA HOU, KAIMAHI 3

This ethos of connecting at a genuine and personal level is something that Te Ora Hou extended beyond programme responsibilities. In fact, they understood ākonga wellbeing and general welfare to be integrated closely with that of their whānau and provided their support and manaakitanga to other aspects of ākonga's lives, including immediate day-to-day needs of their whole whānau. This was a learned experience for Te Ora Hou as they were now dealing with generational cohorts connected to ākonga they had served in the past, which posed new challenges regarding how to connect with ākonga.

"And when they need us, they'll ring us, and we will be available for them, will pick them up from wherever they are even if they're with their mates drinking or whatever. So, that was the generation we worked with back in the days and now their kids are coming into the space and their kids come into the space and the problems are still the same, it's just more intensified with the use of social media. And so, the challenges of not being able to pick them up or wanting to be picked up, has been minimised. So, their social skills are not as good as their parents or their grandparents. From back in the days, they [today's generation] don't have the ability to even acknowledge that you're here and say kia ora or talofa, you'll say kia ora and they just look at you and just look away, are you talking to me and stuff."

– TE ORA HOU, KAIMAHI 2

Kaimahi 2's kōrero highlights some of the generational differences that organisations like Te Ora Hou are dealing with regarding youth development. The advent of social media has shifted in important ways the social behaviours of young people, and for ākonga struggling with unstable home environments, this challenge further heightens the difficulties of being able to motivate young people

to continue to stay engaged with their education and training goals. This suggests that approaches to empowering youth in this space may need to be revisited within this context. However, Kaimahi 2 still felt that the emphasis on developing those connections was the best way they knew to overcome this challenge at Te Ora Hou.

> "Just communicate. The importance of being a youth worker, that's present, physically present, whether it's at the front gate and just having a chat or going over to their school and just throwing the ball around or having lunch with them or even just picking him up for holiday programme that we run in the holidays."
>
> – TE ORA HOU, KAIMAHI 2

This intergenerational element inherent to the cohort's connection for Te Ora Hou was also important for Te Ora Hou's work programme to be able to make a positive impact in the lives of ākonga who were from unstable home environments. This was nowhere more apparent than in the way one of the participants came with a gang affiliation.

> "The intergenerational relationships help significantly because of the trust TOH has. For example, one whānau we have a rangatahi coming from have a gang affiliation, and they're like we had affiliation with Te Ora Hou for many years too and so that opens the door and enables these young people to have wider networks."
>
> – TE ORA HOU, KAIMAHI 4

Te Ora Hou's programmes are also well-connected to schools in their catchment area. Many ākonga were referred to Te Ora Hou by schools, although there was a concern that referrals from schools would end up missing other ākonga in need of support. As such, Te Ora Hou often listen to ākonga themselves when they ask if a particular classmate of theirs is included or not. They also receive requests for support from whānau for their young person to be able to participate in their programmes. All ākonga who are referred to Te Ora Hou have their personal files assessed, followed by a home visit so that Te Ora Hou are able to get a sense of all people who are involved in the ākonga's life and how they can all be connected into plans for the ākonga's development.

2.

CASE STUDY TWO

Billy Graham Youth Foundation

The Billy Graham Youth Foundation (BGYF) was established following the success of the first Billy Graham Boxing Academy in Naenae in 2006. BGYF has the vision of developing champion young people contributing to their communities. Through the discipline required to succeed at a sport like boxing, young people across five locations in Aotearoa-New Zealand are able to funnel physical energy into developing their confidence and ability to overcome challenges in life. Under the Ākonga Fund, BGYF are able to support their Champions Begin programme, which focuses on rangatahi between the ages of 12–21 years.

The BGYF Champions Begin programme consists of face-to-face weekly boxing education and fitness sessions with ākonga during school hours and in co-operation with local schools, as well as 2–3 sessions a week for ākonga in after school sessions. BGYF place ākonga into cohorts where wraparound support for ākonga is developed. This approach draws from BGYF's Passport to Success model, which holds the central values of respect, responsibility, compassion, consideration, kindness, duty, obedience, honesty, and truthfulness. The Champions Begin programme includes tailored support from coaches within a limited cohort size, direct engagement by BGYF staff with teachers in schools, youth support networks, the New Zealand Police, and Oranga Tamariki where required. Their staff and programme activities are either supported by or connected to local businesses and potential employers when seeking to develop alternative pathways for ākonga who may not wish to return to school or re-engage with the school system. To foster connection with parents and caregivers, whānau are encouraged to attend the classes and BGYF have also provided Mother's/Father's and Grandparent's Day events. BGYF staff also attend school/community prizegivings and award events to support ākonga on their programme.

The Research Collective communicated with key kaimahi at BGYF in the lead up to our site visit. After liaising with BGYF's General Manager, we agreed to visit their Naenae site to get an insight into how their programme was running. Two members of the Research Collective and a camera operator attended the main site visit, where we were greeted by a kaimahi at BGYF. The kaimahi took us through the Naenae academy site where we were able to get an overview of how the programme was run.

DEVELOPING NEW SKILLS, CONFIDENCE, AND FRIENDSHIPS

Shortly after our arrival, the first group of ākonga arrived, a group of roughly eight girls from a local intermediate school. We were able to talanoa with their teacher (social worker) who had accompanied them to the session, as well as hear from two of the ākonga themselves as they came in. A strong theme in their responses was how the BGYF programme had helped them to develop new skills associated with learning boxing competencies in a group environment. These skills gave them confidence to be able to publicly speak and become leaders in the various spaces they were moving between, at both the BGYF programme and in school. They were also able to develop stronger connections with fellow programme attendees who were people they had not had much of a relationship with before.

The Research Collective:
Tell us about some of the people that you work with here

BGYF, Ākonga 1: [Kaimahi 2],

"... she's a really good coach. She helps us with what to do for the boxing stance. Boxing helps with discipline. It helps you to focus and learn how to train properly. It also helps with sports and helps you with your siblings."

The Research Collective:
In what way?

BGYF, Ākonga 1:

"If they want to do some rounds and because they don't think I'm a very good fighter. Another reason why I took this class." [cheeky grin]

The Research Collective:
So, since you've been coming here with your friends, how have your relationships developed?

BGYF, Ākonga 1:

"I didn't really know much of the people here, like, I used to not know them, but I know them through school too, and outside of school more now. I've got more friends so I'm more involved and it's good to learn. Like, when I'm older I want to be someone who designs rooms and stuff like that. Just a designer. The best thing I love about coming here is probably with all these girls that are really helpful and know what they're doing and it's just really nice to be with a community and do stuff with them. When I leave, I'll probably feel a bit more confident and have more friends and know more stuff about boxing."

Ākonga 1's talanoa, which was also captured on camera, spoke clearly to how participation in the programme had helped her to gain confidence in the connections with other attendees. This was particularly important when considering the uniqueness of the cohort that was assembled by BGYF. Unlike other Ākonga funded programmes that only focused on at-risk ākonga for recruitment to a specific programme, BGYF executed a style of cohort engineering that focused on including ākonga at different levels of engagement with schooling and training. Ākonga who had been referred by schools and agencies are placed in existing cohorts with other ākonga who were not referred to BGYF by schools or agencies, so

2. CONT.

the referred ākonga are not all placed into one group. When speaking to a kaimahi, this is what they had to offer regarding this unique practice:

> "Our cohort is a little different from others, where we have a split referrals are placed into a group of kids identified as leaders, in the middle, and those at risk. The reason for this is it's based on the Outward Bound model. The reason they make up their lists this way is so that leaders can help wraparound those kids that are more at risk and so the whole group ends up better for it. It's a holistic way of trying to build a cohort."
>
> – BGYF, KAIMAHI 1

This is an important feature of the BGYF programme, as the logic behind this cohort engineering is to allow ākonga who were considered at risk of disengaging with school and training the chance to see other more successful ākonga participating in the programme as well, to avoid the stigma of being singled out as being a problematic student. By mixing the cohort with leaders and those who were somewhat disengaged, the hope is that at-risk ākonga who are supported by the Fund, will avoid possibly internalising a belief that they are inherently problematic in the eyes of their teachers.

> "Then it's not just like: oh, I'm naughty, that's why I'm being sent here. No, wait, some of the best students in the class are here, so this is just something for everybody. I think it's a better way so those kids don't feel targeted."
>
> – BGYF, KAIMAHI 1

BRIDGING CONNECTIONS BETWEEN ĀKONGA WITH STRAINED RELATIONSHIPS

For the kaimahi at BGYF, they felt that this approach of a mixed cohort was beneficial in helping to not only create new connections as detailed earlier, but also extremely helpful in helping to mend broken bridges that often came out of strained relations in the school environment for ākonga. As we were having our talanoa with two kaimahi in the management office, an ākonga walked into the area to retrieve a pair of boxing gloves for the session they were about to participate in. As she left, both kaimahi retold the story of how this particular ākonga's arrival into the programme initially raised eyebrows with other ākonga who were not happy she would be joining their class.

> "She's a cool story in a way too, when she started, we had another young girl in the class who was not happy about her joining, it was like: 'Nah, she has tried to fight me, we don't get along,' and we had to have a conversation with them and said to her: 'That's not really fair because this place is meant for everybody.' And she was capable of letting it go as we said they could hopefully build a better connection through here, and like, they get along great now, they catch the bus together and look out for each other during class. It's great. It was funny how we got pushback from a couple of girls in that class, and they've learned that all that stuff is kind of stupid. The impact outside of here has been great, because now their friends have started to stop talking about her outside of here because they have a better connection. It's been nice to watch that all come together."
>
> – BGYF, KAIMAHI 1

This was not a phenomenon that kaimahi had observed on their own. In conversations with another schoolteacher at a local high school, they had been told that not only were ākonga mending relationships with each other, they were finding that those ākonga who had been attending the BGYF programme had also developed better relations with their teachers and administrators, in that a marked improvement in their attendance at high school was noted, especially when the promise of a boxing session at the BGYF Naenae headquarters was to take place directly after.

2. CONT.

"A couple of girls that have gotten into scraps at school, and ended up in the same cohort here, the teachers have said that it's shocking to see them get along as partners in school now, without wanting to fight with different groups as well, which is cool. I've heard from [name redacted], a couple of kids only turn up to school when boxing's on. Even if it just facilitates attendance, I think that's a great thing. They're happy to go to school and that teacher has said that this is an improvement."

– BGYF, KAIMAHI 2

Aside from facilitating better relations and higher attendance in school, teachers also conveyed to kaimahi that another great outcome was the way in which these disengaged ākonga found confidence to try new things as a result of participating in boxing lessons. For kaimahi, it was their belief that this confidence was crucial in being able to develop the ability of ākonga to grow new competencies on their own. Further, allowing ākonga to thrive in this environment gave them transferable skills that they could take to the classroom. Kaimahi were careful to emphasise this through their goal setting sessions with ākonga.

"We do goal setting with the kids and ask them what they've learned here that they want to use back at school. COVID interrupted some of those sessions, but it was cool to get them thinking about how these skills can be transferred to school, i.e. discipline, listening, trying something new and not being afraid to be embarrassed. You can do all those things at school as well in academics. In many ways it was about letting ākonga know that they're developing skills but they're having fun the whole time. Cultivating a willingness for ākonga to give things a go, to try stuff, this coming from kids who didn't think they were good enough - breaking the cycle of not wanting to do something new because you're scared to fail at it, but doing something like this where everyone's new at it, it teaches them that it's OK."

– BGYF, KAIMAHI 2

EMPOWERING ĀKONGA VOICE IN CONNECTIVE AND CULTURALLY-AFFIRMATIVE WAYS

"We start every class with a check-in circle and end every class with a check-in circle. This is a really good way for coaches to build relationships with ākonga really quickly. It gives all ākonga the chance to speak about how they're feeling, to let us know what's going on and it teaches them it's ok to share. We had one teacher, actually in reference to an ākonga that came last term, but isn't here now as she's transitioned to a registered class (which is cool), the teacher let us know that she had a lot going on at home - a lot of whānau struggles - just having a rough go of it lately. And they actually said since she started coming to boxing and participating in the check-in circles, she was more comfortable at disclosing in school the stuff that was going on at home with teachers. She used to refuse to share before and now she's feeling more comfortable to share what's going on so everyone can help her."

– BGYF, KAIMAHI 1

On arrival and following our tour of the facilities, when the first group of ākonga arrived, we were able to observe one of the check-in circles that coaches at BGYF ran to initiate each session. In these sessions, all ākonga huddle together around their coach, who asks each of them to share how they are feeling. All ākonga are encouraged to be frank and honest, with many using one-word responses paired with different tones of voice to emphasise what they were experiencing in that moment. Most responses were affirmative, one or two were neutral, and we did not observe any ākonga offering any challenges to the circle. The coach running the session kept the energy high and communicated straightforwardly to ākonga what they were going to be doing in the sessions that day. They asked ākonga whether they were happy with that plan and following positive responses from ākonga in attendance, the session began. This was taken to be an effective way to keep ākonga informed and part of the process.

At the conclusion of the session, ākonga were brought back into the check-in circle, where they were able to check if their mood had changed, share with their coach what they enjoyed about the session (and what they did not enjoy) as well as close the lesson loop at that moment. All ākonga left in high spirits, having had physical activity that they enjoyed. BGYF also provided an anonymous suggestion box for ākonga to put their thoughts into if they did not want to share in front of other ākonga and kaimahi. Although we were informed that this was not

2. CONT.

used for much else by ākonga than to suggest new games, it was an important mechanism to ensure another avenue in which feedback can be given by ākonga.

Check-in circles are also where ākonga feedback could be used to directly shift the content of programme delivery at the drop of a hat. One of the programme managers present at the site visit was also a coach. They explained that in the moment where a coach is able to see that energy levels or something is impacting the mood of ākonga in a session, they will be able to change tack and respond to the needs of ākonga as they observe it.

> "It's about reading the room and their energy; we do a circle every time we start a session and check in to see where everyone's at in terms of their mauri and feeling. Maybe their minds aren't there, and they've had a rough time and they're feeling low, then we'll just hang out and do some fun games to try and uplift them. If they're coming in with lots of energy, we'll get them going in a hard circuit and working hard. It's about getting to know them and being able to read their energies and planning with that in mind."
>
> – BGYF, KAIMAHI 3

These soft skills in being able to adapt and shift in response to what coaches and kaimahi were sensing in front of them, were complemented by a range of measures that allowed ākonga voices to be heard and listened to in the way programmes were delivered. For instance, aside from entry and exit surveys that were required for participation, on the advice of an independent evaluation group, BGYF used storyboards with younger ākonga to be able to share with kaimahi what their experience has been like in the programme. These storyboards allowed younger ākonga to share their feedback in a way that was creative and centred their experiences. The storyboards are done at the end of each year, and the independent evaluation group also provides a survey for the older members of the group, collated and reported at the end of the year back to BGYF.

> "Some of the best feedback we get from ākonga is through storyboards with our younger members. This was designed by an external research group and it's called head, heart, feet. The head is: what have you learned, what skills and things like that when you come here, and heart: how do you feel when you come here; and feet, what has boxing helped you do outside the academy. It's nice because it's a creative activity so they get to draw people and some of the kids take it quite seriously."
>
> – BGYF, KAIMAHI 2

Ākonga also felt that BGYF was a place where they could be their full selves in being able to enact and practise their language and cultural identities. On beginning our kōrero with a Sāmoan ākonga, we asked a warmup question to get them comfortable with the camera, and to our surprise, understanding that The Research Collective also had Sāmoan members, they asked if they could introduce themselves in Samoan. We subsequently held the entire interview with them in Samoan. There was a strong sense from the ākonga that their confidence to do so was impacted by their participation in the BYGF programme. This excerpt was translated from Samoan:

> "I have two sisters and one brother. I enjoy coming to this boxing academy this year, as I want to become a boxer in the future. I'm happy that I get to learn new boxing moves here. I only started this year, and it makes me really happy and I enjoy it a lot. My mum also feels happy when she hears that I've been learning new moves here. My parents advice to me since I've started here is to work hard as it might become a bright future option for me. I like the way they treat us here, they encourage us to be honest and be kind."
>
> – BGYF, ĀKONGA 2

3.

CASE STUDY THREE

Ignite Sport Trust

Ignite Sport Trust (Ignite) is a volunteer-based youth development organisation that offers a unique youth empowerment service using sport and recreation to engage young people in advancing their career and training aspirations. The Ignite Sports Academy was originally founded in 2001 as a project for the Youth for Christ Wellington to provide opportunities for sports-devoted young people to reach their potential. In 2007, Ignite was set up as a charitable trust to facilitate sustainable funding of programme activities and enable organisational growth.

The organisation works with over 2000 young people across the Hutt Valley region. The provider works with a varied group of ākonga ranging from those experiencing high rates of truancy, vulnerable students, to young people from refugee communities. Ignite delivers mentoring programmes that provide a safe place for communities and are designed to develop confidence, self-sufficiency and resilience, goal setting, and a regular routine for eligible ākonga.

Programme activities supported by the Ākonga Fund are delivered in the Hutt Valley area working with eligible ākonga, aged 12–19 years over two years. Their Ākonga Fund programme is delivered at multiple sites: Ignite Sport Office, Walter Nash Centre, the Ignite Sport Centre (Bell Park), and the Recoh Centre (Fraser Park) once construction at Fraser Park is completed. We were able to visit the Ignite Sport Office and paid a visit to their Ignite Sport Centre in Bell Park.

Ignite's programmes run face-to-face, through 40 weeks per year, on average three hours a week, per eligible ākonga. They run four individual programmes:

- Oho Ake – a specialised youth development programme to support ākonga at risk of becoming, or already disengaged from school, whānau, and community, or who face issues relating to their future
- Fusion – to support eligible ākonga who are former refugee and migrant young people in their school community with one-on-one mentoring including language and education support and group activities which promote friendships, leadership, building confidence, life skills, recreation, and a sense of connection and belonging in young people new to Aotearoa-New Zealand, supporting them in their educational journey
- Empower – to mentor eligible ākonga with disabilities and support physical activity and service to the community including support to complete Duke of Edinburgh awards and develop leadership skills to support their future options beyond school
- Pasifika Tumau – providing support and guidance to Pasifika young men in their life choices, cultural identity, and leadership development.

The Research Collective observed activities that were administered as part of the Oho Ake (Awaken/Rise Up) programme

supported by the Ākonga Fund, which addresses he challenge of young people facing issues relating to their future or those at risk of becoming or already disengaged from school, family, and community. The programme aims to help ākonga develop positive goals for both learning and in life by developing strategies to achieve their educational and training aspirations through sports and recreation. The programme provides a combination of mentoring, support, and adventure-based learning experiences to develop critical life skills and strategies for ākonga to achieve their aspirations.

The Research Collective reached out to Ignite's Director to arrange a site visit and explained to the Director the approach of the research evaluation. Three members of the Research Collective were present at the site visit alongside one camera operator. Upon arrival, we were greeted by a boisterous group of ākonga at the provider's temporary facilities at a local sports ground in Lower Hutt. As we entered the programme location, we found that the space had been partitioned into an office area at the far end and an activity area in the middle and front ends of the building. Outside on the grandstands was a large group of ākonga talking and playing, with a further group playing on the fields. After speaking with kaimahi and checking in, we were brought in to take part in ice breaker activities, where we were able to introduce ourselves to the ākonga and kaimahi by partaking in whakawhanaungatanga. Following this, the Research Collective split up to speak with four different groups of ākonga, another group of four kaimahi, and another kaimahi at their new Fraser Park venue currently under construction.

GROWING COMPETENCIES THROUGH KAIMAHI ROLE MODELING

The first group of ākonga we spoke to conveyed how they were able to learn important life skills that connected them strongly with an ethic of civic duty and service to their communities. These programme-embedded values were important in helping ākonga understand their own education and training aspirations as part of a collective and contribution to wider society. This was often embodied by kaimahi and in the framing of language used to impart knowledge on ākonga through different sessions as well as the emphasis placed on culture and identity. Ākonga also noted how this has meant they have developed a true connection and respect for kaimahi in their programmes, which comes down to the care and love shown to them by programme leaders.

3. CONT.

"I guess they went from being these complete strangers that we didn't know to like, like guardians that I guess we'll always go to when things are tough. But when we feel like we can't talk to our own elders and our family because Pacific communities are really judgmental and that. I feel like we can always go to them to seek help and stuff and they'll always give it to us. There's not a time or day where they are, like, pushing us off. They are always there to help. They help us with these workshops that we do when we're on programme with them, they give us a list of what we think we could do better ourselves and what we think we could together as a community and socially and like it does benefit us because then we do actually put that into whatever we do, wherever we go and no matter what time."

– IGNITE, ĀKONGA 1

Ākonga who participated in Ignite's programme spoke of how kaimahi embodied aspects of service through their own work and support of young people. They commented on seeing kaimahi going above and beyond to help guide and support themselves and others to stay engaged, particularly during COVID-19 lockdowns.

"I would obviously give back to our mentors like cause they've helped us get through a lot. Like especially through the lockdowns. Even in the lowest moment of our lives. We still pushed through with them by our side, and as our support group and get it actually means a lot to not just myself. But I know to all the girls in our programme that they give us this chance to help grow with them guiding us. It just means so much more because they understand, and they want to help."

– IGNITE, ĀKONGA 2

As a result, it was clear that ākonga felt that kaimahi served as important role models for them as people. This role modelling clearly came from the experiences ākonga had with the support they had offered them during a particularly testing time. Furthermore, it demonstrated to ākonga what it looked like to continue to work hard and stay connected and to serve important people and connections in their life. Furthermore, the lessons they took from kaimahi were also around how to enact and build resilience and deploy skills that took care of themselves as individuals, building competencies around self-love and care. These were also seen by ākonga as cultural values that they saw practised by kaimahi.

"Three things I've learned while being in this awesome programme and these amazing mentors is self-love, self-respect and how to care for not just yourself but everyone around you. I guess like, going back to the homelands caring for everyone is pretty big for us Pacific Islanders, like, I guess, being caring to everybody, goes to show who you are as a person. And like the mentors really do teach us that with how they act and how they are themselves... like how you act around, not just your family, but in the community as well."

– IGNITE, ĀKONGA 3

CHECK-IN'S FACILITATING DEEPER CONNECTIONS AND PROGRAMME INPUT

Part of Ignite's Oho Ake programme includes weekly check-ins with ākonga. Many ākonga shared that their weekly check-ins with kaimahi were beneficial in helping them to set goals, talk through an action plan, and monitor their progress towards achieving their goals. For other ākonga, the check-in sessions were spaces where they could be honest about how they were feeling without judgement. These spaces were particularly important for ākonga as they facilitated a deeper connection with kaimahi.

"Every-time we meet up, we do a check-in with ourselves and our mentors just on our health, how we've been feeling, what our goals are, and they always ask if we feel safe enough talking about them so that's really nice."

– IGNITE, ĀKONGA 4

3. CONT.

> "Because to me, like personally those catch-ups are special because they go out of their way to like talk about life and not just what I'm doing at school and that. Like they really want to know us and care about how we try and be better and stuff like that."
>
> – IGNITE, ĀKONGA 4

As well as functioning as a space and time where ākonga and kaimahi were able to connect, discuss plans and goals, it was also important for kaimahi to ascertain some of the specific needs of ākonga at the time. This included catching any possible concerns around ākonga health and wellbeing. It was clear that ākonga found these sessions empowering, as it allowed them to feel truly cared for in all aspects of their life, not just when it came to schoolwork. This is important as ākonga said that they felt like their voices were being heard in these sessions. As such, these check-in sessions were also a time where kaimahi sought feedback on programme activities from ākonga.

> "We use those check-ins to get a feel of how they feel about the activities, whether it's working for them? How we could improve and what they would like to see in the programme."
>
> – IGNITE, KAIMAHI 1

Kaimahi suggested that the check-ins were where they were able to get the most feedback around programme activities from ākonga. As such, this was a part of the programme where we could see that ākonga voice was most pronounced and taken on-board to help modify and re-design some of the activities that the programme was delivering to ensure ākonga remain engaged.

ENABLING COLLABORATION AND PARTNERSHIP AMONGST YOUTH DEVELOPMENT ACTORS

Collaboration and partnership are important to Ignite as they are keenly aware of the diversity of ākonga needs, backgrounds, and aspirations. Ignite understood the value of collaboration as a way to benefit from the specialisation of other organisations and groups, which allowed for greater benefit in terms of addressing needs and growing ākonga ability to achieve their aspirations.

