

# *Aroha Noa ki Te Ao:*

A Te Matatini Collaborative Inquiry

A report prepared for  
*Te Matatini Society Incorporated*

by

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*E ngā māreikura, me ngā whatukura mā;  
ngā kaihaka, te kaiako, te kaiawhina hoki o Te Rōpū Kapa Haka o Aroha Noa  
i kōrero mai i a mātou;  
ehara tēnei tētahi rīpoata noa iho, he tohu tino aroha.*

*To the Aroha Noa Whānui who spoke to us;  
This isn't simply a report, it is a symbol of our aroha for you all.*

## **KŌKIRI | INTRODUCTION**

This report represents insights and experiences shared by members of Aroha Noa, a year after their successful inaugural stand at the Whakataetae Kapa Haka a Rohe ki Tāmaki Makaurau, in 2024. It explores the profound impact of kapa haka on identity, healing, and whānau development.

Aroha Noa is a non-competitive rōpū kapa haka affiliated with Grace Foundation, a charitable trust that for over 25 years has provided rehabilitation and accommodation to many marginalised whānau, including those recently released from prison. The whānau who participated in this small research kaupapa are from diverse backgrounds, and most have experienced disconnection from te ao Māori, systemic and material hardship, and an array of personal traumas. Undoubtedly then, Aroha Noa goes far beyond simply being a performance group. Also remarkably, the 2024 regionals campaign was achieved after only three weeks of training. Many had never done kapa haka, others hadn't performed since their school days.



What sets this kapa apart from others, is that the majority of Aroha Noa performers are ex-inmates and gang members who have reformed themselves into kaihaka. A group of kaihaka, their devoted kaiako, and Grace Foundation leaders spoke to us, a research crew of three wāhine representing Te Matatini, over a two-day wānanga that included a range of activities, outlined further on.

What follows are narratives that demonstrate that kapa haka is a significant platform upon which cultural reclamation, transformation, and connection can and does transpire. Why did Aroha Noa performers commit to turning up to gruelling kapa haka training with an urgency to learn, not to miss out on moves, lyrics and choreography when they've experienced more challenges than most? What is it when kaihaka state that the most extraordinary act of the campaign is the moment their heroes – 'Papa Dave, Papa Lei' - performed a haka for the kapa as they departed for the performance venue? What is it about kapa haka when mums, dads, and nannies hear their tamariki/mokopuna scream out from somewhere in the dark stadium that makes this the most proud moment in their life? What is it to be given a chance? And lastly, what is it to 'win' at kapa haka, who are the kapa heroes, and who are the 'champions'?

Primarily, the purpose of this strengths-based report is to elevate some of the voices of the Aroha Noa whānau by presenting key themes that emerged from their kōrero. It underlines the significance of their 2024 kapa haka campaign as evidence of transformation, and is tributary to the resilience, beauty, and strength of often unseen and un(der)acknowledged community-led cultural initiatives such as our beloved performing arts.

Signposting throughout this report recalls the movements in Aroha Noa's maiden Whakaeke item; firstly to memorialise this fleeting moment, and secondly to marry that instance to this report. A male kaea strides forward onto the stage and calls Kōkiri (an introduction), followed by the beckoning of the pūtātara (a research methodology). Two kaikaranga step out to Karanga (hui wānanga activities), and the kaea launches into the Haka (themes and thematic analysis). And finally, Pūkana (concluding remarks) are held by the entirety of the rōpū as the last possible impression to imprint on the audience.

## **PŪTĀTARA | RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

***Mā te kōrero, ka ora; mā te kōrero, ka ora***  
*Through speaking we live, through narrative we live*

Given the nature of how kaihaka were recruited to stand with Aroha Noa, it was essential to approach the research with a deep commitment to the safety, security, trust, reciprocity, and cultural sensitivity to the personal storying that was the pivotal component.

The preferred method for this project was Rōpū Whānau, a trusted approach used in several community-focused research situ, such as smoking cessation and creative technologies. Rōpū Whānau<sup>i</sup> ensures a culturally safe environment where all participants are encouraged to engage, question, reflect, and most importantly, whakawhiti kōrero – exchange narratives - with each other. These were recorded digitally, passed through Kaituhi (a bilingual, transcription website operated by Te Hiku Media), and forwarded back to the respondents to

ensure they were happy with how they came across in the transcribed materials. Grace Foundation sent a blanket message of approval.