> "So, we collaborate, collaborate well with them [other youth development practitioners - i.e., churches, community providers, etc.] in order to strengthen each other, because we see the importance of having more initiatives happening in our community. But I'd say we're scratching the surface, and this is just how badly we are [just] scratching the surface. I can't speak for other organizations in other communities, but I think if there is, there's a greater need for strategic youth work now than ever before... we need to be enabled to engage outside organizations as well that can create that sense of community and brotherhood and sisterhood amongst young people."
>
> – IGNITE, KAIMAHI 2

The term 'scratching the surface' suggested that this kaimahi felt that there was more that could be done to develop collaboration between different providers in the area. There was no shortage of goodwill among providers servicing the area, as we had recently visited the Billy Graham Youth Foundation, which was only a few minutes' drive down the road from Ignite. However, what they were speaking to was something we found across all providers, where there was a desire from providers to work more closely with other youth providers, but a perception that there was not much encouragement for a strategic, coordinated approach.
The one programme that we visited that was able to successfully leverage the value of collaboration in delivering a specific programme intervention under The Ākonga Fund was the Te Hiringa programme in Rotorua, covered later in the report - although it was clear that providers did have many pre-existing relationships with other providers in their areas.

For Ignite Kaimahi 3, the example of collaboration they used was how established connections with traditional educational providers such as schools were key, where providers should be supported to offer activities that schools were not well-placed to deliver, and to promote the holistic wellbeing of ākonga in particular. In this context, their comment did not suggest schools were not involved in the wellbeing of ākonga, rather that schools took care of just one part of ākonga wellbeing around education qualifications, whilst community providers often took care of ākonga whose other wellbeing areas were in need of additional support.

3. CONT.

"So, teachers, school staff do a great job at doing what they do. But this again, and it's around the wellbeing of young people and I think that's best provided by outside organizations that can work alongside and work in collaboration with, with one organization working in collaboration with each other, but also in collaboration with the school."

– IGNITE, KAIMAHI 3

The difference between school and provider roles in ākonga lives is something that Ignite was aware of and was a driving force of their programme design. For the ākonga on the Oho Ake programme who have disengaged with schools for a variety of reasons, anything related to qualification earning was often given a negative association. Ignite understood their role as a provider as one that would offer outlets for ākonga to just exist as young people; programmes that would give them the opportunity to enjoy themselves and build confidence in who they were as people through sport. More generally, Ignite has in the past canvassed the possibility of attaching school credits to some of the work they did in their programmes, but once they consulted key stakeholders, the response was a resounding no.

"And one of those stakeholders were the schools that we work in and their response to us was 'we feel Ignite is important because when young people are in school, they're focused on achievement and they're focused on the results.' And we actually said to the schools, why don't we, through our Ignite sport programmes, attach credits to them. And they very, very, very clearly came back and said, no, don't do that, because schools saw the value of Ignite was that we could take them out of school, deliver initiatives, run workshops where young people could just take a breath, breathe, you know, they could take a breather. And when we talk about the wellbeing, the holistic wellbeing of young people, that's the bit that I think is missing."

– IGNITE, KAIMAHI 2

COVID-19 PRONOUNCING BARRIERS TO FOSTERING CONNECTION

COVID-19 caused many issues for kaimahi in terms of fostering and maintaining connections with ākonga. They spoke to the online connection difficulties faced by young people during the lockdowns as contributors to disengagement in their academic pursuits. Some young people experienced issues with accessing a stable internet connection or did not own or have access to an adequate device (word programme-enabled devices) which impeded their ability to participate and/or complete their academic course work. Kaimahi tried to encourage and motivate ākonga by setting up small challenges they could take part in socially online to motivate them to actively stay engaged towards achieving their academic goals.

"So, for us it was a little bit difficult, obviously, because as youth workers its all about relationship and connection, and usually those connections happen face-to-face. And we had to navigate a whole new world which is, of course, social media. And it was kind of difficult, you know, because some young people don't have Wi-Fi, so it was a hard place to navigate and one of those things that we found that we had to do, was make sure that we have Instagram. So, we have Instagram social media, and so putting challenges up there, still making sure that we were still active, and I think letting people, young people know that we were active on social media. And so we got challenges out there, whether it was to wake up in the morning, who can throw the toast in the toaster or who can shoot a tea bag in a cup and see how far... like it was just like... you know all those ideas and so we had to find new ways to play games as well with young people."

– IGNITE, KAIMAHI 4

In our talanoa with ākonga, they expressed their heartfelt appreciation to kaimahi who assisted with challenges that were beyond the scope of their work. For instance, one ākonga explained how they encountered issues with their internet which affected their ability to complete an assignment. They said they felt embarrassed to raise it with their teacher so reached out to one of the Oho Ake kaimahi for assistance. The kaimahi was able to provide that assistance for the ākonga. Kaimahi themselves spoke about having to stay alert and on-call for what felt like 24 hours a day in case ākonga needed support at any time of the day or night. Kaimahi also spoke of having to help ākonga transition to the online learning environment, assisting with setting up Zoom accounts, settings, and filters which enabled them to also better connect with ākonga.

3. CONT.

"And also like small groups, Zoom calls and at the time, everyone was still learning what Zoom was and so we had to of course like, show other young people how to set up Zoom and so it was really hard. It was hard to navigate, but was also a challenge that we were willing to take on because we still wanted to stay connected to the young people that we were working with."

– IGNITE, KAIMAHI 5

There was a general consensus among the kaimahi that there is a long-held assumption that all young people are technically savvy and capable of navigating different virtual programmes/platforms which is not always the case, especially when the digital divide in New Zealand is still a major issue. Young people may indeed be technically savvy, but this does not mean that they have access to the latest technological infrastructure that much of our educational fixes for learning during the pandemic and lockdowns relied upon.

PIPELINE FROM ĀKONGA PARTICIPANT TO KAIMAHI

In our talanoa with kaimahi, it was clear that many had experiences similar to ākonga that were attending the Ignite programmes, which motivated them to become youth workers in the first place. All the young kaimahi we spoke to were either from the local community or worked in other communities such as South Auckland. In this case it was a felt-knowing around the conditions of deprivation that many ākonga have been raised in and a lack of opportunity to experience different things that kaimahi were aware of. For one kaimahi on the Oho Ake programme, they were a former Ignite Sport programme participant, and spoke of how this experience became a catalyst for them entering the youth development sector.

"I saw the incredible work these other young people [youth workers-kaimahi] were doing to inspire me to be better and I then had the opportunity to do this leadership programme here at Ignite and it just sparked this real passion in me aye and I wanted to invest in other young people like they were in me so I came back a couple of years later and started my journey in youth work."

– IGNITE, KAIMAHI 6

Kaimahi 6's talanoa excerpt speaks to the significance of youth development programmes for helping to build the pipeline of youth workers in the sector. This is significant as all providers that we visited were struggling with attracting and retaining talented kaimahi for a number of reasons, including high workloads and low remuneration. This was recognised by key Ignite kaimahi, who intimated to us that investing in youth workers was an important part of helping deliver the capability and capacity for programmes like Oho Ake. Furthermore, kaimahi needed to be supported to achieve and develop their own goals to positively role model and guide ākonga to achieve their academic goals.

> "Our staff have dreams and gifts and how do we best position them and support them to realize those dreams and gifts? Because our young people need those connections and those relationships with good role models."
>
> – IGNITE, KAIMAHI 2

Another important factor was that the majority of the kaimahi we engaged with at the Ignite visit and across all providers had yet to complete any type of youth work qualification. Ignite Sport's kaimahi pointed to a combination of reasons for this situation. There was a sense that youth work was undervalued in Aotearoa-New Zealand as a whole, and the role youth workers played was under-acknowledged. They highlighted three key aspects, namely the lack of resourcing, burnout, and the absence of respect for the profession of 'Youth Work' in Aotearoa-New Zealand.

> "Ara Taiohi is working on professionalism but how do we develop that career path so that it's one that's legitimate in its own right? Like where does a person like them go for work? Our youth workers are also burning out and there isn't enough resourcing to support them through getting qualifications so it's definitely an area that needs to be invested in."
>
> – IGNITE, KAIMAHI 2

This was a big concern for kaimahi at Ignite. Developing a sustainable future for youth work in our country, they felt, means creating a legitimate youth work career path that recognises the specialised skills that community providers carry, which many kaimahi believed could not be replicated in the school setting. Their belief was that community providers are positioned as wellbeing, life-skills, community, and individual development mentors for ākonga struggling to navigate adolescence and associated hardships in various areas of their lives. Schools, on the other hand, function as a place of learning around set curriculum and education standards leading to formal qualifications, where resources to perform holistic caring and development work carried out by community providers is limited by large class numbers and standardised, often prescribed learning units and subjects. Although there has been a suggestion by some that perhaps the answer could be more youth workers in schools, Ignite's most experienced kaimahi cautioned us to

3. CONT.

think about how that may shift the way that youth workers and their functions could be viewed and operationalised. Youth workers may become viewed as counsellors, which is a set of skills and training that is part of the youth development area but would take on a different meaning in the school setting, as many ākonga had already disengaged with school as a place, and were in the Oho Ake programme as a result. Their belief was that work pathways, or career opportunities in the youth development sector are needed to ensure the creation of a pipeline of youth workers. Part of this would be through ensuring better working conditions and remuneration for these workers.

"But at the same time, it's going to bring some challenges, I think, for organisations like Ignite and many other organisations that I'm aware of, they are in the same boat. And one of the things that they did, I think is really important, is that the government really looks at how it supports the youth development sector. My thinking is, you know, this is a strategy, I guess, of putting youth workers into schools and it's great, but they'd be almost seen more like counsellors. So, helping to legitmise their work pathways so that they get better training and support throughout their careers and not just with how they engage with young people."

– IGNITE, KAIMAHI 2

4.

CASE STUDY FOUR

Te Rūnanga o Ngāti Whātua

Te Rūnanga o Ngāti Whātua is a corporate and representative body established to provide social and cultural services for the growth and development of uri (descendents) and others within the rohe (region) of Ngāti Whātua. The organisation was founded in 1989 after the Te Rūnanga o Ngāti Whātua Act was passed into law in December 1988. Since its establishment the organisation has delivered youth development programmes to advance young people's aspirations and empower youth voices within the Ngāti Whātua region.

In 2020, Te Rūnanga o Ngāti Whātua was successful in receiving support from the Ākonga Fund for programme activities delivered across their five marae-based wānanga regions, Ōrakei (central Auckland), Haranui, Puatahi, Reweti, Te Aroha Pa, Te Kia Ora (South Kaipara), Ōmaha, Ōruawharuo, Ōtamatea, Ōtuhianga, Pouto, Parirau, Nga Tai Whakarongaorua, Rawhitiroa, Te Kowhai, Te Pounga, Te Whetu Marama, Waihaua, Waiohau, Waiotea (Warkworth and Wellsford), Korokota, Takahiwai, Toetoe, Tirarau (Whangarei), Naumai, Kapehu, Ripia, Oturei, Te Houhanga, Taita, Ahikiwi, Waikaraka, Tama Te Uaua, Waikara, Pahinui, and Te Roroa (North West).

Ngāti Whātua's programme based in Kaipara is a subsidiary of Te Rūnanga o Ngāti Whātua. Their Ākonga Fund programme activities are run out of Te Puna o te Mātauranga marae where the Research Collective conducted their site visit.

The Ākonga Fund supported activities under the Te Hā Oranga Rangatahi Resilience programme, which is an education focused youth development programme for ākonga between the ages of 12 to 21 years who are at risk of COVID-19 affecting their learning pathways. Delivered through a kaupapa Māori framework, the programme is based on the dynamics of whanaungatanga and incorporating resilience through a Māori lens. It encourages ākonga to stand strong in their mana and identity, giving them the opportunity to be the drivers of their own destiny. Programme activities provide a combination of group, whānau, and individual activities paired with one-on-one support, which provides a holistic approach to ākonga goal-setting and meeting their personal learning needs to achieve these goals and improve their overall wellbeing.

The Research Collective observed activities under the Te Tupu Te Kakano project which is a three-pronged health improvement, environmental management, and work ready kaupapa for ākonga. The purpose of the programme is to teach participants through experiential learning, the status of our environment and how our health can be sustainably improved through kaitiakitanga (guardianship and protection). Through programme activities, ākonga experience the depths of the environment whilst ascertaining valuable life tools such as self-respect and confidence, reinforcing the importance of environmental management. Ākonga follow a three-step action plan that delivers activities through the Te Tupu Te Kakano programme. This includes providing participants with learning opportunities within a diverse range of land and sea-based habitats (i.e.

possum and eel trapping), teaching sustainable methods for long-term wellbeing and connectivity through one-on-one mentorship. They also support participants with achieving aspirational career goals including attaining driver's licences, writing CVs, and/or securing placement into training/educational pathways. Due to the variability of COVID-19 restrictions during the first two years of delivery, activities were consistently interrupted, which affected participant attendance at various points of the programme and required creative delivery from kaimahi. During this time, the provider pivoted to running online workshops that focused on strengthening connections between ākonga and kaimahi, although this was also affected by participants not having access to appropriate devices or stable internet connections.

Ākonga were recruited through four channels into the programme which included being referred through iwi links (particularly in the Kaipara district), through schools, word of mouth, and/or referred to the programme lead by other social service agencies. The provider delivers two distinct programmes in two sites, namely 'Tupu te Kakona Rangatahi' in Whangārei and through the Kaipara, and 'He Waka Eke Noa Resilience Rangatahi' programme in Tāmaki Makaurau.

Whilst the Research Collective was unable to visit and observe activities on the ground immediately, we used the opportunity to broach conversations and make connections with Te Rūnanga kaimahi and staff via email. This was followed up by a one-hour online meeting held via Zoom to discuss the purpose of the work, the process (confirming site visit dates, discussing potential activities that could be observed and explaining ethical considerations) and answer any questions kaimahi may have had. Two members of the Research Collective as well as a camera operator attended the main Aoina 2 site visit, where we were greeted by two Te Tai Tokerau elders, with two kaimahi, two local community members, and five ākonga.

On the day of our site visit, we were welcomed onto the marae with a moving pōwihiri conducted by kaimahi and ākonga. Through this welcome, we observed the shy young men we had met briefly outside the marae transforming into confident tama tāne who were proud to perform and participate in the pōwhiri. As a part of this site visit, ākonga and kaimahi led the Research Collective on an environmental assessment tour that entailed surveying eel and possum traps set up by ākonga the night before. These types of tours are a core component of the Tupu programme, funded by the Ākonga Fund, which is underpinned by the concept of kaitiakitanga.

Once the pōwhiri formalities were complete, we were guided by kaimahi to the Otaika Valley Walkway where the first environmental assessment activity took place. This activity involved ākonga checking in on the possum traps they had laid the day before. We sensed a clear change in the demeanour and attitude of ākonga as we drew closer to the site, as they became audibly louder, expressing their excitement to find out who captured the most possums. Before we embarked on the track towards the traps, a kaimahi ensured everyone had safe walking shoes and outlined health and safety precautions.

4. CONT.

DEVELOPING CONFIDENCE THROUGH CULTURALLY AFFIRMATIVE ACTIVITIES

Te Rūnanga o Ngāti Whātua's programme content is steeped in Te Ao Māori, where ākonga learn proper tikanga of the forest and the awa in developing competencies and building their confidence in their culture and identity. We learned that as part of the programme, ākonga are initially welcomed on the marae by the local iwi and then taught tikanga for welcoming guests and given the opportunity to practise these learnings through the programme. It was evident that the programme activities positively influenced ākonga confidence in the ways they performed their assigned tasks as part of the pōwhiri. In our conversations with ākonga, they shared how apprehensive they were in taking part in cultural rituals like the pōwhiri as they had felt a sense of embarrassment initially, but that they gained confidence as they continued to actively participate.

> "I never use to want to do it because it's always shame, but the more I see it done and the more I do it myself the more confidence I get."
>
> – TE RŪNANGA O NGĀTI WHĀTUA, ĀKONGA 1

It was clear that there was a purpose for Te Rūnanga o Ngāti Whātua in encouraging ākonga to participate in these activities. A kaimahi spoke to the programme providing ākonga the tools to develop confidence through culturally affirmative activities. These culturally affirmative activities such as participating in a pōwhiri, meant that this confidence was something that could be deployed in other areas, which kaimahi believed would benefit ākonga in other areas of their lives. Kaimahi also believed that using culturally affirmative activities meant that the lessons were likely to stay with ākonga, as they connect directly with ākonga's background and cultural context.

> "Confidence is one of those things that you build as you experience more of something. So, what we do is try to help give them the building blocks to develop confidence in different areas of their lives. You have to give them time to build that though, like you can give them the tools of patience, and persistence but they have to keep working at it. We teach them those tools in our programme and through our tours and because it's done in a culturally rich way it sticks more and is more meaningful and that's what you want to see in youth development."
>
> – TE RŪNANGA O NGĀTI WHĀTUA, KAIMAHI 1

CONNECTEDNESS TO LAND, WHĀNAU AND COMMUNITY

The lead kaimahi and elders signified the importance of 'place' and used the whenua as a tool to help ākonga understand their connections to the land to build confidence. Thinking holistically about how young people build confidence through completing tasks and leading in spaces, we could infer its importance in helping ākonga also develop, realise, and grow their educational and training aspirations. Kaimahi spoke to the way they embed the idea of connectedness to land, whānau, and community through programme activities. Their activities help ākonga build confidence, develop self-sustaining skills, and reinforce their cultural identity.

> "I try and paint the narrative of the connectedness by ascending some of these mountains that are sacred to us. And then, from there, being able to look out over the landscape, and be able to connect places and marae. Going out on the awa being able to see where different streams come in like where the Māngere meets the Wairua, and explaining how that connects to me and them, where Waipao meets the Wairua, where Karukaru meets Wairua. Then, when Wairua meets Mangakāhea, Mangakāhea meets Wairoa, heke anō ki Kaipara, all these connections, are examples of that in nature are examples of that everywhere in the sky and the stars. These are examples of how we're connected to each other and everything that is around us. So, for us it is just about showing it to the ākonga and then helping them find their own feet and confidence in that space."
>
> – TE RŪNANGA O NGĀTI WHĀTUA, KAIMAHI 2

The emphasis on Te Ao Māori was clear, as the holistic way in which the programme was delivered helped to put mātauranga Māori at the centre of programme activities and knowledge. Kaimahi also discussed how their approach extended this holistic and connected approach to helping ākonga understand how they as individuals and their aspirations were also connected to their whānau and wider community. The concept of kotahitanga (unity) was extremely pronounced in the way that Te Rūnanga o Ngāti Whātua delivered their programme.

4. CONT.

"To me, there is no greater word in the Māori dictionary than tātou, ehara ko koutou, ehara ko mātou, you know, ko tātou. Ko tāua, ko tatou, it talks about that it's not you over there and that's not us over here, but it's all of us together. You know, supporting each other being one united whānau, I suppose I try and demonstrate that by acknowledging my whānau that are here and bringing my whānau through and to role model that for us, for those young fellows, it's about them realizing ko tātou hoki anō, and that to support each other to not isolate each other, to try and be there for each other. And again, he āhutanga."

– TE RŪNANGA O NGĀTI WHĀTUA, KAIMAHI 1

"I think the point of difference that my kaupapa has from anyone else has been able to go out and get your shoes off and go up the mountains or we're down the rivers or we're doing trapping or fishing and we have the maramataka and so it kind of aligns ourselves with the way that our tupuna, were in a way that they were able to read their taiao you know our tupuna when they [see] the manu flying over from the islands, headed towards, you know, from Arctic, over to Aotearoa they be able to see that, and then see them come back, by reading those tohu can start to gain, like, purpose in life and things like that."

– TE RŪNANGA O NGĀTI WHĀTUA, KAIMAHI 1

For Te Rūnanga o Ngāti Whātua, the outdoor environmental assessment activities embedded within Te Ao Māori and mātauranga were a particular point of difference, which enabled ākonga to develop their sense of self in relation to their whenua and enhanced their environmental custodianship which is highlighted in the excerpt below. Specifically, the programme relied on physical learning, but also on knowledge of the maramataka (Māori lunar calendar) to interpret the natural environment around ākonga. The principles of competency building and confidence were clearly developed by elevating the role of Māori knowledges in the programme operations, as described in this next excerpt.

It was clear that this approach was having a positive impact on ākonga. For two of the ākonga we spoke with, they intimated that the outdoor activities provided them with an opportunity to better centre their spirit and re-affirm their cultural identity. They also spoke of how learning from the programme helped reinforce some of the stories shared by family elders. This was beneficial in strengthening ākonga connection to their family's own knowledge.

"I like coming because I get to get out into the bush or the water and it helps connect me to who I am. It calms me I reckon and I get to learn Te Ao Māori and how to live that life that my ancestors did. The stories I hear here at [the] course are some of the stories I hear back at my nans and papa's and it's like being home but with heaps more things to do and see."

– TE RŪNANGA O NGĀTI WHĀTUA, ĀKONGA 2

"Yeah, it's cool as we get to do those things because it's like we are carrying on what the older ones did. I like to think of the stories and how someday someone will be telling my story to other kids."

– TE RŪNANGA O NGĀTI WHĀTUA, ĀKONGA 3

The use of outdoor activities was culturally appropriate and signalled one of the key competencies that most conventional schools are not able to deliver. Teaching and learning within Te Ao Māori draws in the mauri of the whenua. The physical, in-person, learning-by-doing approach also aligns well with Māori ways of knowing and being. For the elders we spoke to there was a sense that this was the best way to build a spiritual connection for ākonga to the whenua around them. In this way of seeing the world, all are connected to the whenua, and therefore connected to each other.

"In this programme it's a different learning environment. It's in the forest, in the awa. For Māori, I think that that makes sense to us. It makes sense to us to be able to approach it in a practical way. So, as you are able to do something in the practical way for Māori, I think it's important, you know. We're a hands-on sort of people, and we're also visual people, you know, we need to be able to see what it is that we're talking about. You need to be able to see it. And then also in the spiritual way, you need to be able to connect with it."

– TE RŪNANGA O NGĀTI WHĀTUA, COMMUNITY ELDER 1

4. CONT.

"You know that if you have a knowledgeable person, that's guiding you through that, that you start to understand some other things whakapapa to the eel, to the mountain, to the rocks, to the trees. You know, you understand that if you've got a person who can guide you on that journey, you know, that's a, that's a different learning experience from sitting within the classroom, there are some real changes that are happening within the classroom but it's not to deny that there's also a classroom out there."

– TE RŪNANGA O NGĀTI WHĀTUA, COMMUNITY ELDER 1

Through the programme, ākonga would document and reflect on their experiences and activities and present them in a daily diary which would be reviewed and discussed with their kaimahi during their individual check-in sessions. In addition to recounting their experience, ākonga developed confidence in their written and verbal communication skills. One of the ākonga we spoke with expressed that they felt more confident writing their thoughts and feelings since they trusted the kaimahi to understand and relate to them regardless of how it was written, whether it be in te reo Māori or English or a mixture of both.

This ākonga shared that writing was not one of their strongest suits, and tasks like the daily diaries would be something they would have avoided in the past. However, the programme allowed them to grow their confidence and feel comfortable in accounting and sharing their thoughts and reflections on paper. In addition, the daily diaries and check in sessions enabled kaimahi and programme administrators to draw on ākonga feedback and insight to understand how well interventions were working, which ultimately would feed into programme design and delivery.

LEARNING TIKANGA IN CARING FOR THE FOREST AND WHENUA

In the field, we observed a great deal of mana and compassion displayed by kaimahi and ākonga in various activities. One such activity that the Research Collective observed was the way in which the kaimahi led ākonga in dealing with the capture of what can be considered pests in the forest such as possums. During the tour, we were shown how possums became trapped in a tree mounted device called a trapinator laid by the ākonga and kaimahi earlier in the programme. These possums would eventually have to be culled, and in those cases kaimahi went through the process of guiding the ākonga through the appropriate tikanga to bring a possum's life to an end using the patu (Māori weapon/ hunting tool), reciting a karakia, and then skinning it. The fur would then be sold to a local wool manufacturer post tour. Ākonga were tasked with burying the possum and ensuring its grave was appropriately located so that it was not at risk of being disturbed by predators. Furthermore, aside from teaching ākonga tikanga around how to bring a living being's life to an end, they were also taught skills such as how to harvest fish, and other kai in the forest. In the excerpt below, the kaimahi speaks to respect underscoring the process described above. They also highlighted the value of the skills taught through the Te Tupu Te Kakano programme.

> "I always try and role model a way that's respectful to all things and under all circumstances, even when we're doing that mahi out there with the dead possums, ka patua ana, patua te ngāngara, still got a way of being graceful about it and having respect for it and doing that through pray[er] and giving it back to the whenua. To be able to contribute back to get to be able to give something back to your whānau is like, it's a well-being in that some of the ways that we demonstrated that along the journey is not only through experiences, but physically going in and harvesting fish, physically going and harvesting kai, growing kai, native trees and then being able to return that back to your whānau, your marae, hapū, iwi, mātauranga katoa, but the big thing is to be able to make sure that the ākonga when they go home, they're taking something with them aye, you know, we're making bread, or taking some kai back with them because that contribution is a mana to it, aye. He whakamana te tangata you know, waenganui tana kainga, tana whāmere."
>
> – TE RŪNANGA O NGĀTI WHĀTUA, KAIMAHI 1

4. CONT.

It was clear for us that the kaimahi skillfully utilised their cultural knowledge to impart ethical practices for ensuring environmental sustainability, but also provided ākonga with tools to be able to provide for themselves, their whānau, and communities. The kaimahi would stop frequently in both the possum and eel trapping tours to explain different survival techniques that could be used in the various landscapes we visited. We observed ākonga intently listening to the stories and teachings shared by the kaimahi and they would even ask follow up questions, demonstrating their engagement and interest in what was being shared.

> "Yeah, he always does that. Like make sure we do it in a proper Te Ao Māori way and the boys always get a little hoha with it but its good coz it means we don't take any of that bad stuff away when we leave aye. Like those things are heavy and real so when we get taught the proper way of doing it, it means we're being safe for us and whatever else is out there you know."
>
> – TE RŪNANGA O NGĀTI WHĀTUA, ĀKONGA 4

SKILLED AND DEDICATED KAIMAHI ROLE MODEL VALUES

Elders within the community attested to the kaimahi's complementary skills, personal resilience, and background being a unique aspect that greatly impacted ākonga ability to engage in the programme and by extension achieve their education and learning goals.

> "The thing with [Kaimahi], you know, a lot of people say, oh, it's a passion to be able to look after young people, being in service to them. He sees it as a responsibility and he has a very, very nurturing spiritual way about him because of his other culture, which complements his taha Māori, they both go together, they are both very, very powerful. For a young man like him to have that is very rare. And so, how do you nurture that? So they're, he's able to teach others of his age, to be that wise at that age and then we just try to, you know, we try to I guess support him in that area too."
>
> – TE RŪNANGA O NGĀTI WHĀTUA, COMMUNITY ELDER 2

Another elder commented on the kaimahi's ability to grow ākonga confidence in their own skill and ability during programme activities stating:

> "It's hard for a lot of rangatahi who don't see themselves fitting into the school system or this system because they think it's the same thing. But what he [kaimahi] does is allow the boys to grow and be able to make it what it is for themselves. He takes them on those tours and he corrects them where it's needed, especially around the health and safety parts, but he allows them to figure it out and guides them. As a practitioner, he knows his practice, both with the rangatahi and with Te Ao Māori."
>
> – TE RŪNANGA O NGĀTI WHĀTUA, COMMUNITY ELDER 1

To complement the environmental assessment activities, one-on-one mentoring briefings are provided by the kaimahi. It was evident from talanoa with ākonga that these sessions were valuable in helping reinforce the practical learnings they had received in the field and also in further allowing them space to set an action plan for achieving their personal and academic goals.

> "The one-on-one catchups I have with [Kaimahi] are good because he knows heaps of things and teaches us heaps. Like he shows us, and he tells us, you know, and it kinda makes me want to learn more you know. We also talk about my goals and put together a plan for how to get there and check in on it which is mean."
>
> – TE RŪNANGA O NGĀTI WHĀTUA, ĀKONGA 5

4. CONT.

BUILDING TRUST WITH ĀKONGA TO HELP FOSTER MORE MEANINGFUL CONNECTIONS

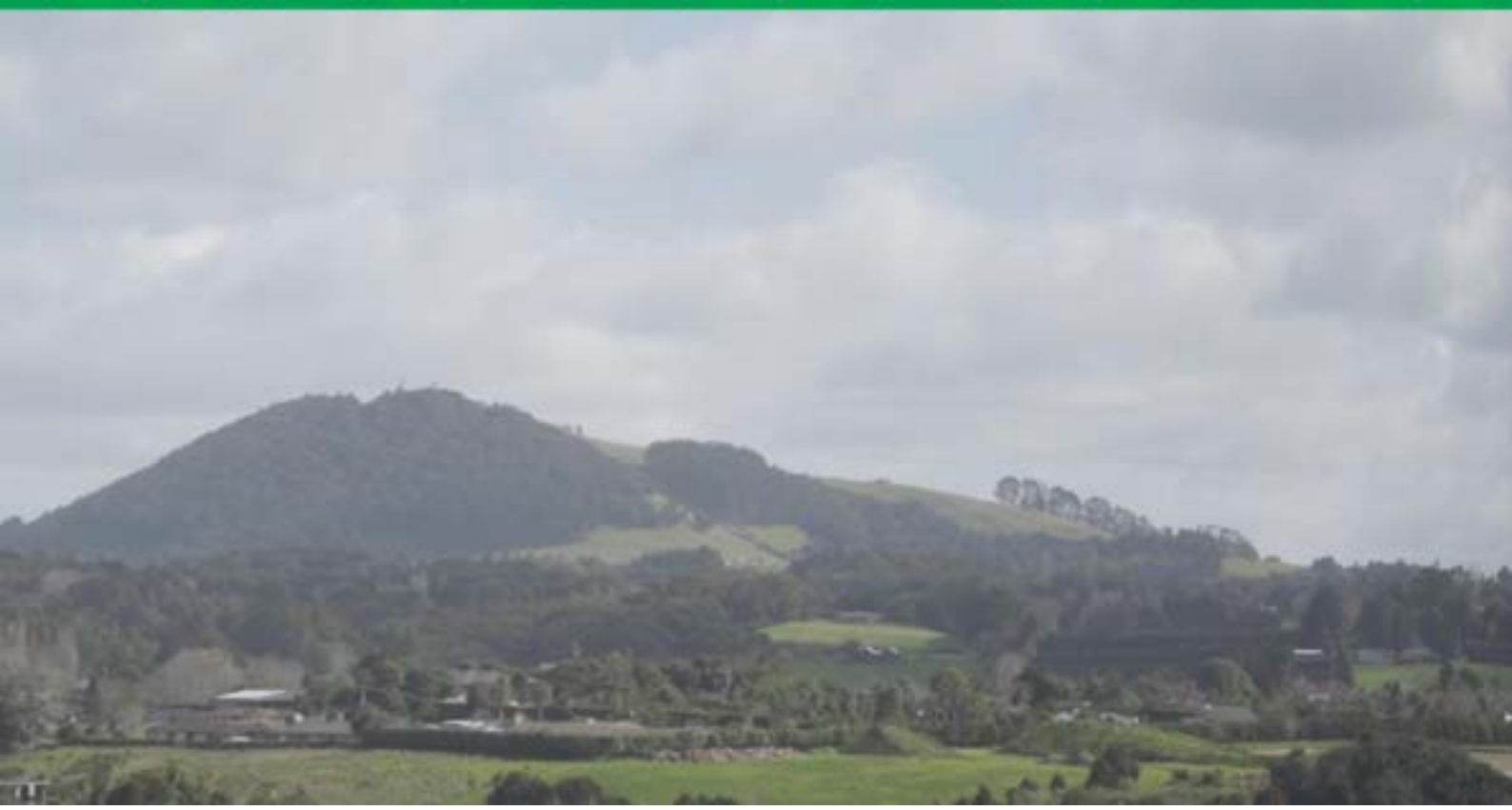
Kaimahi and community elders strongly indicated that developing trust-bearing relationships was pivotal to fostering meaningful connections with ākonga. Inherent to Te Rūnanga o Ngāti Whātua's approach, the kaimahi naturally cultivated whanaungatanga, finding opportunities to connect with the ākonga's whānau to understand their living and family situations, personal relationships, and invested in understanding the connections amongst ākonga themselves.

> "Trust is like the biggest gift a person could give to anyone else. For me I lean towards whanaungatanga. So, I lean towards getting to know the whānau, where they're from and then building connections and narratives through our people in the stories that we have between each other. I think that's a real Māori āhuatanga. I think also giving it time, so being okay with it to take a bit of time is important as well, not putting pressure on people to force people to like you, or to want to trust you. So, everything has moments and time and we do our best to capture those by wrapping around the whānau, I suppose and using the whanaungatanga between us is probably the biggest way of going about that one."
>
> – TE RŪNANGA O NGĀTI WHĀTUA, KAIMAHI 1

Community elders and ākonga substantiated this point and commented on the lead kaimahi's ability and ease to develop trust with ākonga and whānau. They further pointed to the kaimahi's background, demeanour, and innate duty to community which helped to facilitate their reliability.

> "He goes out of his way to get to know us. Who we are and where we come from. I don't let many people do that because I don't trust many people, but I've gotten to know him and his whānau too. So, it's like we're all family when it comes down to it. He knows mine and I know his."
>
> – TE RŪNANGA O NGĀTI WHĀTUA, ĀKONGA 3

For the Research Collective it was clear that Te Rūnanga o Ngāti Whātua programme is run by a unique group of kaimahi who are embedded within a powerful and proud community in the north of the country. The kaimahi are central to the success of their programme, and it is clear that ākonga are being supported by this programme to grow their confidence in their own abilities through the lens of Te Ao Māori.



5.

CASE STUDY FIVE

South Seas Healthcare Trust

South Seas Healthcare Trust (South Seas) is Ōtara's largest Pacific health provider, delivering a range of clinical, community and social services throughout South Auckland. The organisation was founded by a group of health professionals in February 1999, following an identified need to provide Pacific primary healthcare to the Pacific population in Counties Manukau. Since its beginnings, South Seas has grown to be the largest integrated Pacific provider in Ōtara, where more than 45% of the population identify as being of Pacific descent. The Bubblegum programme is part of South Seas' Youth Hub, which according to their website: "trains, upskills and mobilises a group of Youth Navigators to increase capability amongst Pacific youth in South Auckland."

Through the Ākonga Fund, South Seas' Bubblegum programme provides weekly 2.5-3 hours face-to-face mentoring for ākonga during school terms and one day a week during holidays (approx. 75-90 hours per year) at the South Seas Healthcare Youth Hub. Their strength as a health and wellbeing provider allows the programme to utilise the South Seas Village Community to provide wraparound support for eligible ākonga. This includes expert teaching and training support through the University of Auckland South Campus, Pacific Academy, local schools, church youth groups and church leadership, local youth providers, and whānau.

The Research Collective initially communicated with the Youth Empowerment leader to broach the possibility of a visit. Considering the immense challenges South Seas were navigating regarding the targeted COVID-19 immunisation rollout in South Auckland, much of their BAU activities shifted to frontline assistance for South Auckland families, meaning we had to delay our original planned site visits. To South Seas' credit, they were still able to deliver a successful mentorship programme that seemed to work for the communities that they served. As the only provider we visited in South Auckland, it was also the only provider we worked with that served an overwhelmingly Pacific demographic and cohort. Every ākonga we met on our two-day site visits carried Pacific descent.

FRONTLINE, ONLINE, REALTIME: NAVIGATING OUR COUNTRY'S COVID-19 RESPONSE

As an organisation, South Seas quickly found itself at the forefront of our country's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, supporting South Auckland's families and communities who were on the frontline of the pandemic. As one of our country's most socio-economically deprived areas, home to our largest international ports, and where the first of many major outbreaks occurred, South Auckland became not only a focal point of response efforts, but also a target of misinformation and vitriol. Within this context, South Seas' immediate concern was ensuring basic support and health needs among their ākonga and ākonga families were being met. These unique factors formed the backdrop to the formation of the Bubblegum programme. As South Seas already had a youth mentoring programme in place, they went to existing youth programme managers and participants to design their programme for this specific fund, which operated under the motto of: frontline, online, real time. The model was about a mentor being able to stay always connected with a young person to offer support, from studies and work training, to supporting their wellbeing needs through the pandemic.

> "So, we see the funding is there, and we have to come up with something to match that so we can get the funding and then we can do our work prior. So, because we're a COVID youth Response Team, we looked to our community, and asked: what do we need? We looked around, we talked to young people, and we realised that we needed a mentoring program. A youth mentoring program tailored for the young people in South Auckland. We also had to take into account COVID. Because of COVID, youth mentoring programs were nowhere to be seen. So that's where 'frontline, online, real time' came into play. So, frontline: we can be frontline face-to-face and online if we have to. And on real time. So, we got to practise last year because of how the delta variant affected our programme launch and we really had to live up to that motto as we said we're gonna go online, and we had to. So, we've done it and I guess that was the idea of Bubblegum. It was designed by the young people who were already in the Bubblegum programme."
>
> – SOUTH SEAS, KAIMAHI 1

5. CONT.

This one-on-one approach was particularly important for South Seas' unique demographic. With an all-Pacific cohort, all of Bubblegum's mentors and programme managers were of Pacific heritage. Further, they had high competency in cultural understanding with a team of mentors and kaimahi forming South Seas' activities around the relational ways in which Pacific cultural values underpin notions of the self and community. This was important for Bubblegum's programme leaders as they understood that they were working with Pacific ākonga, often from homes where deprivation has led to many impacts and traumas which affected what kinds of interventions were needed. For South Seas' community, it was acknowledging that ākonga empowerment in this case was a journey that involved everyone who was part of an ākonga's life and building respect for the community they were embedded within.

BUILDING PRIDE IN ŌTARA AND SOUTH AUCKLAND AS A WAY TO GROW CONFIDENCE AND GIVE BACK

The Bubblegum programme operates in one of our country's most socio-economically marginalised communities: Ōtara. This is not a fact lost on ākonga or kaimahi running the programme activities. What we found at South Seas was a strong sense of pride in the local community that was being cultivated by kaimahi, programme managers, staff, and volunteers, and was demonstrated by ākonga as well. As all kaimahi and mentors working with ākonga are from South Auckland, they understood the context that ākonga are living in very well and knew the challenge of working against resistant stereotypes. This motivated many of them to stay involved with the programme despite the many challenges of working through COVID-19 in a high-needs area.

> "Coming back and giving back to our community is, I think that's payment enough for us. It's just a feeling of gratitude and making sure that they know that this space is theirs and that this community is theirs and just showing them something positive. A lot of the time South Auckland is in the news headlines or whatever and it's always something negative but letting our kids know that good does come out of our hood. Good is them and it's just making sure that they feel safe in their space and that they know who they are, like their identity and everything. And that they connect with one another."
>
> – SOUTH SEAS, KAIMAHI 2

This ability to understand the struggles of home life for ākonga was important for programme delivery and impact, as ākonga indicated that kaimahi and mentors were their role models in an academic sense and helped them to see the potential in themselves and the beauty of their culture and community in the Ōtara and South Auckland area. While some ākonga had an idea of what career aspirations they wished to pursue, having access to mentors with experience in the post-secondary school training and studying environment was important in activating planning and motivation pathways for them.

South Seas, Ākonga 1:

"They connect with us like, they make us feel comfortable when we're with them."

South Seas, Ākonga 2:

"They're really lovely and sometimes really helpful, they help us with our research."

South Seas, Ākonga 1:

"Try and help us understand the material first and then they like to slowly help us more throughout the problem. So, they try to teach us the basics first and then go through everything, understand everything from the beginning. So, some mentors have different degrees they're going for and I feel like there's inspiration for us kids in what we want to strive for."

South Seas, Ākonga 2:

"Yeah, I want to become a doctor. She wants to become a doctor too."

Research Collective: *Was that dream that you developed because you've been part of this programme?*

South Seas, Ākonga 1:

"Nah, it was more of like a family dream but through this programme I realised it might actually be fun."

South Seas, Ākonga 2:

"Yeah, I thought this was going to be boring. The first week I came I thought this was going to be boring, but then I found it interesting then I just came every time."

The Research Collective visited the day a major volleyball tournament was being played between schools in the area. The kaimahi and programme director warned us that because of the tournament we may not see many ākonga come through on the days we visited. What was striking though was that not long after the designated start time, a large group of ākonga who had not been present at the start of the session showed up an hour into the session. Ākonga who we spoke to let us know that they were at the volleyball tournament but decided to come straight to Bubblegum afterward, despite kaimahi suggesting that it was not needed. It was clear that the programme had become part of ākonga's weekly routine and as Ākonga 2 mentioned, they wanted to attend as much as they could. And this connection was also felt by kaimahi, who saw themselves in many of the ākonga that they were trying to serve.

5. CONT.

"I want them to know that they are enough, that they are worthy of affirmations. Worthy of praise, worthy of all the good things that life has to offer. And making sure that there is a community that they want to see and build in the future. With our children being so young I guess personally as a mentor, I just hope that they do take away the sense of self love, love for the community, love for others, and just making sure that they pass those skills and stuff that they learn here on to our wider community."

– SOUTH SEAS, KAIMAHI 3

KEEPING ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT, A CENTRAL GOAL THROUGH THE CHALLENGES OF COVID-19

The Bubblegum programme run by South Seas has an explicit focus on academics as a core strategy as part of their programme delivery. After engaging in a short icebreaker activity, each ākonga was brought into a check-in session, one-on-one with a mentor. This allowed ākonga to reflect on their day at school and think about what they wanted to work on during the session. During the check-in, ākonga could indicate whether they needed support for specific subject areas or schoolwork and if they felt a particular way, could request support from the rest of South Sea's health and wellbeing hub. The programme, however, was evenly split between working on academics as well as having fun activities, food, and fellowship with their cohort. For South Seas, keeping ākonga focused on educational achievement was a central part of how they chose to work on empowering ākonga.

"So, what we do is we split it as we can't do all academics. That's boring. It's like we're back in school again. So, what we do is just check in with a fun activity, but a lot of them actually over time just start to bring their homework and schoolwork with them and they even prefer to do schoolwork sometimes. When we're like: "Oh, let's go do this fun thing." And they're like: "Oh, no, we're doing homework today." Some do just come in to hangout and chill. That's cool with us, we still make them write it on their check-in forms. Some still write things like school is boring, but over time, you know, you see some who go from having no goals to having them writing that their goal is to complete their English assessment."

– SOUTH SEAS, KAIMAHI 1

This slow and steady approach is a key feature of the Bubblegum approach. There is a strong acknowledgement by kaimahi and programme managers that balance is something that must be pursued, but never at the expense of academics. South Seas is operating in a heavily urban environment, and the opportunity for outdoor education is extremely limited. By focusing energy on associating fun activities with academic work, there has been a gradual shift in ākonga attitudes toward school, which was evident in both kaimahi and ākonga responses to our interview questions.

"We are true believers of thinking that although the classroom may not be for everyone, that's where it can start. And this is the space for people who, if you're not going to excel in the classroom on its own, we have this extra space where you can bring it here and we can try and make you understand it and we'll get it together and try and make you understand the curriculum in your way."

– SOUTH SEAS, KAIMAHI 1

5. CONT.

"Bubblegum has helped me achieve better with my schoolwork, because I've asked our mentors for help quite a lot (but I also did not because of independence *smirk*), and because of that I've achieved better in school, I'm doing well because of them. Before this, I was not doing as well at school as I am doing now."

– SOUTH SEAS, ĀKONGA 3

"To be very honest, I would always come to Bubblegum just to hang out with my friends, but when it came to education, it [Bubblegum] helped me a lot because sometimes I'd have a pessimistic mind when it came to my grades, and they [mentors] would help me by teaching me things I didn't really understand."

– SOUTH SEAS, ĀKONGA 3

During COVID-19, Bubblegum shifted online due to Auckland being placed in multiple lockdowns. The South Seas team had to think innovatively and creatively to ensure that they could reach ākonga. At the time, there were also several concerns around accessibility as many of the ākonga that attended Bubblegum came from homes with limited technological and financial resources. They also found that many Ākonga lived in homes with many family members of different generations. Fortunately, the kaimahi on the Bubblegum programme understood the challenges that Ākonga were facing in their home environments as they come from similar familial backgrounds.

"So, what we found was one of our biggest thing was our kids did not have devices. So, what was obviously a huge, huge help was us being able to give devices to the kids. And what we found was that this meant they were able to do their schoolwork and we were able to just keep in touch. I mean you know; we have our check ins every session they're used to having someone at least checking in with them. And then what we found was that no one was checking in with them during COVID and when we'd give them a Zoom call and they were like 'oh my goodness, it's so weird.' You know, but what we also found was that there was no space or privacy for our kids. So, we found their demeanour actually changed when we would call them. So, they're kind of in the corner of a room and be like, just, you know, whispering. We understood because we're Pacific ourselves. I was like, oh my gosh, it's like I'm whispering to my girls, like, don't worry, and they'd be trying, then parents are like knocking on the door,

or you know, their siblings are on the other side of the room - this was all during COVID times. We still tried to facilitate conversations and what not. But it was also realising, this is our reality, and I think it was important that we shared that experience and that made the return to in-person so much more special."

– SOUTH SEAS, KAIMAHI 5

It was clear through the responses of ākonga that this experience had bonded kaimahi with programme participants in important ways. Many ākonga expressed their gratitude and confidence in having kaimahi they could trust to be part of their journey.

"Bubblegum helps me with my confidence, having tutors around and opening up to them. It's really relieving, they take pressure off my shoulders [...] I don't know, it makes us open up even more. And how I found that really cool is that I've only been in this programme a year, and I can open up to them [mentors] and tell them my stories and everything. So, when that happens – opening up – it makes me feel relieved and I can turn "stuff" into confidence and motivation."

– SOUTH SEAS, ĀKONGA 6

A PLACE OF LEARNING NOT A CLASSROOM AND BUILDING A SAFE SPACE THROUGH CONNECTION

For South Seas, central to their youth development practice is a determination to craft a space for ākonga that feels like home to them. They sought to achieve this in many ways. One of the first things we noticed when we entered the Youth Centre was the strong presence of art and motifs that represented Pacific Island cultures, including language, flags and the notorious 685 and 676 symbols to represent the proud Samoan and Tongan sporting traditions many ākonga felt connected to on the Bubblegum programme. In addition to this, there was a conscious effort by kaimahi and mentors to create a space of learning that did not replicate a conventional classroom as they knew this would not resonate well with ākonga. Instead, they leaned into what it was that makes Pacific cultures unique in the sense that developing meaningful relationships leads and helps to develop safety.

5. CONT.

"I think first of all, like the classroom, they have to look a certain way, they have to wear a certain thing. There's rules and things like that make it hard. The main thing for a safe space for me are the relationships that are created within, I guess within this programme. They come in here and they see people that look like them and people that: oh, they have frizzy hair. They have hair like that. And I feel that connection with another person is what brings them and makes them feel safe. I also think providers are able to dedicate time to ākonga. And I know that sounds simple, but in the classroom, teachers don't have the time. And that's not their fault. Teachers do not have the time to dedicate, you know, the whole hour of a subject to one person. But some young people need that wraparound support outside of the classroom."

– SOUTH SEAS, KAIMAHI 1

In many ways, Bubblegum, as a programme with a strong focus on academics, understood well how it would be able to support ākonga who were not enjoying school. Although ākonga understood that the mentorship programme had an expectation for them to do schoolwork, there was a clear demarcation between a classroom versus the Bubblegum space which encouraged learning, but saw itself as filling a gap that teachers left behind in ākonga learning due to the limitations of the conventional school classroom.

"Like I think in the classroom, teachers, they do their job. They have a criteria that they have to do. But you're like, well, I guess providers were more open and we can be more vulnerable. What we can say and share certain stories with the young people that they can relate to. So this is a space where they can come and kind of be like, oh, Miss just said she didn't have time to answer my questions. I can come here and it's okay to have those questions. So, I guess that's kind of like a safe space for them."

– SOUTH SEAS, KAIMAHI 1

The ability of mentors to show vulnerability and work with ākonga to understand the material being covered in the classroom in an enjoyable and non-judgmental way was incredibly important in developing ākonga confidence. Many ākonga told us that during their time in the programme their academic achievement had improved. Further, we spoke with parents who had arrived to pick up their children and they all agreed that this programme was helping ākonga do better at school. The following excerpt comes from an ākonga at the conclusion of our site visit and talanoa.

"My comments about Bubblegum is that it's 100% a safe place, they know more things than my parents. I'm able to open up to them because we can relate to them. And before we came here, we were writing and one of the questions was: what are some challenges you're facing this week? I was able to tell them my challenges and they [mentors] were able to help me conquer them. Bubblegum's amazing and I'm so blessed to be here."

– SOUTH SEAS, ĀKONGA 7

DEVELOPING ĀKONGA FUTURE ASPIRATIONS AND GOALS

Nearly all kaimahi and mentors for ākonga at South Seas are university students and come from the South Auckland area if not Ōtara proper. Being of Pacific heritage and understanding the unique challenges ākonga face allowed kaimahi and the programme design to be tied to and generated from lived experience, providing unique insights into the needs around developing not only educational competency, but also educational capital to support ākonga engagement with education and training goals. Most parents struggle to help ākonga navigate the pathways to higher education due to their lack of experience in this area. The South Seas programme sees itself positioned well to be able to assist ākonga in these areas, whilst simultaneously building ākonga aspirations for themselves and their families.

5. CONT.

> "We have to understand that these kids don't come from homes where the parents went to university, and that's okay. And that's why this kind of space in our community is needed because our parents have not been to university. They can't give us the information we need to navigate the challenges there. And that's what we can do for a young person, and in doing so we can also help the family. You know, I always question how we just put ākonga straight into employment, or straight into this exit pathway or whatever, because what about understanding what you need to do to succeed? So, for example, when you get to employment, you have to know what your rights are, you need to know how to read and understand your contract. You know you need to know how to pay your taxes. Like what about those things?"
>
> – SOUTH SEAS, KAIMAHI 1

In this way, we can see that competency for the South Seas programme was more than just academic achievement, despite this being a strong feature of their programme. For South Seas' kaimahi and staff, understanding that there was a need to provide a more full education around societal institutional knowledge was also key to their programme design. It was not enough to just have ākonga stay engaged with education and/or training, it was important that they were set up to succeed in life as this would lead to long-term resilience and a greater likelihood for ākonga to envision different scenarios of success. Ākonga who we spoke to indicated they felt empowered to think about new career pathways within the context of their lives as young people, supported by their mentors and the Bubblegum programme, where kaimahi developed their confidence to claim certain abilities and attributes they were not necessarily aware of.