Critically, tikanga Māori principles were closely adhered to during the wānanga, and Grace Foundation leadership attended all activities as kaitiaki, and proffered reflective kōrero about kaikōrero where appropriate. Each hui followed a structured process rooted in tikanga, including:

- Whakawhanaungatanga
- Karakia
- Mihi
- Kaupapa Matua
- Kai
- Koha
- Whakawātea



## **KARANGA | HUI WĀNANGA ACTIVITIES**

All participating whānau were invited to bring a taonga that held personal or kapa haka significance to them. The taonga, such as photos, footage, and whakakai, served as pakiwaitara anchors, helping to contextualise each participant's kapa haka journey.

Two separate rōpū were held on Day 1; wāhine and the kaiako of the rōpū in the morning, and tāne in the afternoon. Kaihaka were of varying ages, iwi, marital status' and upbringings.

Kaihaka stood to deliver their kōrero, and began by locating themselves by pepeha (if known), then they turned to their poignant stories of mamae, many of which were cycles of poverty, abuse, violence, and prison. These were complex, multifaceted and challenging narratives that were elemental to putting into context how they arrived at Grace Foundation, most elevated into positions of community leadership, only to find themselves heading onto stage with Aroha Noa to perform kapa haka at a regionals competition. The lights, microphones, cameras and screaming, supportive audiences, were realms apart from their backgrounds. Narratives naturally evolved into whakawhiti kōrero, particularly when other Aroha Noa members added their commentary from their perspective, and asked reflective campaign related questions.

The Rōpū Whānau method was particularly powerful in this setting as it proffered a safe, supportive environment where kaihaka could and did share some incredibly moving and vulnerable moments openly.

On Day 2, the rōpū returned for a thematic wānanga, where they reflected on their kapa haka journey and dreamed themselves forward by composing a signature haka for Aroha Noa together. The discussion encouraged deep reflection; recurring themes were brought to the floor about vision, whanaungatanga, proving people wrong, role-modelling, and the healing that has come to them through haka.

The final activity was a 'watch and react' session, whereby members of Aroha Noa and Grace Foundation leadership viewed their Tāmaki regionals performance together, a year on, keenly observed by a screen producer. This reflective activity ultimately embodied much of the whakawhiti kōrero shared on Day 1, and was enjoyed immensely by all.

Such rich and layered discussions were entrusted to our team during the wānanga; and in the remaining passages of this report, we aim to whakamana each kaikōrero and to underline narratives of the transformative and healing power of kapa haka.

## **HAKA | THEMES AND THEMATIC ANALYSIS**

The kōrero shared by Aroha Noa whānau bared lived experiences, many of which were challenging to hear; but these turned to cultural reclamation, personal transformation, and whānau resilience. Several key themes emerged across the two-day wānanga. As Grace Foundation is a Christian organisation, dedicated to serving marginalised groups across society, it's a given that a decent proportion of kōrero was devoted to the changes in the lives of these kaihaka, particularly so in the session devoted to writing a haka together. However,

the analysis section here is devoted to the ways in which kapa haka has impacted lives, healed identities, and restored mana, true to many performers in Aroha Noa. It's important to note that there were hours more kōrero, whakapatapātai, and raucous laughter than what appears within the limitations of this small scale report. The representations in this thematic analysis section are simply snapshots formed into the structure of a haka: *Kia mau, Hī, Auē, Hā, and Arero*.