> "I started thinking that I want to be a lawyer, probably like term two because that's when they brought up debating. One of the mentors said that, like, I'm really good at debating and stuff. And so, I thought that would be really good for me. But I also got into business and stuff, when I saw all of these young creators on TikTok saying, I'm making all of this money from being at this age, I'm 15 and I was really persuaded by that."
>
> – SOUTH SEAS, ĀKONGA 8

"You know we were writing letters to our future selves in there, and you know what? It really helped to learn to love myself, it was like a love letter to myself. I thought: what is this? A love letter? An encouragement letter? You know, love and hate, it balances out life, you're not perfect. If you have no hate ... I mean, if hate doesn't come to you, you won't feel what love is... and it's like pain, it also follows behind happiness, but I've learned that it won't be like that forever. I will work hard to be a rugby player, because I've been passionate about rugby since year one I think, and that's one passion I have. It's rugby. Other than Bubblegum and my family, it's rugby. It's a safe space for me, it's where I know who I am, what to do, my role to play."

– SOUTH SEAS, ĀKONGA 9

"Bubblegum's helping me get to university by teaching me ways and things we don't learn at school and Bubblegum helps me with tasks – when I get tasks I know where I can get help. Sometimes when I think about university, I'd always think about how much my parents struggled and I turn that into motivation and that powers me to keep striving."

– SOUTH SEAS, ĀKONGA 9

6.

CASE STUDY SIX

Te Waiariki Purea Trust and Rotorua Community Youth Centre Trust

The Research Collective's final site visit to the Rotorua Community Youth Centre Trust (Rotorua Youth Centre) was delayed three times due to COVID-19 interruptions, severe weather leading to a cancellation of flights, and the public holiday marking the sudden passing of Queen Elizabeth II falling on the date of the pre-arranged visit. The Research Collective was able to visit Rotorua in December 2022 and speak to ākonga, kaimahi, and other staff involved in Te Hiringa, a programme supported through the Ākonga Fund. This initiative is a collaboration between different providers in Rotorua, which draws on the strengths of multiple providers, community, iwi, and hapū education providers, with Te Waiariki Purea Trust and the Rotorua Youth Centre working together to deliver the programme.

Te Hiringa, as noted by Te Waiariki Purea Trust and the Rotorua Youth Centre, seeks to provide a holistic approach (kotahitanga) to support and transition eligible ākonga to re-engage in their education journey through an intensive 10-week programme, face-to-face, five days a week. This includes support from youth mentors, home visits, whānau activities, and outdoor experiential programming of controlled progressive adventure activities for social and personal development, cultural connection, identity, and belonging. Te Hiringa supports ākonga in five cohorts over two years, and while the programme lasts ten weeks, it also integrates six months of mentoring to guide ākonga toward their chosen post-programme pathway.

The Rotorua Youth Centre was the only youth one-stop shop we visited during the research, meaning that they have health services, career development services, community rooms, and a whole host of support services for ākonga in one location. These assets were brought into coalition with the long history and success of Te Waiariki Purea Trust's expertise in outdoor education and empowerment activities, drawing together organisations with different strengths to provide a diverse and holistic experience for ākonga who join Te Hiringa.

UNDERSTANDING ROTORUA AND ĀKONGA FINDING THEIR WAY TO TE HIRINGA

Te Hiringa serves an important purpose in filling a gap that exists for ākonga who have disengaged from school. The ākonga we spoke to detailed how they lost motivation for school, often due to the school environment not being conducive to the way they wanted to learn or be treated. Many ended up in trouble because of fighting and high levels of truancy. As a result, these ākonga, excluded from school, would find their way to Te Hiringa through a key connector, such as a family member with a connection to a youth worker in their school or through wider community networks.

"I was excluded for fighting. I only went to school to see the bros and eat my lunch. So, I was mainstream in year 9 and then, I got kicked out of all my core classes and I had to do all my classes in a year 12, year 13 class. And then I was too naughty and that, so I got kicked out into this like alt ed class thing, basically all the naughty kids and then yeah and then this year, I got moved back into mainstream. I lasted two days. And then yeah, I was just fighting and then got kicked out. My Mum was asking [name redacted], I think he just goes around and helps the kids in trouble and that. And then he told my Mum, I can either do this online school or I can go to a course and of course it was this course and Mum reckons oh yeah, we'll give that a go. That's how I got on this course."

– TE WAIARIKI PUREA TRUST AND ROTORUA YOUTH CENTRE TRUST, ĀKONGA 1

The Research Collective recognised almost immediately the unique context in which youth development providers in Rotorua were operating within. Although it can be said that gang life is something that affects many marginalised ākonga across the country, this challenge is extremely palpable in Rotorua, often impacting the dynamics of cohort building for Te Hiringa. Many of the ākonga on the programme, especially the boys, were caught up in this dynamic and it was something all the ākonga spoke about. Rotorua is also in an emergency housing crisis, which has been well-documented in public press recently, with the Rotorua Youth Centre positioned on the same road as many of the emergency housing locations set up in motels in the area.

6. CONT.

"I just reckon there's too many gangs around that the young ones want to get into because that's how they're brought up around gang members and they just want to get straight into that gang stuff like all the uncles and all that stuff."

– TE WAIARIKI PUREA TRUST AND ROTORUA YOUTH CENTRE TRUST, ĀKONGA 2

When speaking to kaimahi and programme coordinators, this was an issue that they understood well and were continuing to work through. As nearly all kaimahi had been raised in and around the Rotorua and Bay of Plenty areas, they had lived experience that would serve to support ākonga who wanted to break free from gang life. Te Hiringa received referrals from a variety of sources through their connections to agencies like Oranga Tamariki and local schools, and have strong relationships with families within the Rotorua community.

"If you're raised out where I'm from, you're just going to be targeted as a Mongrel Mob supporter or something. If you're raised out West then you're going to be a Black Power supporter, or Black Power whatever so yeah that's kind of hard. Like, even clothes. Like I've watched, I don't know if I'm going too deep, like, I've watched this little white boy get smacked over down Fort Block. He had a red Chicago Bulls hat and they thought he was like, trying to be Mongrel Mob in that and then he got smashed over, his nose got broken. Yeah, it was out of it, but yeah probably the gangs and the violence. Gangs, violence, drugs, alcohol – it's probably the hardest thing here."

– TE WAIARIKI PUREA TRUST AND ROTORUA YOUTH CENTRE TRUST, ĀKONGA 3

"So, either schools will send referrals to us about the young people who have disengaged, sometimes referrals come from working with Ōranga Tamariki, sometimes there's self-referral between the two organisations, between the different services we provide, like mentoring or Oranga [Tamariki]. So, I think referrals tend to come from here, there, and everywhere. If they're school age, we run all those referrals past the Ministry of Education, and the Ministry of Education may even suggest young people and work with the schools to get those young people referred."

– TE WAIARIKI PUREA TRUST AND ROTORUA YOUTH CENTRE TRUST, KAIMAHI 1

BUILDING TRUST AND CONFIDENCE IN KAIMAHI AND TE HIRINGA

This strong embeddedness within the Rotorua community meant that Te Hiringa was designed with Rotorua's context in mind. As a partnership between Te Waiariki Purea Trust and the Rotorua Youth Centre Trust, the programme was able to tap into a wide range of support and expertise. Te Hiringa builds trust and confidence between kaimahi through the centring of a holistic youth empowerment model founded on four components geared towards supporting the whole person, rather than viewing a person as having deficient parts. This approach has had great success with ākonga enrolled in their programme.

"So Puutakenui is based on four areas: rangatahi aspirations; rangatahi well-being; act early, act together; and youth centric. And by working in that model, it enables you to actually look at the young person as a whole. So, if you're doing that needs assessment holistically at the beginning, middle and ending, you can wrap services around them. Rangatahi hate the idea of being referred to a mental health service, even adults hate the idea of being referred to a mental health service. But, if you are in a building where there are staff that are counsellors or work within mental health, no longer does that make you think you've been referred to a mental health service. It's just [name redacted] or staff and adults that you've met along the way that are trusted adults that are there to be able to provide you support and it doesn't matter what their job is, they're just the people that have got that expertise. So, building relationships is the essential part, building that whanaungatanga around the rangatahi and [what] those connections mean, once they start getting supported within those services, their health literacy and trust in services – huge increases. Young people don't trust, young people with trauma really don't trust. And so, therefore building up those relationships is what enables them to realise that actually, you can trust other services, but the wraparound support and the one-stop shop enables them to go into services without feeling they're going into services."

– TE WAIARIKI PUREA TRUST AND ROTORUA YOUTH CENTRE TRUST, KAIMAHI 1

6. CONT.

Wraparound support services in a one-stop shop configuration helps to reduce stigma in seeking support for various parts of an ākonga's life, but also ensures streamlined, consistent support is visible for ākonga. This is particularly significant considering how many ākonga felt that they had been devalued and ignored by their teachers in mainstream schools. There was even a strong sense of being racialised by teachers in schools and being treated differently because they are Māori. For ākonga on Te Hiringa, being Māori is celebrated and connections are meaningfully developed through values such as manaakitanga, awhi, and whanaungatanga.

"I like it [here at Te Hiringa]. I enjoyed it heaps. It was just more like connecting more and then like they'd actually listen, and it was just way better. I like the connection with the teachers here or mentors, like they try to make a connection and make you feel like this is a good place, like they make it feel like a safe place. Whereas at school, if I'm being honest, they only really connect with the white kids. Basically it's racist. Like here everyone is treated the same, but when I was at [name redacted], I'd draw in my book and get in trouble for it. And then another kid, a white kid would start drawing in his book and the teacher wouldn't say anything and then when I called the teacher out for it, I got detention. Then they just made me have no respect for the teachers that done that. So, every time I was there, I was either late as to class or didn't turn up."

– TE WAIARIKI PUREA TRUST AND ROTORUA YOUTH CENTRE TRUST, ĀKONGA 4

The importance of having Māori leadership and mentorship was also underscored by ākonga as central to Te Hiringa's success. It created an easy rapport and brought relief for many ākonga that it was likely their kaimahi would fully understand the world that they were working through, especially after feeling discriminated against by the education system and certain teachers.

"It's mean, I feel like it was easier for them to connect with us because we are all Māori in the thing. Like we just had a connection already and then just built on top of it and yeah like at school, like they didn't try to build relationships or like to connect with us."

– TE WAIARIKI PUREA TRUST AND ROTORUA YOUTH CENTRE TRUST, ĀKONGA 5

CALIBRATING LEARNING ACTIVITIES TO BE RELEVANT, PRACTICAL, AND INTERESTING FOR ĀKONGA

As ākonga are arriving in Te Hiringa with a negative view of learning and education, one of the urgent tasks on the programme is the recalibration of learning activities and reframing learning as something enjoyable, relevant, practical, and interesting for ākonga. This is achieved by the programme through the first three weeks focusing on whanaungatanga in seeking to develop relationships between the cohort members and kaimahi on the programme. This is a crucial task for Te Hiringa to undertake, as many of the ākonga enter the programme from a partisan perspective, often tied to gang divisions across Rotorua, and carry tensions among a tight knit community.

> "The first three weeks are really whanaungatanga focused, in trying to build that relationship between the young people. And because we take young people from across Rotorua, conflict is almost guaranteed whether it's colours, whether it's with whānau. It governs our first three weeks, so in that space we're doing a lot of team building activities, the outdoor space is perfect to grow in there as well."
>
> – TE WAIARIKI PUREA TRUST AND ROTORUA YOUTH CENTRE TRUST, KAIMAHI 2

6. CONT.

Offering a variety of activities is also key in this time. Although whanaungatanga is the key feature of these first three weeks of the programme, Te Hiringa makes sure that there is a range of creative activities and employment learning opportunities folded into the programming to ensure that ākonga remain interested. In doing so, they also design learning opportunities around the strengths of their kaimahi seeking to develop careers in the creative industries. Thus, the ability of Te Hiringa to also draw on music, radio, and art offers multiple opportunities for ākonga to find activities that they are interested in and can develop a passion for.

"Alongside that, we do the employment stuff. We do creative workshops as well. So, between that, we've got a radio station downstairs which I'm sure you guys have seen. So, we focus on radio. Music has been quite a strong interest with the young people. It's an easy tool for engagement because the self-expression, the ability to vent and our space which is governed by people who are currently artists. So, our youth worker, which I'm hoping she shared, is an incredible artist. So, being able to coach the young people through the steps that she's currently taking is proving to be pretty cool. We focus on site visits as well. So, both educational tertiary visits things like NZMA, places like service skills, trying to find some sort of engagement, my kōrero always, you know, giving young people a buffet of options to go through to see which one tastes better for them. So, there's the idea of really encouraging young people to try things that, you don't know what you don't know. We visit employers because returning to school or going to a course isn't necessarily [a] reality for some of our young people now in our space. So they're in the space for 10 weeks, that's all we aim to do as well as creating quite a thorough plan for the young person to walk out of the mentoring space so that it's not a mean: you've done well, good luck. It's a, you know, the follow-through is super important to us."

– TE WAIARIKI PUREA TRUST AND ROTORUA YOUTH CENTRE TRUST, KAIMAHI 2

The smorgasbord of opportunities is also paired with a post-programme mentoring scheme that keeps ākonga tied to the programme as they transition out. In preparation for this, ākonga are encouraged to think about future plans, and this gives ākonga confidence and allows them to see themselves in different career paths. Te Hiringa in this sense, provides development through activity delivery as well as acting as an opportunity broker for ākonga.

"Figuring out what courses I was going to do, that was all on my own, but getting here, this place,

and Te Waiariki Purea Trust. So yeah, they helped me set out different goals that would help me prepare myself for doing those courses, spoke with a lot of people, a lady who said she was a lawyer, so she helped me like map out what courses to do. So, I figured I should do like a Level 2 Foundation skills first that would give me like a qualification to then move on to like the bigger courses that involves law. One thing was me getting out there socialising and being more confident, when I'm around more people, not being afraid to speak your mind. And like, speaking up more because I'm a really shy person.

– TE WAIARIKI PUREA TRUST AND ROTORUA YOUTH CENTRE TRUST, ĀKONGA 6

OUTDOOR EDUCATION AND BUILDING CONFIDENCE IN KNOWLEDGE OF CULTURE AND TE ARAWA HISTORY

Te Hiringa, as a collaboration between Te Waiariki Purea Trust and the Rotorua Youth Centre Trust, allows for the development of a unique array of programming that combines outdoor education pursuits with a range of opportunities to develop skills and career pathways, and support for ākonga wellbeing and education suited to the community at Rotorua and Te Arawa. Many field trips and physical activities help ākonga to reconnect with Te Arawa history and develop pride in their cultural heritage and whakapapa.

"Yeah, it's been hard, don't get us wrong. Like it's been hard, although you might see that we get all the fun stuff and get into the kayak and get to do the beautiful maunga walks and sit on beautiful awa and connect them to iconic spaces of Te Arawa history and to be able to walk that journey from, mai Maketu ki Tongariro and everything of significance in between that space, not only provides them with mana and pride, it also gives them newfound knowledge that they can take home and to actually encourage them. They can go home and say: Mum did you know that we whakapapa to here? And that this maunga we can access? You know, Mum there's actually ways that we can better support our mental health and well-being to do well, rather than having a drink and having the smoke and all of that sort of stuff. So, it was providing opportunities ultimately to help them challenge what they were currently sitting in, what they were currently living in, and the spaces and places of which they interacted with each other, and their friends and whānau."

– TE WAIARIKI PUREA TRUST AND ROTORUA YOUTH CENTRE TRUST, KAIMAHI 3

6. CONT.

The field trips to key sites of Te Arawa history were a major hit with ākonga, who demonstrated their appreciation and a heightened sense of pride in their own whakapapa. By featuring this situated, cultural knowledge, ākonga felt a stronger connection to their whenua and their families, a key outcome that can help to heighten motivation to develop connections to local communities and their whānau. Ākonga also suggested that the in-person, practical learning was far more enjoyable than reading about it in the classroom.

Te Waiariki Purea Trust and Rotorua Youth Centre Trust, Ākonga 1:
"There was learning as well but it wasn't like standing there and looking at the river and it takes about 100 years. We got to walk around as he was talking and made heaps of friends. I only had five friends,
I never talked to anyone else and then I came here. Out of my shell."

Te Waiariki Purea Trust and Rotorua Youth Centre Trust, Ākonga 2:
"I liked all the trips because we always got to learn about, like, our history, Māori history."

Te Waiariki Purea Trust and Rotorua Youth Centre Trust, Ākonga 3:
"It's better than being stuck in a classroom. You're actually learning stuff."

Te Waiariki Purea Trust and Rotorua Youth Centre Trust, Ākonga 4:
"We're actually going to a place not looking at it through a screen."

Te Waiariki Purea Trust and Rotorua Youth Centre, Ākonga 2:
"And the teachers at school were telling us to do this, but our mentors were just like, kind of showing us what it was. Instead of telling us off, this is a moment. Yeah, write about it. But nope, the mentors took us to the mountain and showed us. We walked around and then they would tell us about the heritage of it, the history."

It was clear from ākonga responses that this was indeed an important experience for them, drawing on their own lineages as a site for generating interest in learning and understanding the whenua around them. For kaimahi, it was also an opportunity to make ākonga more aware that this was their whenua, their history, their whakapapa – a way to draw them into positive representations of their culture, heighten their awareness of their rights, and give them access to this knowledge and these spaces.

"Probably a bit more of identity in themselves and having a bit more faith in themselves and just actually realising they have access to all these things because a lot of them didn't actually realise, half the places that we went to were available to them already. Whether it was in the outdoors or with an alternative education provider. Yeah, they had no idea that those opportunities were available. So, it's knowledge and more self-awareness. I've found that that was our biggest impact was telling them we were going to go to Te Hiringa to learn about our waka that came from Hawaiki and we had to go somewhere else to see where we first started as

Te Arawa and how we migrated over to here, those are probably the sessions that I can guarantee, we'll capture their full attention."

– TE WAIARIKI PUREA TRUST AND ROTORUA YOUTH CENTRE TRUST, KAIMAHI 3

OVERCOMING DIFFERENCES IN GANG ALLEGIANCES

As alluded to earlier, a key feature around the challenges faced by kaimahi in re-engaging ākonga was the strong influence of gangs in Rotorua. This often posed multiple problems for the staff at Te Hiringa. Ākonga would often arrive with some sort of gang-related affiliation tied to the area in which they were raised, causing tension in the programme. In this instance, kaimahi on the programme needed to develop firm messages to ākonga that Te Hiringa was not a space where these old grudges could be rehashed. Admittedly, this was a difficult task for kaimahi, which they attempted to overcome by encouraging the development of relationships within the cohort. While this was successful to a certain degree, there were additional concerns around what would happen to ākonga when they left the safety of the space.

"One of the difficult things that I found with my cohort was trying to get them out of the idea of representing their gangs. That was a big one we had to face, just putting our foot down, making it known that this is a neutral ground. And when we're in this place this isn't a space to bring that kind of wairua and they struggled with that right through the whole programme. But I recognized that halfway through the programme, they started to see each other as the people that they were. So, we started to get along really well in our place, the issue was when they would leave our space, they would go back into that tense environment that sometimes was even enhanced because there were positive relationships among ākonga from opposite gangs and that's not okay in that environment."

– TE WAIARIKI PUREA TRUST AND ROTORUA YOUTH CENTRE TRUST, KAIMAHI 4

6. CONT.

As well as encouraging the development of positive relationships within the cohort, kaimahi sought support from community members to bring to light the hardships and violence that accompany the gang-related life. This involved bringing in an ex-gang member who had spent time in prison to give ākonga knowledge of the true nature of what gang life entails. Indeed, it was a strategy that orbited around the idea that higher exposure to the realities of the aftermath of a gang life would give ākonga the opportunity to choose a different path for themselves and ultimately their whānau.

"We also went out looking for other people that could help us within the community to help support us with rangatahi from two different worlds. We went out to the community and asked if there was anybody that was able to help us wrap around these rangatahi who come from that background who might know how to, you know, support these rangatahi. We had some people come and support us and have a bit of a kōrero and talk about what life behind bars was like and you know, trials and tribulations he's had in the past and why it's not so good or the best parts about that life. And we tried to let rangatahi form their own view and have their own whakaaro around it; not try to say to them that they shouldn't do it, or they should do this, you know, or they shouldn't follow their whānau or they should follow their whānau, but it was just showing them different opportunities and things that can happen within that lifestyle."

– TE WAIARIKI PUREA TRUST AND ROTORUA YOUTH CENTRE TRUST, KAIMAHI 3

For ākonga, they were well aware of the gang situation and for many of the young women on the programme, they felt it was a distinctly male problem. The feedback they gave regarding these sessions was positive, with many observing a shift in their own behaviour, or in the behaviour of cohort members who were interested in the gang life. This was no mean feat, as many ākonga have relatives that are in gangs, with role models from within their families who tend to be in the gang world.

"But see having a course like this, like how they bought [name redacted] in. He was cool, he really did talk a lot about the gang situations and all the different gangs around here and how they run things, like he was telling us that him and his crew had beef with their own kind like the Mongrel Mob. They had beef and he said they had a lot of drama thing going on with them. Because, you know, all dogs are supposed to say that, but for them, they're different, they got positive mindsets. They're not about drugs and all that kind of stuff, so that kind of changed the boys' mindset too."

– TE WAIARIKI PUREA TRUST AND ROTORUA YOUTH CENTRE TRUST, ĀKONGA 2

"Changed my mindset. Before I came here, I wanted to be a gangster, I wanted to be a gang member. So, on this course, like this, just different games like all the boys, at first, I hated them like I didn't want to speak to them, but now we're close as. They just made me want to be better and not be a gang member, trying to do better."

– TE WAIARIKI PUREA TRUST AND ROTORUA YOUTH CENTRE TRUST, ĀKONGA 1

CHALLENGES ON GETTING ĀKONGA INTO TRAINING/ EMPLOYMENT PATHWAYS AND STRUGGLING AGAINST A SILOED, NOT-FIT-FOR-PURPOSE YOUTH EMPOWERMENT FUNDING AND SUPPORT MODEL

One of the biggest challenges that kaimahi on Te Hiringa faced was in relation to the lack of desire for ākonga to return to the school environment. This was often because ākonga felt that the school environment was not conducive to the way they wished to learn. This posed an additional problem for kaimahi, as many ākonga fall into the 14–15 year age group. As such, they are still technically too young to leave school for employment under our current laws. It is also difficult to place these ākonga in employment as many employers preferred workers with more experience. There is a danger that these ākonga may fall further through the gaps as they are unwilling to go back to school and are unlikely to receive employment opportunities.

6. CONT.

"One of the other challenges we do face with our rangatahi is not a lot of them want to go back to kura but that's a goal for us. We try our best to try and get them back into kura or mahi but because of this age group 15, they're still too young to actually get a job in the community and a lot of people look for people that have experience, all those different things. So, for us in Te Hiringa, we try our best to, you know, teach them all these different things in creative and all these different skills, talk about resilience, talk about all that type of stuff and that you need these things to be able to work. But it's the age for us, 15 is still too young for them to work. So, a lot of the things that we try and do is get them into kura, we get them work experience. We do have a few places that allow this age group, but it's very rare to get them into mahi at this age."

– TE WAIARIKI PUREA TRUST AND ROTORUA YOUTH CENTRE TRUST, KAIMAHI 4

For Te Hiringa, an additional issue is that ākonga who join their programme often come from very unstable home environments, and often carry with them high burdens of trauma related to complex upbringings. It was clear from the experiences of kaimahi and leadership that they feel that the Ākonga Fund itself, with its limited life span, is not enough to continue creating the impact the Ministry wants. In our conversations with senior kaimahi, there was a feeling that the support they receive for their programmes is siloed and diluted between multiple agencies, complicating the ability to develop lasting and impactful changes that can shift the course of ākonga life trajectories in a positive direction.

"I think one of the things as well is like what is very obvious in this programme versus the others is the level of chaos and trauma that's in these rangatahi life. It's not your mild, and the people say, mild to moderate issues that these rangatahi are experiencing. These are hard out kids that have got multiple complex backgrounds and I think that was one of the things for me, when we were renegotiating the contract with MYD. This programme is the lifeline for these kids. These are kids that have got virtually no prospects, no aspirations and majority are on a very slippery, traumatised journey and that are not engaging in school, not aspirational and a lot are involved with a whole variety [of] agencies and if we don't work with these rangatahi they are going to be the ones that are in youth justice, they are the ones that are going to be in prison. The intensity that these rangatahi need is huge and I

think that's really, really underestimated within the funding."

– TE WAIARIKI PUREA TRUST AND ROTORUA YOUTH CENTRE TRUST, KAIMAHI 5

TRANSITIONING OUT OF TE HIRINGA AND INTO EDUCATION AND TRAINING

As Te Hiringa lasts approximately 12 weeks, transitioning ākonga back into schools and toward employment or training is supported by six months of one-on-one mentoring, to assist ākonga into their new pathways. We spoke to ākonga who had found this post-programme support extremely helpful. The transition plan for ākonga is developed during the programme and focuses specifically on what motivates ākonga in terms of a future goal. All the ākonga we spoke to had clear goals moving ahead as a result.

"So, when we finish the ten- or twelve-week programme we don't just see you later. They get six months of mentoring afterwards and so when they're with us in that ten weeks, we do all that cool stuff. We do like goal planning and stuff with them. We try to figure out: Okay, what's the next step when you leave? So that when you do leave, we've got a whole action plan ready to go to that mentor and say, this is our young fellow, this is what their dreams are.

This is who he is, this is who she is, and this is what they want to do. So, then we've got six months from there hopefully to try and smash that out and make it happen for them."

– TE WAIARIKI PUREA TRUST AND ROTORUA YOUTH CENTRE TRUST, KAIMAHI 6

Both ākonga and kaimahi at the Rotorua Youth Centre spoke of the difficulties they encountered when attempting to place ākonga back into the school environment. A point of concern, which was also shared by ākonga, was incidents and a general feeling that certain schools did not want ākonga back after they had been on Te Hiringa. Speaking with some of the mentors and programme managers, while they believed that they had invested a lot of time and effort to prepare ākonga to return to the classroom, schools have closed the door on ākonga who have regained the motivation to return.

6. CONT.

"What's clear is one of the original thoughts was that we would transition young people back into school and we realised pretty quickly that that wasn't the ideal next step for them, for a number of reasons. We've tried to transition a few young people back to school who have got to that point where they've gone, 'I'll give school one more go' and unfortunately the doors are not open in school."

– TE WAIARIKI PUREA TRUST AND ROTORUA YOUTH CENTRE TRUST, KAIMAHI 6

"Some of the rangatahi have got to the stage where they go to the interview to get back into school and that has gone appallingly badly with the schools. The want of some of the schools to take these rangatahi back was not there, and some were literally told that they weren't wanted. Now that's not the schooling system that we thought we had and we are not going to set our rangatahi up to fail, to go to that meeting and be rejected again, when all that work, that's been put into them to actually start to believe in themselves, have hope, build the connections, you know, get them to the stage where they go somewhere we have they really, really have struggled so badly to get to that meeting and feel complete rejection is not OK. That's actually quite devastating to hear that that's been something that some of the rangatahi have experienced."

– TE WAIARIKI PUREA TRUST AND ROTORUA YOUTH CENTRE TRUST, KAIMAHI 5

We were able to speak to a couple of ākonga who were now in the mentoring phase of the programme, and they felt well-supported and cared for by the Te Hiringa team. One of the ākonga we spoke with was preparing to take a legal executive course with the guidance of their mentor. Their belief was that their experience on the programme was what motivated them to move into the realm of practising law. Another suggested that they wanted to become a barista in the future, and the ākonga quoted below spoke about how she had become motivated to follow her dream to become a flight attendant. In doing so, she had developed a forward-thinking mentality that suggested the motivation was likely to continue.

"They just help you towards your goals. Like even I came in last week for lunch and [Kaimahi] was down there, so we went for lunch, but they were in here talking about all the students they said, "Do you still want to study to be a flight attendant?" I said "Yeah." And another [Kaimahi] goes, "Oh, so if I gave you a job right now, 20 bucks an hour or something, would you choose that or your study?" And I said, "I'll choose my study." And I said "I can get the money later, I'd rather worry about my study, and then work towards money," and he goes, "That's a good decision," and I said "Yeah." So, they can't help you with everything actually but they stick with you for six months. So, after you finish, they are still stuck with you. You gain a lot from them, they just show a lot of respect and being open to you, they make you feel comfortable and they're always here for you and stuff, so you get really good with rangatahi like us."

– TE WAIARIKI PUREA TRUST AND ROTORUA YOUTH CENTRE TRUST, ĀKONGA 2

Discussion

In developing the thematic talanoa from the hours of interview and observation data we recorded over the course of the research, the Research Collective was able to develop answers to the key research questions that were posed at the beginning of the research evaluation project. Overall, it was clear that providers had a strong sense of youth empowerment principles embedded in their programme design. Values such as aroha, compassion, sensitivity, care, and responsiveness were all clearly evident in the way kaimahi and programmes were conducted. Providers also found ways to include ākonga voice in programme design that were organic, fluid and responsive, although few providers had formal mechanisms for this to occur. The connections that providers were able to foster through their programmes were leveraged successfully in motivating ākonga to engage with school and training, as well as re-engaging some ākonga with schools. Best practice principles in youth empowerment were also employed throughout these programmes, as alluded to in the previous section and expanded upon in the remainder of this report.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE 1:

Fostering stronger connections with whānau, iwi, community, and other support services.

The first question the Research Collective sought to address was around how providers and their programmes were fostering stronger connections with whānau, iwi, the community, and other support services. The providers that we visited have demonstrated that their programmes and organisations were embedded and well-connected to different organisations and stakeholders within their communities. As the providers selected for the evaluation represented different communities and locations around the country, relationships with certain stakeholders were emphasised more than others.

1a. Whanaungatanga with a purpose to craft quality relationships.

A key feature of the programmes that were supported by the Ākonga Fund was the way connections were fostered through whakawhanaungatanga. The design of programme activities reflected the providers' understanding of the importance of holding meaningful whakawhanaungatanga to foster connections and their consideration for the communities and locale they were serving. Ākonga understood the purpose of these sessions well, and they were able to come into a space where their voices were heard and included in the programme activities for the day. Although this was not a formal mechanism in many cases for collecting feedback, the sessions were designed to be generative and fluid, allowing nimble shifts in programme activities in situations where ākonga may need specific support, such as activities to elevate mood or to unload about the pressures of the day.

An example of whakawhanaungatanga embedded within programme design was the check-in circles that were used by BGYF at the beginning of their sessions. Ākonga could openly share how they felt coming into the programme from school. Depending on the mood, kaimahi were then able to adjust their activity plans to suit ākonga needs, even if it did not fit well with what they had prepared. This response assuages the positionality imbalance between kaimahi and ākonga by giving ākonga power to negotiate what they wanted to do. This practice is indeed tied to best practice in the youth empowerment space, particularly in serving our target cohorts (McNelly et al., 2020; Hamley et al., 2022), which emphasises the need for power and positioning to be addressed in programme design to ensure that ākonga are being meaningfully included and heard (Cahill & Dadvand, 2018).

At Ngāti Whātua, whakawhanaungatanga was practised with a Te Ao Māori lens. Ākonga were taught proper tikanga required to perform a pōwhiri in the programme. By performing whakawhanaungatanga in an authentically Māori way, ākonga were able to gain a sense of purpose and connection through an awareness of their relationship with the whenua, the awa, the rangi, and with the living environment. The purpose of reconnecting ākonga with their roots was clear, as young people who are experiencing difficulties in their learning and training often feel a lack of connection within the environment and context they are being asked to learn and develop within (Freeman et al., 2020; Hapeta et al., 2022). The action of engaging with cultural practices helps ākonga regain a connection with their whakapapa and their rohe so that they may understand themselves to be a part of their community and envision a role they might play within it. Kaimahi and community leaders drove this practice, which sits comfortably in what we would consider to be best practice around developing core connections and truly meaningful, quality relationships

for the Ākonga Fund's targeted rangatahi in the youth empowerment space.

In programmes such as South Seas Healthcare Trust's Bubblegum programme in South Auckland and the Oho Ake programme at Ignite Sport Trust in Lower Hutt, whakawhanaungatanga took place in other ways, but retained the same purpose to connect. Their whakawhanaungatanga sessions always began with ice breaker activities to get ākonga out of a formal education headspace, to an environment of enjoyment, fun, and laughter. The purpose of these games and activities was to give ākonga the opportunity to organically find comfort within the space. As their programmes had been running for a substantial period of time before our visit, we were able to witness well-organised programme sessions. Though we observed upon arrival a sense of nervousness from ākonga coming to terms with new adults in their space, by participating in the whakawhanaungatanga activities with ākonga, we saw marked shifts in their comfortability with us being present. In this way, these activities did indeed allow us to connect with ākonga and kaimahi for the period of time that we were able to visit. This suggested to us that quality relationships existed between ākonga and kaimahi prior to our observation visits. By having kaimahi lead these sessions, ākonga were able to get a sense of the personality of the kaimahi they were working with. Further, by allowing ākonga to win at specific collaborative activities, it also helped ākonga understand their power in this relationship, that, they too, could succeed in winning at activities that included the participation of those older than them.

For the Bubblegum programme, the activities offered ākonga opportunities to let off bursts of energy, which we observed as helping with their preparedness to communicate and strategise with cohort members to win certain games. This effect was two-fold: it helped ākonga develop confidence to work with their peers from different school environments, and it also primed them for their next check-in session with individual mentors that would focus on their schoolwork. This shift in energy was incredibly useful to get ākonga to understand the balance needed in their studies. Ākonga suggested they enjoyed this divide as it gave them the opportunity to build an association between happy and fun memories with schoolwork, which would follow in their next session. The next sessions always began with a personalised check-in session with their mentor who made sure that goal setting and progress checks would occur before the academic schoolwork session began. So, before any schoolwork and tutoring would take place, mentors asked ākonga to talk about their future goals, and if they had already articulated and documented these, they spoke about what progress they felt they were making toward them. Ākonga were then invited to talk about what support they needed for their homework and learning. This practice of including the ākonga's aspirations at the start of every session, rather than between the gaps in their learning, reflected Bubblegum programme's respect for their dreams, and positioned their learning within the context of moving toward their goals through the process of the programme.

1b. Provider connections to schools.

From our visits, it was clear that all providers were well-connected to schools or teachers in their catchment areas, who often acted as feeders into their programmes. All providers also suggested that they felt they had positive relationships with schools and they often worked closely

with schools to coordinate their efforts to help keep targeted ākonga on track with their school and training goals. This was clear with the Champions Begin programme run by BGYF, where schoolteachers would accompany ākonga to their sessions. Further, kaimahi were in regular contact with schoolteachers about the progress and development of certain ākonga. For programmes like Bubblegum, their close vicinity to the local high school, which was literally positioned across the road, meant that the local high school was the direct feeder into their programme, where ākonga often saw Bubblegum as a natural extension of their learning day.

Despite providers' connections to schools, the programmes served ākonga who had often already disengaged from the school environment. We found a degree of variability and complexity regarding the relationships between providers and schools. This was particularly pronounced in the Te Ora Hou context in Ōtautahi-Christchurch, where kaimahi suggested that they did not have a formal relationship with any schools, but rather had key relationships with specific teachers within schools who helped refer ākonga who were in need of support or were disengaged with schooling to their programme. This was important, as it showed that providers were also cognisant of the complicated relationships ākonga had with schools that ākonga were attending or were no longer attending for various reasons. It was clear from our talanoa with ākonga and kaimahi, not just at Te Ora Hou, that they understood the need to differentiate programme work from a formal school environment when considering the mixed experiences ākonga had already had within the formal school system. Many ākonga held negative views of this experience and were likely to carry on this association into programmes that looked too much like a conventional school.

For this reason, programmes like Te Ora Hou's and many others focused on activity-based learning activities related to personal interests that ākonga had expressed to kaimahi, to nurture ākonga education and training aspirations. In doing so, many of the programmes focused on ākonga connections to their peers and to others who shared the same interests as them. At Te Ora Hou, this came in the form of the gaming activities where ākonga who were previously disconnected with society as a whole were able to develop relationships with gamers in other parts of the country. This raised not only their ability to connect with others, but their interest in travelling and seeing a future for themselves beyond the context they were currently living in.

The complicated nature of the relationship between schools and providers can also be seen in the case of Te Hiringa in Rotorua. Many of the ākonga we spoke to were either excluded from formal schooling or asked to leave. Some also left on their own accord, where they were then referred to Te Hiringa by a youth worker or a concerned teacher from the school. As such, ākonga here held a negative view of schooling. Through Te Hiringa, there had been incidents, described by ākonga and kaimahi during our visit, where ākonga who had regained a desire for learning and wanted to return to school were met with closed doors due to schools remaining apprehensive about ākonga returning. It was clear from our talanoa that this brought great distress to not just the ākonga, but also the kaimahi who had worked hard to rekindle ākonga motivation to pursue a formal school qualification. The case study of Te Hiringa demonstrates how relationships between providers and schools affect ākonga outcomes. Without schools and providers working together, hard-won successes on the provider side may be squandered, with ākonga suffering the most.

In the Te Rūnanga o Ngāti Whātua context, we were not able to get a strong sense of connection between schools and the provider programme. This is not to say that no connection existed; some ākonga were referred to the programme by local schools. Rather, we observed a strong sense of learning and training steeped within Te Ao Māori, where the connections emphasised were holistic and tied to the marae, ako, and to the natural environment around them (Duckworth et al., 2021; Hapeta et al., 2022). Ākonga were required to write daily diaries as part of their participation, which connected what they were doing in the programme to their schoolwork. However, Ngāti Whātua's programme was one centred on connections within the local mana whenua context, as the key node developed and capitalised on in terms of growing ākonga relationships with peers and their communities.

1c. Connections with community, support services and agencies.

All providers had a strong connection with support services and agencies which they leveraged to either draw in targeted ākonga, or operationalised to offer wellbeing and even food support for ākonga on their programmes. In terms of recruitment, aside from feeder schools and certain teachers, agencies like Ōranga Tamariki often referred ākonga to their programmes. We also heard that certain alternative education providers would refer ākonga to provider programmes. In this way, providers were often seen as the key intervention point for formal organisations and agencies to support ākonga re-engagement with training and education. What it seemed like from our observational standpoint after listening to providers, was that providers described themselves as being treated as the final line of defence against ākonga disengagement with education and society.

Providers leaned into this positionality in many ways as well. We were able to witness the way providers leveraged their perceived role as a way to advocate for the wellbeing needs of their ākonga. This was easier for some providers than others, especially those who operated within a one-stop shop environment like Te Hiringa based out of the Rotorua Youth Centre. There, ākonga on their programme had access to trained guidance counsellors, career advisors, a medical clinic, a radio station, and even a dance studio. By having such a high level of wraparound support for ākonga that drew in diverse skill sets and areas of expertise, the support that Te Hiringa offered was truly holistic and localised. The one-stop shop model naturally drew in a wide cast of professionals and members of the community to work under one roof. This then meant that ākonga who participated in Te Hiringa, a joint venture between two providers in Rotorua, were able to develop their own personal connections with wider parts of their local community. This invisible thread went beyond the programme design. These underlying connections were then activated through the programme execution, where ākonga were able to make these connections with other people and organisations around Rotorua as a result.

In the South Auckland context, Bubblegum's programme is part of the youth empowerment arm of South Seas. South Seas is one of the largest Pacific health providers in New Zealand, based in Ōtara. As such, the kaimahi and programme director for Bubblegum have a strong existing connection with health providers in the area. This meant that for ākonga participating on the Bubblegum programme, they were able to have direct access to the healthcare support that the wider South Seas organisation

was established to provide for the local community. In this context, ākonga were able to receive appropriate support for their health and wellbeing if kaimahi felt it necessary to refer ākonga to the professional services that they had on-call. This was clearly an advantage of the programme being nestled within a larger set of youth empowerment work that South Seas was currently undertaking.

Developing connections to the wider community looked a little different for a provider like BGYF. As a boxing academy, they receive support from local businesses and charitable organisations in the community. In particular, they work with local supermarkets and food companies to provide additional food support for their ākonga, which they have identified as a key ingredient in being able to activate ākonga motivation to participate in their programme. They had a fridge fully stocked with donated food, and nutrition bars that were positioned all across their headquarters to ensure ākonga would feel comfortable to grab whatever they needed so they would not go hungry. The food that they had in the fridge was for ākonga to take home and had been donated by local people. The programme was a bridge that channelled community support to ākonga and their whānau, alleviating in some way, the socioeconomic pressures on local families as our country continues to navigate a cost of living crisis. For BGYF, food security was a key prerequisite for the success of their ākonga, which was being provisioned by the meaningful connections they had built with local businesses and organisations.

1d. Building meaningful and generative connections with whānau and iwi.

For all the providers we visited, there was a pronounced emphasis on bringing whānau on the journey with ākonga, even offering opportunities for parents of ākonga to participate in programmes when possible. One of the simplest, yet most effective ways to build trust between providers and whānau, was the willingness and commitment of providers to pick up ākonga from homes, after school, in other contexts and bring them to the various programmes. Following the programme sessions, providers would also drop ākonga back to their homes to their parents. Nearly all the providers we visited did this as part of their programme activities. They felt this was not merely a nice gesture, but a key part of their programme development. At Te Ora Hou, we witnessed how van rides were important sites where connections were made. As kaimahi drove ākonga to and from the programme, ākonga used the opportunity to share about their days, informally interview each other about what they were excited about doing, and share jokes and laughter with each other. The camaraderie fostered on these rides was also highlighted by kaimahi themselves who saw this as a time to reinforce connections made during programme sessions. Furthermore, they saw this as an important sign of their dedication to whānau, by showing up for their ākonga, dropping them at the assigned time back to their whānau after each session, which helped develop a sense of trust and reciprocity between parents and kaimahi. This is crucial, as many ākonga who were supported by the Ākonga Fund through programmes like Te Ora Hou have lost trust in the education system and those who have been charged with their educational development. This trust was being developed and built on by Te Ora Hou in other ways as well. The vans that Te Ora Hou were using to transport ākonga were also given to help ākonga families when they needed to move homes, a true community service.

The lasting impact of the value of dedication and community service is evidenced by the intergenerational element the cohort at Te Ora Hou has developed. Many parents of ākonga who are now in Te Ora Hou's programme, supported by the Ākonga Fund, were also previous participants in Te Ora Hou's programmes when they were ākonga themselves. Thus, this simple act of manaakitanga demonstrated by providers, we observed, to be significant not just symbolically, but also in helping to build enduring connections between whānau, providers, and ākonga. In addition to this, we found at Te Ora Hou that this intergenerational element was crucial in allowing Te Ora Hou's programme to work with ākonga who had gang affiliations in their whakapapa. The ākonga who had come from this background were sent to Te Ora Hou precisely because their parents had been helped by Te Ora Hou in the past. This connection between whānau and Te Ora Hou, built over time, was what gave them access to ākonga who come from families harbouring a strong distrust of institutions.

As mentioned earlier, BGYF would also provide food for ākonga to take back to their whānau, which we took to be an important way that ākonga themselves could see their participation in the programme as a contribution to their whānau. This was also the case at South Seas, where on the Bubblegum programme, ākonga were always given a hearty meal during the programme. On the days we visited, the meals were subway sandwiches, cookies, and water. Bubblegum's programme often ordered a surplus of food, and ākonga were encouraged to take the food home to their whānau at the end of the programme activities. Again, this gesture may seem insignificant, but in a situation where ākonga supported by the Ākonga Fund can sometimes be framed in deficit ways, the ability to contribute something to their whānau is an important way to build trust and genuine connection between the programme and whānau. In the South Seas context, we saw that ākonga were being picked up by their parents, and ākonga would come out with their take-home portions of food and offer it directly to their parents or older siblings who had come to pick them up, with a bright smile on their face. We observed how parents or caregivers would often say they were not hungry at that time and thank their ākonga for thinking of them at that moment. This we felt to be significant as much of our conversation in the South Seas space orbited around how ākonga loved their parents and understood their parents' sacrifices for them in their life. In the small act of providing food, the connection between the provider and ākonga and their family is bolstered.

Ngāti Whātua's Kaipara-based programme is a subsidiary of Te Rūnanga o Ngāti Whātua. Their programme activities are run out of Te Puna o te Mātauranga marae. As most ākonga are from local iwi, the way their programme is run is not about making new connections per se, but rather about reinforcing ākonga connections to their own whakapapa. Thus, their programme that is designed around mātauranga Māori is hugely significant as connection is woven throughout the entire programme, which is noted to be an impactful strategy for engaging young people (Baxter et al., 2016). Ākonga are welcomed on the marae by local iwi and the programme takes ākonga into the bush surrounding the marae and in the region. The learning of pōwhiri connects ākonga to the customs of their local marae, reading the signs of the whenua while possum hunting connects ākonga to their mātauranga, learning the tikanga around bringing a possum's life to an end connects ākonga to their customs, learning the whakapapa of their marae

encourages ākonga to gain a greater sense of their interconnectedness to all those around them. This programme design centred youth empowerment principles in many ways beyond just fostering connection. It also ensured that ākonga were being empowered in a culturally affirmative way that sought to celebrate the power and innate complex knowledge systems (Jenny et al., 2006), experienced in relation to the whenua which mātauranga Māori inherently possesses, through a strengths-based approach.

This theme of connecting ākonga to their whakapapa was also a key part of Te Hiringa in Rotorua. The programme combined outdoor pursuits with in-person skills development workshops at the Rotorua Youth Centre. The outdoor pursuits took ākonga to visit key sites of Te Arawa history. With ākonga almost all being affiliated with Te Arawa, they learnt about their own histories as they visited the landing site of the Te Arawa waka, and learnt more about the different maunga, awa, and settlements that marked out Te Arawa settlement in the area we know now as the Western Bay of Plenty including Rotorua. For ākonga, this gave them the opportunity to connect with their own history and whakapapa in a tangible way. This was seen as an empowering experience and they mentioned regularly how being able to visit these key sites of Te Arawa history with kaumātua elevated the lesson to one that connected to their own mana, transforming the way they viewed their own people and history far beyond what learning in a classroom through books would have been able to give them. This meant also that the trips that they went on as part of Te Hiringa caught the interest of their whānau as well. One of the ākonga we had a talanoa with mentioned how their mother wanted to come along to all the trips, which the Te Hiringa team encouraged on occasion.

The enthusiasm for learning led to another ākonga we spoke to becoming so motivated that they never missed a day of the programme. This shift in attitude towards learning greatly impressed their guardian, who remarked that this sort of motivation was never shown by the ākonga for school before, and improved the relationship between the guardian and ākonga.

1e. Developing connections between ākonga and peers.

For all the providers that we visited, the cohort building approach was seen as the best way for ākonga to build strong, positive and supportive relationships with their peers. We saw this in many guises throughout the life of the research project. As mentioned earlier, cohort building was facilitated to occur organically in settings like van rides and shared transportation moments to and from programme activities such as those observed at Te Ora Hou in Ōtautahi-Christchurch, and in places like Rotorua during Te Hiringa. But we also witnessed many instances where whakawhanaungatanga was developed through carefully selected ice breaker activities that required ākonga to work together on specific tasks. Take for instance our observations of the Oho Ake programme by Ignite, where the cohort we observed easily numbered over 50 ākonga. A team of kaimahi worked with the cohort in two groups, a group of girls and a group of boys. After this, the cohort was brought together to play a game that resembled Zap. This activity required all ākonga present to work together to keep the game going. If there was a failure in the link, the game would come to an end. In this way, ākonga were given the message that without working collaboratively, even with people you may not have a pre-existing relationship with, the fun would come to an

end. We concluded that the activity was a success, where all ākonga were engaged, laughing, talking loudly, and demonstrating strong rapport with each other despite the large number of the group after the game ended.

At BGYF, this cohort building approach was also very successful. As detailed in the thematic talanoa section, the mixing of cohorts within their programme brought together ākonga from mixed backgrounds, abilities, and relationship difficulties. The BGYF Champions Begin programme, which focuses on learning skills through boxing, was used as an activity to bring a group of ākonga together who had a strained relationship at school. The programme allowed these ākonga to see each other in a context outside of school; where initially one ākonga described a new cohort member as "annoying" upon their arrival, these ākonga would, in a few months, be able to see each other in a different light. They developed a new respect for each other as they engaged in a physically demanding activity that encouraged supportive relations and languaging to be used. They now catch the school bus together and look out for each other during sessions and consider each other friends.

In the South Seas context we also spoke to many ākonga who described themselves as not very people-friendly and who came from a schooling environment with a lot of tensions among the student body. As these ākonga came into Bubblegum's learning space, the contrast from a formal educational setting filled with underlying tensions marked by past experiences allowed ākonga to learn more about each other in a less pressured environment. Many ākonga suggested to us that without Bubblegum, it was very unlikely they would be friends with the other members of their cohort, as internal cliques and different groups within the school dynamic shifted what relationships were likely to be made or severed.


BubbleGum

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE 2:

How have providers fostered the meaningful inclusion of ākonga voice in programme design and

One of the challenges for all the providers in attempting to include ākonga voice in programme design was the fact that they were working with ākonga who were already disengaged with learning and often came with their own set of trust issues related to people in positions of authority. As such, best practice around youth empowerment involves thinking of ways to empower ākonga to feel confident enough to speak up, which often happens when programme delivery and design have attended to the power differentials at play. This is not an easy mechanism to activate in any programme where elders are leading activities on behalf of younger participants. Furthermore, the solution is not as simple as just asking disengaged ākonga to just tell us what they need, as bonds of trust must be built first. Considering these challenges for providers around meaningful youth voice inclusion, it was unsurprising for the research team to see very little formal mechanisms built into programmes around ākonga evaluation of existing programme design and delivery. This is not to say that ākonga voice and feedback was not considered important or not meaningfully included in the programmes providers were delivering. Rather, it forced providers to engage in an agile and adaptable manner to receive ākonga voice, that was dependent on the trust ākonga had for their mentors and kaimahi, who would then be the vehicle for ākonga voice to be included in programme design.

2a. Lack of clarity around role of formal ākonga feedback mechanisms.

Drawing on youth empowerment principles and models like the Cahill and Dadvand (2018) P7 model, for the Research Collective, we took one key indicator of meaningful ākonga voice inclusion to be the degree of influence ākonga feedback had on the way programmes were designed and delivered. In terms of design, when we asked kaimahi and programme directors whether there had been any co-design process with ākonga before their programmes were ultimately shaped and submitted as funding applications, providers gave us complicated responses. Whilst it could be said that it seemed like very little ākonga input had been formally documented in the design of programmes that were then supported by the Ākonga Fund, providers made use of the learnings garnered from previous programmes they had run, which included many conversations with ākonga, their whānau, and other key stakeholders who participated on these programmes to craft new approaches for programmes that were supported by The Ākonga Fund. Furthermore, in this way, it would be more accurate to say that providers did include ākonga feedback from those who participated in other programmes through informal mechanisms that allowed them to circumvent the difficulties of gathering and managing formalised feedback from ākonga. Providers noted this was due to the fast paced nature of programme delivery and the limitations of working with very few resources. It was informal ākonga voice and feedback that they ultimately used to help craft the programmes supported by the Ākonga Fund.

BGYF did note that they did have formal mechanisms to gather ākonga feedback. This included the head, heart, feet model which had been designed for younger ākonga on their programmes through an external evaluation team. Additionally, they had feedback forms that older ākonga were able to use to offer their own feedback. When we pressed them about how these formal mechanisms were being deployed, the kaimahi suggested that the feedback is discussed by the entire BGYF team, but there is no formal mechanism that allows for that feedback to be fully

assessed against programme design. Thus, there was a lack of clarity on our side around how much of the voice of ākonga was being incorporated into the overall design of the programme. They also had a very prominent suggestion box available to ākonga to give feedback to the programme manager and kaimahi, however, they admitted that ākonga did not make much use of the suggestion box.

One provider that did have an embedded feedback loop for ākonga to express their views on their experiences was South Seas' programme Bubblegum. As part of their daily check-ins, ākonga were encouraged to fill out a worksheet where they could evaluate their experience of the programme weekly. In the feedback form, ākonga were asked to reflect on how the programme content had been experienced from their perspective, what were the things they enjoyed as well as things they wanted to have improved. This process was completed with their mentors, meaning the feedback was not exactly anonymous. However, a benefit of this approach was that kaimahi and mentors could engage in direct conversations with ākonga to clarify any areas that kaimahi needed. These feedback forms were then used by the programme manager to track their progress on the programme and flag aspects of the programme that were not working well for ākonga. Aside from South Seas and BGYF, there were no other clear formalised feedback mechanisms that providers shared with us that went beyond some of the feedback mechanisms that MYD requires. However, this is not to suggest that ākonga voice was any less important to other providers, as will be seen in the next section.

2b. Including ākonga voice through whakawhanaungatanga activities.

Despite there not being many formal channels for ākonga voice to be incorporated into the programme design process, kaimahi and providers did demonstrate on many occasions how much they valued ākonga voice and opinion around delivery of the various programmes. This was often best seen through the various whakawhanaungatanga activities that providers developed at the beginning of many different sections of their programmes. For instance, at BGYF, check-in circles were most valuable to get a sense of ākonga emotional and physical wellbeing upon arrival. During these check-ins, ākonga shared openly about what they were feeling that day, possible challenges they might have encountered, and what activities they were not looking forward to doing. This was important for a provider like BGYF whose programme utilises sports activities like boxing to engage ākonga interest in learning and training. Their check-in circles allowed ākonga the space to share as much and as little as they wanted depending on their mood. Kaimahi led ākonga through an activity that allowed them to scream out a single word that described their emotions in that moment, or more if they wanted. By listening intently and getting a read of the energy, kaimahi would adjust their session plan to match the mood of ākonga. We found this to be an effective way to include ākonga voice in programme delivery for BGYF in a meaningful way.

Similar to the check-in process that South Seas instituted, Te Ora Hou in Ōtautahi-Christchurch held regular sessions with their ākonga to get a gauge of their progress and whether the activities they were engaging in through the programme

were resonating with ākonga. These sessions were held less frequently than South Seas, at roughly two-week intervals, and involved kaimahi having one-on-one sessions with ākonga to talanoa about what was going on in their lives. Not only was this a great way to get feedback from ākonga, it was also a really valuable tool to ensure that ākonga were also having their wellbeing supported while encouraging ākonga to re-engage with education and training. It was in these sessions where ākonga were able to influence programme delivery as these sessions could alert kaimahi to adjust the content to be relevant to ākonga. This was the case around the use of gaming as a platform to engage ākonga in developing their training and future work aspirations. With ākonga expressing their desire for more gamer-styled engagement, kaimahi at Te Ora Hou were able to deliver accordingly.

This was also the case at Te Waiariki Purea Trust, where the strong emphasis on mentorship meant that through whakawhanaungatanga and genuine manaakitanga, ākonga were able to share with kaimahi what their dreams were, and kaimahi, through utilising services in the Rotorua Youth Centre, were able to design programme delivery around site visits and link ākonga to people in the community who could help them. Te Hiringa has a six-month mentorship service following the conclusion of the 12-week programme. During the mentorship phase, ākonga are able to voice what their desires are for their future and respond to any suggestions made by their mentor-kaimahi. One such example included an ākonga who said they wished to be a flight attendant, and they were asked by kaimahi at Te Waiariki Purea Trust whether they would rather go into employment or study and train toward that goal. The ākonga responded that they would rather pursue their long-term goal and forfeit their current earning potentials as they have been empowered by the programme to stay true to the future they envision for themselves. In response to this show of determination, kaimahi connected the ākonga with local community education providers who could give them the skills to become a flight attendant in the future. The same happened for another ākonga who aspired to become a lawyer as a result of learning about the injustices happening to many in their community in Rotorua. This young person was then provisioned with the information needed to get into a legal executive training programme, with the goal to get enough credits to be able to enter law school at a later date.

2c. Building trust with ākonga to empower their voices.

Although this has been alluded to across the report, it is important to acknowledge the role kaimahi played in empowering the voices of ākonga to be meaningfully included in influencing delivery of the programme. This was evident in how many ākonga felt cared for and supported by kaimahi, which allowed them to open up to kaimahi in different contexts. Ākonga we spoke to across all the providers told similar stories around first coming into Ākonga funded programmes, where they felt nervous and did not know anyone, but soon built strong rapport with kaimahi. Ākonga cited many reasons for why this rapport built rapidly. The majority of ākonga found kaimahi to be generous and kind, and extremely down to earth. Furthermore, especially for Māori and Pacific ākonga, seeing other Māori and Pacific kaimahi working in the space that gave them an inherent feeling of safety and connection, while teachers at schools were unable to understand or connect with their cultural and socioeconomic context.

For many ākonga, this trust was only enhanced further by the way that kaimahi responded during the COVID-19 rolling lockdowns. Ākonga involved in Ignite's Oho Ake programme mentioned in our talanoa how their kaimahi and mentors stayed on-call for them during the pandemic, how they would message them regularly to make sure they were coping with the added stresses that pandemic life offered. Furthermore, kaimahi provided regular online activities that kept ākonga connected to each other each day. From these acts, ākonga felt a true sense of genuine care and connection with kaimahi that they did not feel with their teachers in school. The shared experience being supported through the pandemic built ākonga trust in kaimahi, which allowed ākonga to open up to kaimahi about themselves, their preferences, and their dreams for the future. This level of trust also facilitated candid discussions around ākonga thoughts on the programme content and delivery method. But most importantly, it meant that the ākonga voice was truly being listened to from the perspective of ākonga.

This was also the case at Te Rūnanga o Ngāti Whātua's programme in the Kaipara region. One-on-one sessions between kaimahi and ākonga function as not only opportunities for kaimahi to receive feedback, but also a time for whakawhanaungatanga. These weekly check-in sessions also involve ākonga keeping a diary that documents their experiences on the programme. From these diaries and the associated kōrero between ākonga and kaimahi, ākonga speak to their aspirations for the future and discuss their experiences on the programme, where kaimahi utilise the information to inform future delivery of activities and programme content.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE 3:

How have providers utilised linkages to increase engagement in learning and/or improve future aspirations (e.g. ākonga have transitioned to further training or employment as a result of participating in Ākonga funded initiatives)?

From the Research Collective's observations and talanoa with kaimahi, ākonga, and parents we encountered through the journey of the research, we got an overwhelming sense that the programmes were making a positive difference in ākonga choosing to engage in learning and training aspirations in their lives. The Research Collective were not privy to any quantitative data regarding specific overall numbers from providers as there was also a feeling shared among everyone we engaged with that ākonga long-term engagement with training and education aspirations required long-term monitoring and support. However, there were many examples of providers successfully using the connections they had built with ākonga and their whānau to guide ākonga toward re-engaging in formal school or training. This came down to the hard work by kaimahi and providers who ensured that ākonga stayed connected to programmes and with their mentors even through the pandemic, which was the outcome the Ākonga Fund was seeking to achieve. These qualitative insights suggest that the Ākonga Fund did achieve this based on the insights we gathered from our provider visits.

3a. Making use of provider connections to open pathways for ākonga.

One way providers were able to establish engagement or re-engagement with career and training aspirations through the years impacted by COVID-19 was by activating their pre-existing relationships with different community organisations, businesses, and learning institutions, to find ways to keep ākonga in pathways of training or learning. A great example of this was the work that was done through Te Hiringa in Rotorua. The Te Hiringa programme had the added difficulty of working with a lot of ākonga who existed between being excluded or disengaged from the traditional school system and being unable to legally leave school before the age of 16. Te Hiringa would engage these ākonga with dynamic blended outdoor activity-based learning and then have to actively seek out opportunities for ākonga who did not want to return to school to be able to partake in work experience. This meant that both the providers who worked on the programme would reach out to their existing networks within Rotorua's business community to get ākonga who fell into this category the chance to be in some kind of employment.

As mentioned earlier, Te Hiringa was a collaboration effort between Te Waiariki Purea Trust and Rotorua Youth Centre in Rotorua. The Rotorua Youth Centre functioned as a landing place for at-risk ākonga, supported through a one-stop-shop model that included wellbeing and career advice support, whilst Te Waiariki Purea Trust delivered outdoor activities based on the history of the whenua and surrounding environment. The collaboration between the two providers leveraged each other's specialised skill-set to create a holistic programme that supports ākonga in a way that departs greatly from the conventional classroom learning models likely to be deployed in schools.

Although not as directed as Te Hiringa's focus on transitioning ākonga into training or employment opportunities, Te Ora Hou in Ōtautahi-Christchurch used a similar approach in connecting ākonga on the programme supported by the Ākonga Fund, to see potential opportunities outside of school. They held a career open day and invited guest speakers to outline what skills and qualifications ākonga would need to be able to get into professions they had expressed a desire to pursue in the future. This included people like artists, web designers, and people working in the technology sector. We found this a great fit for ākonga on the Te Ora Hou programme

as it aligned with the gaming focus of their intervention that drew ākonga in. In this way, the provider connected ākonga interests to future career prospects. This was a key aim of the Ākonga Fund.

Connecting ākonga to further education and qualifications was also a goal for Te Rūnanga o Ngāti Whātua. The funding they received from the Ākonga Fund was used to support their Te Tupu Te Kakano project in the forest around their marae. However, they also ran additional programmes for qualifications such as getting driver's licences, vocational qualifications that included barista training courses, and they were also connected to employment agencies that could offer ākonga advice around career development and employment opportunities. These were all services that Ngāti Whātua's overall work programme offered, but they were not connected directly to the Te Tupu Te Kakano project. Ākonga, however, were able to move into these programmes in the future if they were the right pathway for them. The goal was still to re-engage ākonga with school where possible. For participants on their Ākonga funded programme, kaimahi shared that their school attendance had improved as did their engagement with teachers and school curriculum. Ngāti Whātua's programme managers kept in contact with schoolteachers to ensure that they were able to get a read from a qualitative perspective about what impact their programme was having on the lives of their ākonga.

For BGYF in Lower Hutt, they reported that the schoolteachers they were connected with mentioned that attendance for students who had a history of truancy improved owing to the Champions Begin programme. This was partly because the sessions BGYF ran were attached to the school day. Thus, for ākonga who were enjoying the boxing classes, they needed to attend school on that specific day to be allowed to attend boxing. Some teachers further stated that although the gains in some cases could appear modest, the fact that some ākonga were now showing up to school at least twice or three times a week was a huge improvement from some ākonga only showing up on one. Moreover, as the connections between the school programme and the BGYF programme strengthened over time, a pipeline of communication developed between certain school staff and kaimahi, allowing them to coordinate support for ākonga in different ways. Teachers reported that ākonga on the BGYF programme had undergone major transformations in their ability and willingness to communicate with their peers and the teaching staff at their school. This coordinated approach served as a valuable mechanism for sharing information, but also for maintaining healthy connections between the ākonga's lives at school and in the programme.

3b. Using connections to build competencies.

For the Research Collective, we were able to also see how programmes and providers were using connections to facilitate the development of ākonga competencies in important ways. In this context, connection was understood by providers to be paramount and the basis where all youth empowerment work would take place. Providers and kaimahi dedicate a great deal of energy to connect meaningfully with ākonga, which has been well-telegraphed through this report. Connections between ākonga and kaimahi are often facilitated through shared cultural and ethnic

heritage. This is extremely important in places like South Seas where they serve an almost exclusively Pacific cohort. Thus, all kaimahi they had on staff were also of Pacific heritage. Ākonga were able to sense that kaimahi and mentors they were working with understood the specificities of the cultural challenges they were navigating. This also meant that kaimahi were keenly aware of how the digital divide would affect ākonga during the COVID-19 lockdowns that happened multiple times across Auckland. One of the first actions South Seas took was to move quickly to source and distribute laptops and digital devices for ākonga. Through these devices, ākonga were able to continue their tutoring sessions and keep up with schoolwork despite all the pressures they felt and stay engaged. South Seas was able to identify, react, and meet ākonga needs as they drew from the cultural knowledge that the kaimahi and programme at South Seas was developed within. The power of connection in this context came in the ability to read and see the contextual nuances of the challenges specific to the neighbourhood they were operating within.

From this connective base and cultural intuition, the Bubblegum programme has enabled many ākonga to improve their academic performance in school. By having this bond with ākonga, Bubblegum mentors and kaimahi leveraged their insider positionality to work with ākonga in a way that resonates with them. Over our two-day visit at Bubblegum, we were able to see these connections operating in real time. Kaimahi and mentors used humour in Pacific languages to motivate ākonga to study, where they drew on internal Pacific ethnic-specific competitive spirits to draw ākonga into contests. They also demonstrated an ease and respect for ākonga parents in a way Pacific peoples understand within their own context and protocols. All these factors were important to building competencies through a foundation of authentic connection.

This was also very clear when the Research Collective visited Te Rūnanga o Ngāti Whātua, whereby the first and most urgent task undertaken by kaimahi was to reconnect ākonga with their whakapapa, their whenua, and their tikanga. Within this context, we saw ākonga develop a strong sense of pride in being able to participate fully in the pōwhiri, in leading songs, directing the manuhiri to the their seats and listening to the kaikōrero with a sense of knowing around the tikanga that was being displayed. This was a powerful place of connection for ākonga and set the tone for the type of confidence we were able to witness in the forest. In our talanoa with ākonga, it was this growing knowledge in their own culture which was facilitating their confidence to learn new skills and write openly about what they wanted for their future. Within this environment, being Māori was not just celebrated, it was centred in all that was done through the programme delivery. This, in a sense, was where the most pronounced competency around culture was being developed and felt for ākonga we came across.

A similar outcome was witnessed in Te Hiringa further south in Rotorua in Te Arawa territory. With nearly all ākonga coming through the programme being of Māori descent, there was a very intentional focus on connecting ākonga with Te Arawa history and tikanga. For ākonga, this was a connection that had been missing through school and once it was restored, it motivated their desire to do more, to be more, and to serve their local communities more. One ākonga mentioned how through Te Hiringa they developed a deeper connection with their Te Arawa

history, and they gained a stronger sense of their identity, fostering confidence to be in places with kaumātua and kuia. In the end they were asked by a kaumātua to speak on behalf of their group at each place they visited, a competency they were able to develop as a direct result of the programme. This was another way we saw how the value of connection was deployed to help develop core competencies and confidence for ākonga, which could then be transferred into other contexts especially around training and career development. The ākonga alluded to here is now on a pathway toward future employment and is in a training course.

Another way connections were utilised to build competencies was through Ignite, whose programme design relied on youth empowerment through the lens of sports. The programme intervention here was getting ākonga to find connection with sport and activity as a core part of one's wellbeing. In doing so, they developed the confidence of ākonga to be able to try out different things and to not be afraid of growth and change. We were able to witness this in the way that ākonga, who we engaged with at Ignite, demonstrated courage in new activities they undertook, whether it was a new outdoor pursuit or making new friends with people from other schools and classes. This core competency tied to confidence had a positive influence on how ākonga envisioned their own futures through education or other possible vocations. Many ākonga felt that they could see a future for themselves in sport or careers related to sport and recreation. Moreover, they were more engaged with their studies at school as a result and many were also considering a career in youth empowerment. Ākonga expressed how they felt empowered to think about their futures in ways they did not when in school and this was another way we could see the value of connection forefronting the desire to develop competencies and keep at-risk ākonga engaged with their education and training aspirations.

3c. Leveraging trust through connection to build competencies.

Related to earlier reflections around the connection developed through shared cultural heritage between ākonga and kaimahi, there was also a strong theme that emerged in all our visits related to the importance of trust as not just an outcome of meaningful connections, but also as a precursor to building competencies (Iwasaki, 2016). To revisit the Te Ora Hou example in Ōtautahi-Christchurch, trust was key for the programme to make a meaningful impact on ākonga aspirations for their own education and training. As Te Ora Hou had been in operation for many decades, there was an intergenerational element that connected their current cohort of ākonga in their programmes with previous decades. This sense of trust was essential for ākonga who came from a gang background to be given permission from their parents to participate in Te Ora Hou's programme. As such, the Te Ora Hou team were able to work with this ākonga to develop a different outlook in life away from the gang context in which they were raised. This trust was developed not just through meaningful connection, but through community acknowledgement of Te Ora Hou's history of service to the Ōtautahi-Christchurch community. This allowed Te Ora Hou's programme, in establishing some recognition within the community, to enable kaimahi to tap into the community aspect of youth empowerment. Ākonga often mentioned how Te Ora Hou were trusted by their parents and teachers as they had a long history of service and helping not just at-risk ākonga but the community and whānau as a whole. This

then meant that the deep sense of trust that ākonga felt was only reinforced by whakawhanaungatanga activities Te Ora Hou held with ākonga. Ākonga trusted kaimahi to have their best interests at heart and opened up to kaimahi about the things that truly motivated them. As a result, Te Ora Hou was able to develop through programme adjustments a way to bring gaming as a motivating tool for many of their ākonga.

The issue of trust was also paramount in the South Seas context in South Auckland. Most of the ākonga on the South Seas Bubblegum programme were ākonga who came from Ōtara, an area that ākonga and kaimahi felt has a stigma attached to it due to its history of gang violence in the 1980s-1990s, as well as being a town with one of the most concentrated levels of Pacific peoples in all of New Zealand. Ōtara, and South Auckland as a whole, is a place that has been much maligned, most of it unfairly, in public press and in relation to its history of socioeconomic deprivation. For ākonga to be raised in this environment and for parents of ākonga to be comfortable enough to send their children to an after-school programme near the Ōtara town centre required a significant amount of trust. The parents we spoke to outside the Bubblegum sessions intimated how much faith they had in the kaimahi at South Seas to be able to care properly for their children during the programme sessions. Further, they truly believed that the Bubblegum programme was improving their children's performance in school, with one mother (whose husband had moved to another part of the city) deciding to remain in Ōtara so that their children could continue to attend the after-school programme. For these parents and guardians the trust they had in the Bubblegum programme and all associated staff was because all of these kaimahi were either from Ōtara or South Auckland themselves and were of Pacific heritage as well. This was significant for parents as the issue of role modelling was something they said was important. For the parents, they felt that Ōtara was often neglected and ignored, with one parent mentioning how Ōtara is somewhat of a food desert without a single major supermarket that services the area. With ākonga academic achievements improving, it was clear that this trust was also an enabler that was important for ākonga to develop competency around their schoolwork in the eyes of ākonga and their parents.

Trust was also built by kaimahi and providers through their meaningful embracing of culture and identity for ākonga. This was often embodied by kaimahi and in the framing of language used to impart knowledge on ākonga through different sessions as well as the emphasis placed on culture and identity. We saw many examples of this around how te reo Māori was integrated into the names of sessions, buildings, and signage across all locations we visited. Furthermore, ākonga flagged how this has meant they have developed a true connection and respect for kaimahi in their programme. A lot of this respect was earned through kaimahi demonstrating care and love for ākonga in the way they addressed them, in the way they centred their voices, and by demonstrating service by ensuring they were fed, dropped off, and picked up by kaimahi. This was significant as ākonga were often coming from school environments where that trust no longer existed or had been severely tested.

3d. Developing competencies through role modelling.

For ākonga, another way that competencies or the motivation to develop a work and education plan arose came

through the role modelling offered by kaimahi and mentors. As has been emphasised extensively throughout this report, it was clear that for ākonga, having kaimahi and mentors that looked and talked like they did was incredibly important in developing meaningful connections. However, ākonga also intimated how role modelling by kaimahi also served as a major motivator for them to strive to achieve better. We saw this in every site we visited. Ākonga inevitably spoke of how the programmes had kaimahi that modelled the type of manaakitanga they themselves wanted to share with others in their lives. At South Seas, having mentors who study at university was pivotal in inspiring many of the ākonga to consider university education as a possible pathway for them. A few ākonga we spoke to mentioned how they always dreamed of university but thought it was unattainable as they had so few examples in their lives of people who had successfully completed a university qualification. As the mentors and kaimahi working on the Bubblegum programme were university students themselves, this shifted their mindset, and helped ākonga realise that this was not an unattainable goal after all.

For the ākonga we engaged with in Te Hiringa in Rotorua, there was a great deal of admiration for the kinds of work that their kaimahi and mentors did in service of their communities and whānau, and the efforts they made to preserve their culture and language. The programme encouraged ākonga to use te reo Māori, where they learned and performed their pepeha, something that all kaimahi modelled and demonstrated, as well as a strong understanding of tikanga throughout the visits to key Te Arawa sites. Ākonga mentioned to us that they saw their kaimahi as the types of role models that they aspired to be, who are champions for their communities and their culture. This was particularly pertinent when the ākonga spoke of issues related to gang affiliations in Rotorua. Certain ākonga suggested that it was important that more ākonga have role models like their kaimahi, especially tāne who were easily influenced by the colours of the gang in areas they grew up in. Furthermore, another ākonga shared that because of Te Hiringa they had left the gang allegiance behind and had developed multiple plans post-programme that included pursuing a Rugby League career with the backup plan of setting up a barber shop so that they could empower other young Māori through delivering fresh cuts that they assured us was a key part of one developing pride in their own appearance.

Role modelling was also important when thinking about potential future careers. As alluded to earlier, at Ignite, we came across a kaimahi who was once an ākonga on the Ignite programme. The fact that this kaimahi was a former ākonga was not lost on the ākonga we engaged with on our site visit. They felt this was a great thing as it showed to them the effectiveness of the programme to inspire a future pathway for them. Many ākonga said that they would consider a career in youth work as a result, as once again, they felt that kaimahi were true role models who embodied the ethics of duty and care in the way they made themselves available and on-call for ākonga during some of the most difficult moments of their life. At Ignite, many of the ākonga reiterated that they believed that their kaimahi and mentors would always be there for them and that they never felt that they would ever be turned away or made to feel small by their kaimahi. We observed this as offering real confidence for ākonga but also as a catalyst for ākonga to consider their own future pathways as a result of this positive role modelling.


Champion

Priority Cohorts

The Ākonga Fund sought to enhance the engagement and re-engagement of four target cohort groups, Māori, Pacific, Rainbow+, and ākonga with disabilities, with training and education through programmes delivered by community providers. Overall, we found that programme designs served Māori and Pacific ākonga well. Most providers were well-positioned and understood the cultural values systems of both, incorporating Te Ao Māori and Te Ao Pasifika into their programme design, culture, and values. Naturally, the more holistic practices associated with both value systems provided a higher degree of connectedness for these priority cohorts. Where it became more difficult for the Research Collective was around how providers were engaging with Rainbow+ ākonga and ākonga with disabilities.

This issue relates to the idea of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989; Thomsen, 2022), whereby many in our society often occupy multiple marginal identity frameworks and experiences, often, making it difficult to separate between the priority cohorts. In many instances a person can be Rainbow+ and Māori or Takatāpui, in the Pacific space, they could be Sāmoan, queer, and neurodivergent. But this issue is complicated further when you consider gender and sexual identity is often evolving as a young person comes to terms with who they are. There is no specific timeframe or age at which this process takes place (Cass, 1979), meaning that many ākonga may not be comfortable and resilient enough yet to be able to claim this identity in spaces like ākonga programmes. It may also simply be inappropriate in many cases to collect data from ākonga around their sexual identity as issues around privacy then come to the fore. Many ākonga may also not be "out" to others around them, and excessive focus on Rainbow+ issues may actually harm their progress in this regard. Further, many ākonga who came into programmes supported by the Ākonga Fund were neurodiverse, and not necessarily showing a physical disability. In intersectional spaces it is often understood that targeted programmes for these cohorts are developed separately that prioritise ākonga of that cohort.

The intersectional problem is an issue that providers were not well-positioned to navigate. This is because for providers: 1. Their programmes were about supporting ākonga who had disengaged from school, therefore, the prescribed profile is not actually tied to a specific identity group or framework despite there being a predominantly Māori and Pacific feature of their programme attendees and cohort; 2. Targeting ākonga of a specific cohort runs the risk of othering them further, which can have the impact of reinforcing deficiency stereotypes. As such, providers had to develop programmes that were as inclusive and welcoming as possible, emphasising that everyone is welcome on their programmes irrespective of what their background is. However, some degree of targeted support for the needs of ākonga in the Rainbow+ and disability cohort, as well as those that occupied multiple marginal positions, may be missed. It was clear that providers needed to be supported to develop more work in the intersectional space to better address this in their programmes.

Māori

The Research Collective found all providers except for South Seas in Ōtara had a high number of Māori ākonga enrolled in their programmes. Māori ākonga were the predominant group of ākonga serviced by programmes supported by the Ākonga Fund. BGYF and Ignite had a higher prevalence of diversity within their programme cohorts, but still had a very high number of Māori ākonga in both their programmes. In Te Rūnanga o Ngāti Whātua, all of the ākonga that participated in our talanoa were Māori. Nearly all of the ākonga on Te Hiringa in Rotorua were also Māori.

We also note that all providers included high levels of Māori kupu in their programming, and in places like Ōtautahi-Christchurch and Te Rūnanga o Ngāti Whātua in Kaipara the majority of the kaimahi were also Māori. For each provider (besides South Seas in Ōtara) they had at least one Māori kaimahi leading programmes with ākonga. For providers like Te Rūnanga o Ngāti Whātua and Te Waiariki Purea Trust and Rotorua Youth Centre, all of their kaimahi were Māori with ties to local iwi. A high level of Māori symbolism and kupu were entrenched through different parts of their programme activities and delivery of these programmes.

The values of Te Ao Māori were embedded clearly through each of the programmes, this included the use of karakia to open and close spaces, the use of Māori terms as framing values such as whaka-whanaungatanga, manaakitanga and kotahitanga were clearly shown by providers throughout our site visits. Te Rūnanga o Ngāti Whātua and Te Hiringa (Rotorua) in particular had a strong Te Ao Māori focus which informed programme design, approach, and delivery.

Pacific

Aside from Māori, the next most common ethnic group carried by ākonga in programmes supported by the Ākonga Fund was Pacific. There were high numbers of Pacific ākonga in each programme except Ngāti Whātua, with all ākonga we encountered at South Seas in Ōtara being of Pacific descent. As a result, their programme design and interactions with ākonga were all able to use a Pacific lens and draw from lived experience. At South Seas we were able to see a high level of Te Ao Pasifika being incorporated into the way their programmes were delivered.

Aside from Ngāti Whātua, throughout the country, we found Pacific kaimahi were also very common. We encountered Pacific heritage kaimahi at Ignite, Te Waiariki Purea Trust, and Te Ora Hou. This was a fair representation of Pacific kaimahi and staff across the providers as each provider had developed programmes that were designed to work in their local areas.

Pacific ākonga we encountered in the different programmes all felt that their cultural identities were encouraged and supported in the programme through various mechanisms.

As Pacific values are closely aligned to values espoused within Te Ao Māori, the feeling among all programmes was that the whānau-centred approach also worked for Pacific ākonga and their whānau. In places like South Seas, Pacific symbolism is threaded throughout their programme space. Ākonga were encouraged to use art to display their pride in their Pacific heritages, with their artwork displayed prominently across all their spaces. Pacific languages were spoken freely in the space, and kaimahi all had connections to South Auckland, ensuring authenticity in experience was offered to ākonga in this context.

Rainbow+

Providers spoke of often struggling to articulate what it was they were doing that helped to support Rainbow+ ākonga specifically. A valid concern raised by all providers was that they were not adequately equipped to be able to understand how to support Rainbow+ ākonga appropriately, with many unsure around both the legality and appropriateness of trying to identify Rainbow+ ākonga at a crucial age of their development. Te Ora Hou in Ōtautahi-Christchurch did have a programme for Rainbow+ youth, however programme activities were not supported by the Ākonga Fund and it was not running during the time of the site visits.

Community providers also expressed concern about the enrolment form, which does not allow for ākonga to identify themselves as part of the Rainbow+ community, and whether this was even appropriate data to collect. Despite this, two providers offered gender neutral bathrooms at their facilities. This was BGYF and South Seas. These providers, however, inherited buildings with these functions, and it was not necessarily a conscious decision on the part of providers themselves.

When pressed by the Research Collective to articulate what it was they did specifically to support Rainbow+ ākonga, providers suggested the best approach they could think of was ensuring that their spaces were as safe and inclusive as possible. What none of the provider's spaces did, however, was offer any gender diverse affirming practices in their spaces. There were no Rainbow+ flags seen anywhere (not to suggest that this resonates with all Rainbow+ people in the country), providers still used gendered terminologies like "guys" for a collective term, and the activities offered around physical sport would also emphasise physical strength and bonding within a binary brotherhood or sisterhood.

To all the providers' credit they all admitted that they could be doing more for Rainbow + ākonga but lacked the expertise to do so in their current capacities. This suggests that there is definitely will on the side of the providers, but still a lack of support for their ability to learn the most appropriate programme tweaks and practices to be able to achieve this greater goal of open and welcoming participation. It seems that it would be valuable for providers to receive targeted support and training from Rainbow+ youth development experts around how to make their spaces and programmes safer for Rainbow+ ākonga in the future.

Disabilities

Much like when dealing with Rainbow+ ākonga, providers focused on what they considered to be delivering their programmes in the most welcoming and accessible way they could to ensure that an ākonga with disabilities would be able to join their programme. All of the programmes offered by providers took place in accessible venues, which meant that ākonga living with physical disabilities would be able to participate in their programmes if they chose to. We did not encounter any programmes, however, that had an ākonga living with a physical disability in that specific cohort.

Ignite did have a programme dedicated to ākonga with disabilities, however, the Research Collective was not able to observe the programme as it was not running at the time of our site visits. Feedback had been strong from kaimahi and the provider's director, as ākonga who participated in these programmes felt included and empowered. As Ignite had used the Ākonga Fund to bring in more mentors and kaimahi, which included their programme for Ākonga with disabilities, in this way, the Ākonga Fund was able to support the activities of ākonga with disabilities on that specific programme.

Moreover, what became very clear from our observations was that although there were no ākonga with physical disabilities that were part of the cohorts we visited, there was still the issue of neurodivergence and mental disabilities that were common among ākonga who attended programmes. Providers would often seek additional support for these ākonga as kaimahi were not trained appropriately in many instances to support the needs of these ākonga.

The Ākonga Framework: Community Ākonga Empowerment Framework and the Youth Voice Framework

Considering the recent focus on ram raids and youth offending in popular media, with outdated models of interventions (military style boot camps) being proposed by certain politicians as a solution that often ignores the incredible work providers do with very few resources, the Research Collective believes it is important that the life-sustaining work youth providers are delivering across our communities is highlighted. The Community Ākonga Empowerment Framework is what we propose can help to further articulate what it is that providers do, and how they do it, which cannot be easily delivered in other settings. This approach was crafted by the Research Collective after reviewing existing youth empowerment best practice literature and highlighting how providers engage with this through the report. Working with responses from providers around the questions that were guided by the Community Ākonga Empowerment Rubric (CAER) and the Youth Voice Rubric (YVR), we were able to get a clearer picture of the way programmes delivered by providers embodied and practised principles of youth empowerment whilst seeking to keep ākonga engaged with the learning and training aspirations during the COVID-19 context. Based on this work, the Research Collective developed three frameworks that consist of two base frameworks that are combined and interwoven, much like a whāriki, to form the overall Ākonga Framework approach.

The first framework is titled the Community Ākonga Empowerment Framework (CAEF), which maps out different levels of practice that are unique to their context as a community provider. This framework centres best practice in the youth empowerment space whilst being cognisant of the Aotearoa-New Zealand environment. We believe that providers need to have their role in the Aotearoa-New Zealand youth empowerment landscape clearly defined and acknowledged, which the Research Collective were able to bear witness to across the research. This framework helps to articulate this uniqueness while embedding what we learned within what we consider to be best practice based on youth empowerment literature and research. The second is the YVF, which focuses on ākonga voice as a tool for empowerment. This framework draws from youth empowerment literature such as Dadvand and Cahill's (2018) P7 model, benchmarked through the insights we gathered in the field. We believe this aspect of youth empowerment is crucial to ensure that ākonga are able to experience empowerment and their views are better included, valued, nurtured, and acted upon by providers. The CAEF and YVF are then combined and tied together through articulated values that are both specific to the Aotearoa-New Zealand context and in line with youth empowerment best practice to create the Ākonga Framework. These include, but are not limited to, whakawhanaungatanga, manaakitanga, te reo Māori, Te Ao Pasifika, identities, culture, belonging, self-esteem, generosity, respect, and space for many others to be articulated by providers themselves.

MODEL 1:

The Community Ākonga Empowerment Framework

The first framework we have developed is titled the Community Ākonga Empowerment Framework (CAEF). The CAEF is driven by the analysis of all of the data the Research Collective generated in the field, and highlights in summary form the elements of youth empowerment that characterised provider practices and programme delivery. In terms of literature around youth empowerment, the CAEF draws on Bronfrenbrenner's social ecologies framework (Bronfrenbrenner, 1977), which highlights the unique yet significant social relationships that are shaped by interrelated, interwoven, and interdependent actors, practices and forces that influence how youth empowerment is enacted by youth development practitioners. Moreover, it privileges social and environmental factors, whether isolated or related, that build young people's resilience to deal with adverse circumstances. The CAEF also takes cues from the Cahill and Dadvand's (2018) P7 model. Throughout the journey of this research, we observed how values such as whakawhanaungatanga, language, identity, culture, self-esteem, and belonging were themes that guided the purpose, positioning, perspective, process, and dismantling of power-relations in offering protection for ākonga, were embodied in various ways by providers, documented throughout this report, that reflected the Aotearoa-New Zealand context providers were working within. The CAEF is developed along three interconnected areas which build and regenerate in multiple directions as shown in the diagram: connections, competencies, and contributions.

THE BASE LAU (LEVEL 1): CONNECTIONS

It was clear that the basis for ākonga empowerment that our community providers were engaged in was built on the foundation of meaningful connections. These connections began with kaimahi meaningfully connecting with ākonga on the programme using various nodes of shared experience such as ethnic background and culture, as well as shared experiences of growing up in the same neighbourhood. All the work that providers undertook in their programmes was founded upon establishing, nurturing, and developing meaningful connections as a base for their programme interventions to be built around. These connections were not just with ākonga, but also with whānau, community organisations, schools, peers, and even with businesses. All providers had a strong sense of building connections to the rich cultural heritage of ākonga backgrounds, in strengthening ākonga pride and connection to their cultures, and for programmes steeped in Te Ao Māori, an intentional centring of connection to whenua, to marae, and to key sites of historical significance. The affirmation of culture also came in the use of Māori and

Pacific languages throughout programmes that we visited. These connections formed a socio-ecological system of connections that surrounded ākonga in their programmes, with these connections moving with, through, and against each other at different moments. This microsystem which we have noted in the model as being horizontal, denotes the shared interwoven significance of all of these connections. This is the base of the CAEF and was the foundation of all the programmes we visited. It was our observation that all the empowerment work we witnessed across all providers stemmed from this solid foundation of connection.

These connections also brought together some of the core principles of youth empowerment as articulated by the YDSA, which emphasises how youth empowerment happens when quality relationships are developed, where young people are connected, and based on a consistent strengths-based approach, which was evident throughout the ways in which the providers operated. In this way, the CAEF recognises the significance of fostering connections with peers, kaimahi, whānau, culture, and language as key drivers and motivators to empowering ākonga to make positive changes and work towards achieving their personal and educational goals. This is the first strand and can be characterised as an individual base of empowerment, where ākonga are engaged and connected to their career and education aspirations; they're beginning to develop connections to a multitude of stakeholders and enact values that shape and influence how they work towards achieving their goals and aspirations. This reinforces what we observed in the field, where providers acted as conduits to fostering relationships and arming ākonga with tactics and the confidence to better sustain connections to enable and empower them towards achieving their aspirations.

THE INTERVENING LAU (LEVEL 2): COMPETENCIES

With the solid foundation of connections, we were able to get a sense from ākonga talanoa and from their kaimahi and providers that these core points of connection allowed for the development of many different competencies. Again, aligned with the YDSA, we could see that the quality connections and relationships ākonga had developed were allowing them to grow confidence in their academic ability, participate fully in the lives of their whānau and peers, grow their confidence and sense of identity, as well as confidence in their own language. The confidence in their culture was a key competency that relates to protection and resilience building for ākonga, where pride in their cultural backgrounds as well as in the geographic areas they were raised lifted their ability to articulate their sense of self and purpose, both within the programme and back in their everyday lives. These were all observable phenomena in the way ākonga described their experiences to the Research Collective. Many spoke about how they felt comfortable speaking their language in programmes run by providers. The languages we observed being spoken were mostly Māori and Samoan, with one Samoan ākonga giving their entire talanoa on camera in the Samoan language.

Ākonga also demonstrated increased motivation to attend school in many cases, improving their relationships with other ākonga whom they had not had a positive relationship with in the past. This also led to improvements in grades for certain ākonga. Some other competencies related to their ability to strategise toward a future goal that involved careful longer-term planning. Ākonga also developed physical skills through sport via boxing and other sports that taught discipline and diligence as well as opened up pathways in their minds around the world of sport as a possible career path for them.

THE TOP LAU (LEVEL 3): CONTRIBUTIONS

Building on the first two lau, the third lau represents the ways and potentiality articulated to the Research Collective by ākonga and providers around the contributions they felt ākonga were now making, or wanted to make, to the lives of those in their immediate circles: their peers' lives, their whānau, the communities they were embedded within, and to wider society. As we witnessed many ākonga developing competencies around their whakapapa and culture, there was a great sense from ākonga that they were either already making a contribution to the wellbeing of their whānau, or would be making a contribution to the overall wellbeing of their parents and whānau once their aspirations in career development and training were realised. This was clearly witnessed in the talanoa offered by ākonga in places like South Seas, where ākonga deliberately framed their aspirations as an opportunity to make meaningful contributions to their family's wellbeing as recognition of the love and support they had received from their parents whom many felt had sacrificed a lot to be able to bring them educational opportunities in New Zealand.

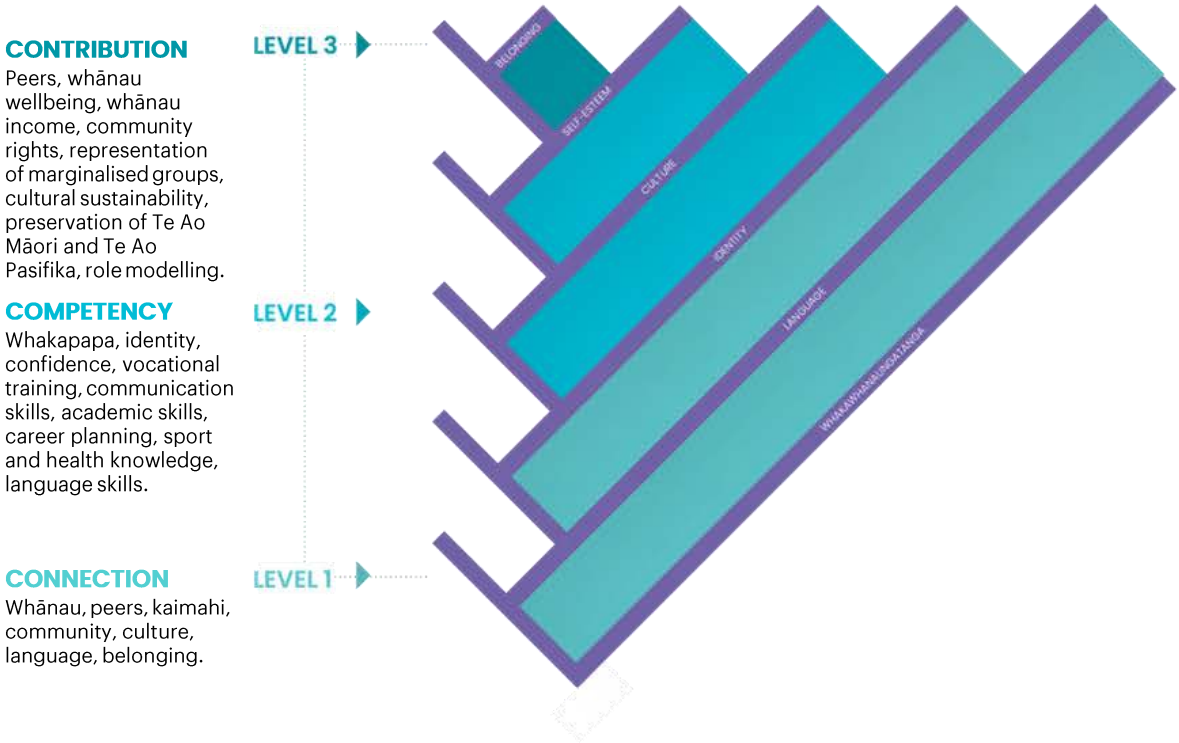
Moreover, ākonga on Te Hiringa understood that their success in education and training would bring important benefits to the communities they wished to serve. Namely, one ākonga mentioned how their desire to enter law school came as a realisation that many within their community were not able to receive adequate legal support and protection from Māori representation in the legal system. In this way, ākonga realised that they had something meaningful to contribute to wider society, once again demonstrating a core principle of the YDSA, that youth development happens when ākonga are able to fully participate in various activities, especially in areas of their own interest and passion. This was something that we also observed in the Te Ora Hou setting, where ākonga were empowered to pursue their passion in gaming to foster connection and friendships with other ākonga in different parts of the country.

Furthermore, at all locations we went to, ākonga understood their academic and training success as being vital to build stable careers so as to contribute financially to their families or to ensure the success and sustainability of their own lives. For ākonga we encountered at Te Rūnanga o Ngāti Whātua, it was clear that they had understood that their learning was a contribution to the continuation of tikanga and the values of Te Ao Māori within their own rohe. These realisations were all empowered through the competencies that ākonga had developed through the activation of meaningful providers, and their peers.

Shifts in behaviour toward other ākonga in programmes like BGYF's Future Champions Programme and Ignite's programmes were illustrative of the way ākonga understanding of their contribution to the wellbeing of peers had shifted through participation in these Ākonga Fund supported programmes. Again, through utilising the power of whakawhanaungatanga to foster meaningful connections, ākonga were able to develop social competencies to be able to build relationships with ākonga who they had not had positive relationships with in the past, the overall result being ākonga were now contributing to the wellbeing of other ākonga by continuing to build friendships with peers of their cohort.

All three lau, as demonstrated in the model below, are interconnected, and whilst the base lau sits at the bottom, elements of the values and practices in the base lau are woven through the other two lau. Thus it would be erroneous to think of this model as a strictly sequential road map, as what we observed were processes that were often occurring simultaneously and were being reinforced regularly by providers. What we were able to deduce from our observations however, was the centrality of the intentional development of connection through whakawhanaungatanga activities that were activated by providers in different contexts that laid the foundations for the other two layers of development. The competencies that were developed as a result of these meaningful connections are what led to stronger planning and understanding of ākonga capacity to make meaningful contributions to various people, groups, communities, and society.

FIGURE 2:
Community Ākonga Empowerment Framework



MODEL 2:

Youth Voice Framework

Inclusion of youth voice is a necessary component of successful youth empowerment. However, there is a difference between inclusion and empowerment. Some may believe that by simply listening to our ākonga, we are empowering them to take charge of programmes and that their contribution can be seen as equal to those older than them. Cahill and Dadvand (2018) challenge this assumption by arguing that the issue is not whether youth have a voice, the real question is how that youth voice is being nurtured, developed, included, and empowered to influence programme design not just delivery. As we understood youth empowerment in this way, we looked for instances in which we could see this idea being put into practice. What we found were many instances where ākonga were being listened to by kaimahi and providers informally – and from this we were able to see how this would influence certain decisions around programme delivery. However, we did struggle to get clarity around how overall programme design decisions meaningfully included ākonga voice and feedback beyond the co-design of plans around future training and education aspirations. This was where many providers were empowering their ākonga to use their voice in their programmes. To be clear, we believed that this was a successful way of having ākonga voice centred in decisions around their future. Further, we understood the difficulty providers were having working with ākonga who were at risk of further disengagement, making the opportunity for formal feedback around overall programme design difficult to formalise.

As such we have crafted the YVF based on our observations of provider efforts to centre ākonga voice, offering an extra layer that may be useful for providers as they seek to further empower the ākonga they work with. Specifically, for providers, this framework considers an immediate task, thinking through ways to work with ākonga in formalised feedback sessions, and to operationalise formal co-design mechanisms at a programme design level in the future and at an appropriate time. This framework does not detract from the incredible work providers are already doing to listen to their ākonga in their care. However, we believe that this could be a useful tool, in tandem with the CAEF, to have providers reflect on future design of programmes that have an even stronger ākonga voice empowerment focus and element embedded within its design. The ĀVF is a cumulative model, whereby it can be read both horizontally and vertically, with each level building upon the previous.

THE BASE LAU (LEVEL 1): ĀKONGA VOICE - INDIVIDUAL LEVEL

The first lau of the framework outlines how when ākonga are being listened to, they are able to use their voices in developing connections with peers and their opinions are included in discussions around supporting the voices of their peers. At this level, ākonga begin to feel they are heard regarding their future plans and aspirations for themselves and their whānau. This includes having their voices centred when training and education plans are developed for their own future. At this level, ākonga are enabled to use their voices to express confidently their desires for development and growth. Furthermore, providers facilitate the connection of ākonga voices to each other, by demonstrating manaakitanga and the embodiment of whakawhanaungatanga in their practice, emphasising and reaffirming cultural, social, and community identities that ākonga bring into the space with their language, in crafting a sense of belonging. These were dynamics we observed providers already demonstrating. Providers developed intentional whakawhanaungatanga events and spaces, moments through their programme that allowed ākonga to voice their concerns around their own progress and also what they wanted to achieve for their whānau. In these situations, we can see that ākonga are being listened to as has been reported extensively across this document.

THE INTERVENING LAU (LEVEL 2): ĀKONGA VOICE - PROGRAMME DELIVERY LEVEL

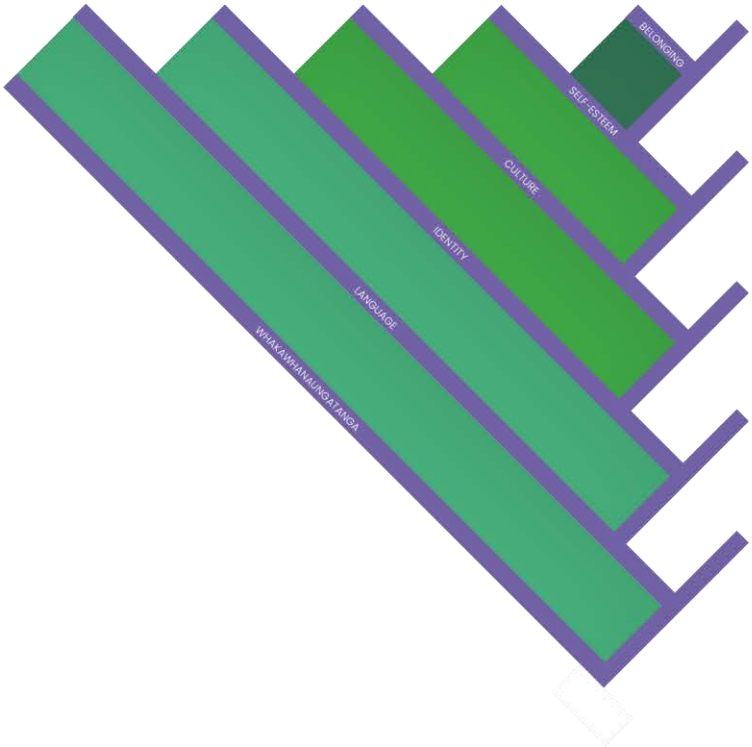
The second lau builds on the first, and highlights how ākonga views, not just their voices, are being collaboratively incorporated into the action plans being developed for their future education and training aspirations. Their voices are being incorporated into programme activities that are designed to increase connections to peers and the communities they are embedded within. Ākonga voice is now not only being included by providers at a personal or individual level, providers and kaimahi are giving ākonga voice the capacity to lead others in the programme. This was clearly observed by the collective when ākonga would lead whakawhanaungatanga activities, group exercises, etc. At this level, when exploring opportunities for ākonga and fellow cohort members to contribute to the lives of their peers, whānau, and community, ākonga opinions are actively included and used to refine programme delivery. This was displayed in many ways through check in circles, through the one-on-one sessions providers offered to ākonga around co-designing their plans and providing progress checks where needed. Providers and kaimahi adapted in an agile manner in these moments to bring ākonga concerns to the fore in shifting programme content to match ākonga voice and mood. In this way, we saw how providers showed they valued ākonga voice in programme delivery. We took this to be within best practice models around including ākonga voice in programme delivery.

THE TOP LAU (LEVEL 3): PROGRAMME DESIGN/GOVERNANCE LEVEL

The top lau helps to better crystallise the difference in ākonga voice development with ākonga voice empowerment. Ākonga voice empowerment is not just the inclusion of ākonga voice in programme delivery, but also in programme design and the overall shape of the intervention. This was an area that remained unclear from our visits to providers. Whilst providers and kaimahi were doing an incredible job at including ākonga voice through programme delivery using various check-in methods, what was missing was a formal mechanism that included ākonga voice into the overall design of programmes. The P7 model articulated by Cahill and Dadvand (2018) is helpful to clarify this. While providers were clear on their programme purpose and ākonga were able to articulate their "why," and programmes were inclusive of ākonga perspectives in tangible and visible ways - enacting cultural practices that acknowledged place as well as providing safe spaces (protection) for ākonga, an area of empowerment that we felt could be strengthened was the sharing of power, or what Cahill and Dadvand (2018) refer to as power relations. Thus, the Research Collective suggests that empowerment for ākonga voice should also actively seek out and empower ākonga to co-design programmes before they are put together and project proposals are developed. Further, at this level, providers see ākonga as equal partners, where their voices and mana are enhanced and protected. This also includes the need to continue to stay engaged with ākonga, and a strong sense of responsibility is given to report back to ākonga around how their views have been implemented in programme design and project proposals. This also means that ākonga should be given the power to not just influence, but actively decide on programme decisions. As such, ākonga voice is given decision-making capacity at the leadership table. In this way, providers would be shifting their practice from merely being reactive to ākonga experiences as users of their services, but also into the space of active designers of the youth empowerment intervention.

Much like the CAEF, the YVF's levels are interrelated and each helps to sustain the other. In this model, ākonga voice can be meaningfully included across a range of areas through programme design, in the way connections are developed, in the way competencies are provisioned, and ultimately in the way contributions are crafted as the output of programmes in differing contexts.

FIGURE 3:
Youth Voice Framework



TOP LAU
Ākonga voice is;

- Empowered to co-design programmes.
- An equal partner to kaimahi and programme leaders in programme design.
- Given decision-making capacity in programme interventions.

INTERVENING LAU
Ākonga voice is;

- Used in collaboration for co-designing future training and education plans.
- Given the capacity to lead others.
- Valued.

BASE LAU
Ākonga;

- Are heard.
- Are enabled to use their voice to express aspirations.
- Voices are connected to each other.

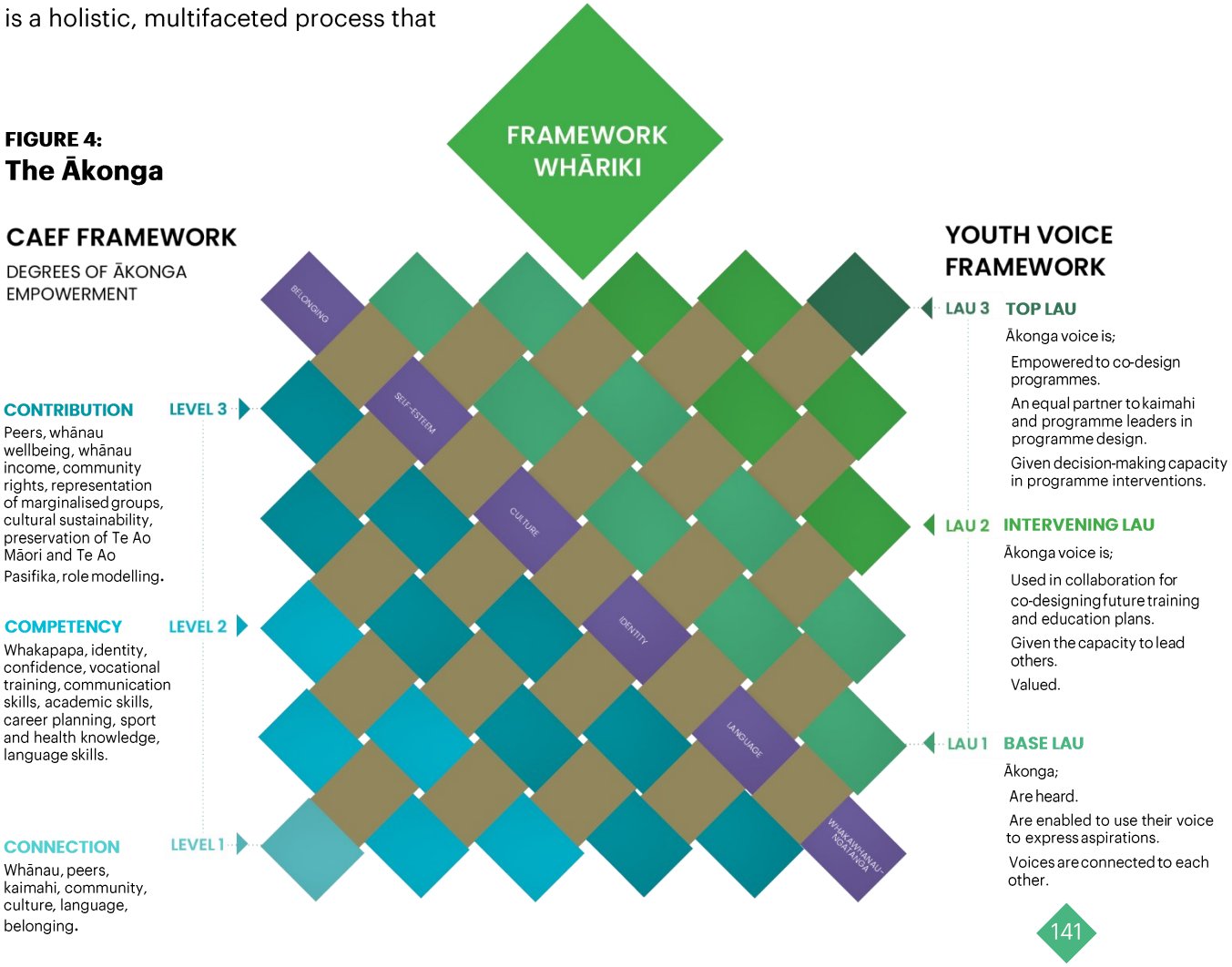
MODEL 3:

The Ākonga

The CAEF and YVF are overlaid and joined together by the specific values and practices that guide providers in their articulation of youth development practice. In Aotearoa-New Zealand, a strong sense of whakawhanaungatanga is embedded across practice, with the role of native languages in programmes acknowledged, cultivated, deployed, and encouraged. Ākonga empowerment also comes from affirming the cultural background of each ākonga and their way of knowing and being, and from building ākonga self-esteem and enhancing their sense of belonging.

As we understand, ākonga empowerment is a holistic, multifaceted process that takes into account the contributions of many different stakeholders and parties that are part of the provider delivery process. We always envisioned both the CAEF and YVF as being interconnected. Thus, we have overlaid both, woven together by these values of youth development to create the Ākonga Framework. We believe this framework provides a holistic self-assessment tool and approach to understanding the role of providers and their programmes in advancing the development of ākonga and the re-engagement of vulnerable ākonga with schools and training activities in a post-COVID-19 world.

FIGURE 4:
The Ākonga



Recommendations

Based on the findings of the research evaluation, which draw on the insights generated from providers, kaimahi, programme managers, and ākonga themselves, it is clear that the Ākonga Fund has been successful in supporting our community providers to make impactful change in the lives of vulnerable ākonga. As a research team, we felt that our experience in developing these insights with providers and ākonga engendered specific recommendations around not just the success of the Ākonga Fund, but also in thinking about how these programmes can be funded to continue beyond the life of this specific pool of funding. Despite this funding becoming available specifically to address the risk of further disengagement of vulnerable ākonga from schools and training environments due to COVID-19, providers demonstrated throughout our site visits how these programmes needed ongoing support beyond this context in order for the pipeline of youth development to continue into the future. Although there have been some successes as documented in this report at re-engaging certain ākonga through programme interventions, there was a strong feeling among providers, supported by our observations, that these gains could be lost if a lot of these programmes were not funded to continue into the future.

1 Continue to enable greater collaboration and partnership between providers in the same region/area

The Research Collective noted that one of the goals of the Ākonga Fund was to increase collaboration between providers, and in turn, reduce duplication and allow for more scaled-up programme interventions to grow around increased collaborative capacity. It was clear for providers in smaller centres that this is a sound strategy, as the results of the partnership between Te Waiariki Purea Trust and the Rotorua Youth Centre in Te Hiringa demonstrate what is possible when collaboration takes place. Te Hiringa was highly successful as it allowed two organisations in the Rotorua area, both serving ākonga using very different mediums and specialisations, the opportunity to collaborate and develop a far more diverse, interesting and appropriate programme for ākonga than what they would have been able to produce on their own.

We recommend that MYD continue to encourage and enable collaboration and partnership between providers, and actively seek to remove administrative barriers in funding mechanisms to allow these collaborations to happen more easily.

2 Consider finding ways to support better training and career development pathways for kaimahi to be able to stay in the youth empowerment sector

Kaimahi and youth development managers expressed the explicit need for further training and better career development pathways for youth workers. In our site visits, there was an overwhelming sense of burnout expressed by kaimahi, particularly in being equipped to address ākonga needs and in dealing with their own journeys through COVID-19. The leadership within community providers spoke of the need to invest in strengthening kaimahi capabilities through training to better

equip and prepare kaimahi to deal with ākonga vulnerabilities. They also called for more secure career development pathways to ensure gifted and talented kaimahi are retained, recognised, and rewarded for their work in supporting ākonga towards achieving their personal and educational aspirations.

We recommend that MYD actively work with community providers to enable training and development schemes and create more secure career development pathways to retain skilled and gifted kaimahi.

3 Encourage providers to make more explicit how their programmes are incorporating ākonga voice and feedback at the programme conception and design phase

It was clear that providers' work and programmes engaged principles of youth empowerment as laid out by the YDSA, and that principles of mātauranga Māori were being embraced as an important way to activate connection and cultural safety for many ākonga. What providers did struggle to articulate was whether ākonga voice was meaningfully included in the way their interventions were designed, and how their feedback was being incorporated into future iterations of the programme and their practice, and how this information will be given back to ākonga. This is not to say that providers did not listen to ākonga, rather, the inverse was true as providers listened very well to ākonga during programme activities and in one-on-one sessions. Providers demonstrated an ability to sense and adapt, with many understanding what worked well and what did not work well with ākonga during their programme sessions. What was missing, however, was a clear pipeline as to how feedback could be given officially, and used to impact overall programme design. Many adjustments being made on the ground were through the delivery phase, which runs the risk of not being systematically included at the design level if not established through an official pathway.

We recommend that providers engage with the YVF as a self-assessment tool to better articulate and embed ākonga voice formally into their programme design, and to work with the principles of the P7 model as a way to reflect on the different domains of youth empowerment and their interlocking nature within their own programmes as a way to further enhance ākonga voice in their programme design.

4 Encourage and further develop the relationship between schools, providers, and kaimahi

It was clear from all our site visits that schools played an enormously important role in the way that providers were able to offer their programmes and deliver them. They acted as both feeders and destinations for many of the ākonga that attended provider programmes. We found that at South Seas in South Auckland, the urban environment limited the typology of programmes that could be delivered, thus, the focus on games and activities that could be paired with academic activities lent itself well to the space and context of the programme. However, despite the local high school acting as a feeder to the programme, there was still greater opportunity for schools to connect closer with South Seas in sharing curriculum and lesson plans for the mentors, and more direct communication between teachers and mentors. The only way South Seas kaimahi were able to understand what key academic material was being taught in schools was through ākonga bringing work to the programme. This is of course valuable; however, it does leave space for

stronger coordination and communication between schools and the provider. Furthermore, as we saw in Rotorua at Te Hiringa, schools sometimes viewed provider programmes as an alternative option and treated that relationship as unidirectional. This means that ākonga who they felt were too difficult to work with could be passed onto Te Hiringa with no expectation that they would return to the classroom, but to be transitioned out of the education system altogether. There is much work that needs to be done here to have schools in this instance rethink their relationship with providers. The relationship should be seen as mutually dependent and multi-directional. This is also an issue of equity, as ākonga have a right to seek an education and that includes a return to the classroom if appropriate and desired.

We recommend that greater signals should be given to schools to work with providers in more formal capacities, including the possibility of developing memorandums of understanding, to ensure the relationship is mutually dependent and not unidirectional.

5 Continue to develop programme designs from the bottom-up and within local contexts. There is no silver bullet or standarised programme that can be scaled up without sacrificing the uniqueness of local conditions

In our discussions with providers, there was a strong consensus that a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to programme design is ineffective in bringing about meaningful sustainable transformation in ākonga. Ngāti Whātua, for example, focused its programme design around kaitiakitanga (environmental guardianship) where ākonga cultural identity and confidence were developed through performing environmental assessment tasks in their local ngahere (forest) and awa (river). Even though these types of activities are well designed, they are unlikely to have the same impact or quality of implementation in another context, such as South Auckland, or be as meaningful for ākonga. By way of contrast, South Sea's programme design reflects the ākonga in which they serve (all Pacific descent), with Pacific values embedded throughout the activities and approaches adopted to fostering deeper connections with ākonga. This is because of the diversity of ākonga needs across the regions and contrasting conditions in which providers work within. To ensure meaningful and impactful youth development outcomes, community providers need to feel enabled to develop tailored and specific programme designs to meet the needs of ākonga they serve.

We recommend that providers are provisioned to develop ākonga empowerment programme interventions that are highly cognisant and customised to the local community, and in the cultural and geographic context in which they operate. We also suggest empowering providers in local communities to make decisions based on their embeddedness within their local contexts.

6 Support providers and kaimahi in their aspirations to better incorporate the needs of Rainbow+ and ākonga with disabilities into their programme design and delivery

Providers operated from a place of inclusivity and desire to holistically build the confidence of all ākonga who enter their space and programmes. However, there is still much work to do to expand the intersectional approach to be more intentionally inclusive of Rainbow+ and akonga with disabilities. Providers explicitly

asked for support in understanding how to better support Rainbow+ ākonga in particular. No provider was able to articulate to the Research Collective what it was they were doing specifically to recruit and better serve Rainbow+ ākonga or ākonga with disabilities. It was noted that when we spoke of ākonga with disabilities, providers were aware that learning difficulties and neurodivergence certainly was part of the lived experience of many ākonga who attended their programmes, however, we were not able to encounter a programme that included in their cohort an ākonga who had a physical disability except for Ignite, whose programme for ākonga with disabilities was not running on the day of our site visit. This is not to suggest that providers did not want to include ākonga in this cohort. There was a recognition, however, that these programmes required a higher level of resourcing and training to ensure accessibility and safety.

When it came to Rainbow+ ākonga there was a systemic issue that providers needed to negotiate carefully. Divergent gender and sexuality data is not usually encouraged to be collected unless absolutely necessary as it may impinge on a person's legal rights to privacy. This is noted in Statistics New Zealand's (2021) latest guide to collecting gender and sex characteristics data. The recommendation is that this data is not collected unless absolutely necessary with a very high threshold for what constitutes necessary. As ākonga are in an age group where sexuality (a separate category altogether) is often in development, this poses further complications. An overt focus on Rainbow+ topics in programmes could also bring further harm to ākonga if they are encouraged to claim to be Rainbow+ in these spaces. In this context, it is difficult for ākonga and providers to navigate these complications. Providers suggested that they wanted to create a welcoming environment for everyone, and they believed that they had. However, the issue with environments that are meant for 'everyone' is that the term does not address intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) adequately enough. The term everyone is subjectively designed to meet the gendered practices of the normalised centre, meaning what is considered to be welcoming and safe for the majority, may not actually be welcoming and safe for those on the margins, including Rainbow+ peoples, and especially those still coming to terms with their divergent sexuality (Thomsen 2020; 2021). Providers expressed that they were under-resourced, under-staffed and often worked with ākonga managing trauma. As such, we felt it would be difficult for providers to do the work on their own to understand how their programmes move with or against heterosexism in their local communities.

We recommend that providers be supported to develop plans around how to best tailor their programme delivery to be truly inclusive and resistant to heterosexism and transphobia, as well as be resourced to develop inclusion and accessibility plans for ākonga living with physical disabilities. Furthermore, we also recommend that providers be resourced, including training and development to ensure ākonga have access to mental health practitioners and experts in neurodivergent conditions to take pressure off kaimahi and improve the responsiveness of programmes.

7 **Develop more streamlined and core funding infrastructures so providers do not need to constantly apply for multiple funding streams around projects to support their programmes**

For all providers, the issue of funding was the red herring in all their programme efforts. In particular, there was a sense from providers that the programmes that they were running as a result of the Ākonga Fund were seen as 'nice to have' programmes, when their belief was that this was core work. It was difficult for the Research Collective to disagree with this assessment. Many of the ākonga we encountered were indeed coming from homes that were not well-resourced, had experienced trauma in many instances, and were embedded in localities around the country that were more likely to expose them to different forms of violence. For providers, this meant this specific programme that targeted at-risk ākonga was considered a separate part of their programming as opposed to a core part of their delivery models.

Many providers spoke about having to write multiple applications for funding to resource one part of their work programme, whilst having to apply for funding from other sources to resource another. This creates a high level of transactional costs that decreases efficiency and increases opportunity cost for providers. As a result, many of the providers and kaimahi we spoke to often referenced terms like burnout and high staff turnover.

The Research Collective believes that it would be in the best interest of the government for a more streamlined approach to be considered for funding providers, shifting to a government core model of funding as opposed to project-based, which often leaves providers relying on charitable donations.

Conclusion

COVID-19 has undoubtedly had a profound impact on ākonga engagement in their learning and training goals. Furthermore, our research has found that providers that were provisioned by MYD through the Ākonga Fund have been successful in enacting youth development principles in their work to empower ākonga they work with to stay engaged and become motivated while in settings outside school environments. Examples abound throughout this report, and providers, whilst working with limited resources, have done their best to demonstrate to ākonga different ways of learning skills, and alternative pathways toward qualifications and learning that can motivate vulnerable ākonga to engage in education and training pathways. After an extensive research process, we as a Research Collective have concluded that providers activated principles and values such as whakawhanaungatanga, manaakitanga, purpose, provisioned confidence in ākonga identity, culture, language, and developed interventions that used physical activities, outdoor education, and leaned into ākonga hobbies as a pathway to empowerment. Although we also concluded that providers could do more to meaningfully include ākonga voices in programme design through formalised feedback mechanisms, this was also nuanced with our observations that providers were listening to ākonga through various mechanisms such as check-in circles, one-on-one feedback sessions, and programme content that encouraged ākonga to use their voice.

While this report has focused primarily on insights into how providers were utilising connections and youth development principles to engage and re-engage vulnerable ākonga, another aspect of this research was also around articulating the difference between youth empowerment and competency development enacted in a school environment versus a community provider context. While this element has been alluded to throughout the report, the Research Collective would also like to respond to this question in this conclusion.

Drawing from insights across the research process, including talanoa with kaimahi and ākonga, we understood that for both providers and ākonga, they felt that the school environment focused primarily on classroom study toward formal qualifications. Whilst this was deemed to be important, it was also an area that many disengaged ākonga felt came with other issues related to their academic performance and the rigid shape of the school environment. Teachers, for instance, were seen as authoritative figures who often did not understand them or the issues they were facing in their everyday lives. These issues combined meant that activities that were carried out in the school environment were also tainted in the eyes of ākonga, and this was also highlighted by certain kaimahi. Although schools had counsellors, they were often over-burdened serving an entire school, and the association with a formal school also shifted ākonga perception of their ability to fulfill the wellbeing needs that were connected to their learning aspirations, often tied to hobbies and interests not addressed in the formal school curriculum.

Ākonga perspectives of who teaches in a school versus someone who tutors or teaches on a community provider programme were markedly different as well. Sometimes ākonga felt that teachers and other school staff treated them differently from other learners, with a few ākonga suggesting that racism was a real experience they had in a school environment. Providers offer ākonga mentors and educators who are often from the same ethnic background as them, and these kaimahi are able to connect with ākonga on a genuine level that is related to shared lived experiences. This was a key fundamental difference between school educators and provider educators or kaimahi in the eyes of ākonga. As a result, they felt motivated to participate actively in community provider programmes whilst feeling less inclined to do so in school environments.

Furthermore, ākonga saw provider programmes as spaces where they would be learning skills that cannot be delivered effectively in the classroom. This was a focus on life skills, community-embedded lessons that drew in local whenua, histories and community members as educators, lifting the education experience outside of the domain of books and classroom learning. This resonated well with ākonga, and was one way they differentiated their experience between school and being on a programme through a community provider. Examples have been covered extensively in this report, being particularly pronounced in programmes run in Rotorua and Whangārei, where landmarks, the forest, and rivers became literal classrooms for ākonga through community providers. Ākonga and providers acknowledged that this is not a viable activity for schools to be able to run, as schools often had rolls that numbered in the hundreds and thousands. The community provider context also for this unique programming to take place as community providers work with local communities and people from all walks of life. Schools are limited with their function being around working with ākonga at specific ages of their development geared toward formal academic qualifications.

Another key difference we saw between schools and community providers was that there was an active goal to involve the dreams of whānau and members of whānau in the programmes where appropriate. Schools do offer updates on student progress to teachers, but for the most part parents are not very involved with the delivery of teaching materials and curriculum in a school setting. In contrast, BGYF even encouraged parents to come along to sessions and watch. This is not a practice that happens in schools. What providers offered for ākonga was the opportunity to strengthen their bonds to their whānau in ways that were uplifting and empowering. We saw this in the way parents were excited to be invited on learning trips for ākonga on provider programmes and we also bore witness to the way ākonga were encouraged to talk openly about their dreams for their whānau and their role in their lives in the future.

Providers also focused on learning through the prism of wellbeing in more pronounced ways than what may be found in a traditional school setting. For instance, many providers were able to find ways to wrap around additional support for ākonga as they came through the programme. There was always a holistic element and approach community providers offered to ākonga around their learning. It is true that certain providers did incorporate education elements into their programmes, where homework and assignments were also supported through tutoring, but these academic support

elements were always delivered with the acknowledgement of ensuring ākonga were fed, that they were allowed to share their feelings openly, and that their culture and sense of self were cultivated at the same time.

In the same vein, there are things that schools can provide where community providers cannot. For instance, schools can provide pathways to formal qualifications and have the expertise to be able to provision ākonga with the necessary information to be able to reach the qualifications toward specific industries. Providers do not have the expertise or capacity to carry out this function, which is why schools remain an important part of the youth empowerment ecosystem. Schools also offer wider socialisation opportunities that community providers may not be able to offer to the same scale. With smaller bespoke programmes such as the ones that we were able to visit, we found community providers had a role to play especially in the lives of vulnerable ākonga, whereby socialisation in a smaller group built their social skills and confidence to a point where they could then apply these new skills in their school environment, leading to improved attendance records and rising grade achievement for many ākonga.

To conclude this report, the Research Collective would like to reiterate that community providers are playing a vital role in supporting vulnerable ākonga who are at higher risk of disengaging from education and training. Their role, much like schools', is pivotal to ensure that all learners are better supported by our education system, that our young people are empowered to be who they are, and are able to develop future goals and aspirations that resonate with their identity, culture, background, and history.

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