KIA MAU!: Te Kaiako hūmārie

*So I get to the tangi and... it was like Matatini style.  
My aunty was there and from that time she just took me under  
her wing... she looked after me; just nice to me, just kind to me,  
always said nice things... that's where I wanted to be. I felt safe"*  
- kaiako matua, wahine, nō Te Tairāwhiti

It's important to begin this section by putting into context the pou of Aroha Noa, and recognising the knowledge, patience, humility, commitment and creativity of the person without whom the 2024 stand could not have been possible. This passage of kōrero is significant because it outlines the heart by which this kaiako was paying forward her experience, and the āhua demonstrated to her by one of Aotearoa's most renowned performers, ("my aunty") Annette Wehi. These āhua had very little to do with kapa haka; rather, the generosity, kindness and proffering words of encouragement and affirmation are far more significant. Later, the kaiako – who has tutored thousands of rangatahi across her teaching career - said of the other wāhine in the rōpū whānau, "We don't say much to each other, but there's an aroha," and she noted their growth and confidence in themselves where she reflected that a year on, she can call on any of them to lead an item, and they won't hesitate; a long way from the women who lined up in front of her, only twelve months prior.

Every kaihaka who presented themselves in the rōpū whānau expressed their gratitude and admiration for their kaiako *and* her tamariki, who also invested into the kapa by her side, and who stood to haka tautoko following the Aroha Noa performance. Some instances brought forward were, "I love you, Paddy; thank you for giving this to us, a real privilege to perform" (wahine, nō Ngāti Kahu), "They [Paddy & Piripi] kept on pushing us... You got it, you got it! [...] week after week, telling us to stand in our mana" (tane, nō Muriwhenua), and "She could see our struggles [...] she changed things up so many times to fit us; she was so good, cos it felt like ours" (wahine, nō Te Hokianga). The simplification of actions and poi in particular is both a skill and act of humility – by this longtime Waka Huia performer - that ultimately meant Aroha Noa could be confident in knowing they were uniform with each other.

The mark of this humble wahine, who simply emanated what her haka guru taught her, is underlined here, where she articulates that working with Aroha Noa "Changed my life [...]" it goes back to the power of kapa haka and what it can do, and aroha for people. Ahakoa ko wai te tangata." Whoever has the courage to line-up in front of her, is a worthy akonga, and this is observable in her kōrero, and the responses to her pedagogy which ensured the actions

and choreography was at the level of the kapa. Here, a self-professed non-singer articulates, “She acknowledged us in this [kapa] space, where – I don’t know if she knew this, but... we needed it. Still to this day [...] she might want to say something else, but she just chooses to be kind and loves on us” (wahine, nō Waikato/Tainui), which speaks to the core values of manaaki/tiaki ingrained in this kaiako.

### Hī! Whānau identity

*Back home, I ain’t got no family, it’s just a gang...  
everyone [here] sort of became my family – then all  
my family were joining kapa haka, and I thought ‘Ayyy? Are youse  
leaving me behind?’ [LAUGHTER] so yeah, I joined the kapa haka  
group*  
- tane, nō Tauranga Moana

The majority of Aroha Noa performers were raised in heightened pressure and stress environments, none more clearly stated than the above kōrero where a family was swapped out for a gang. The 3-week turnaround on the regionals campaign, meant the sense of urgency for Aroha Noa was intense. However, the need to draw together as a whānau, was equally so. One wahine who had never done haka before said of the campaign, “It really brought us together. Those of us who did stand, we’re still tight as to this day, it’s just elevated” (wahine, nō Tauranga Moana). A good proportion of respondents spoke to a ‘moving as one’ kaupapa. Reflecting on a photo taken prior to their stand, “That’s us. We all stood as one” tane, nō Muriwhenua said, and described it as “The brotherhood, the sisterhood within the kapa; just, we were a whānau”. His niece stated, “When I come [to kapa], I feel loved, I feel at peace, and I feel wanted... we couldn’t let each other down, we’re ready” (wahine, nō Ngāti Kahu), which directly parallels with “We felt like one-hundred percent everyone was sure we had each other’s back... no one was left out, everyone was included [...] Bro, Sis, you gotta do this, we had each other and we went out there and we were one” (wahine, nō Waikato/Tainui).

Ultimately, there is a sense of ‘chosen’ whānau in these kōrero, and at the same time the impending kaupapa that compelled these kaihaka to quickly become a whānau or bust. However, there was also a strong consensus that whānau a-whakapapa played a significant part in the perceived success of their stand, and here are a select few of many, many passages where positive affirmation at various stages of the campaign proffered insight and encouragement:

*There’s one moment when we’re coming on stage and I hear my  
son in the crowd go, ‘YEAH, LET’S GO MUM!’  
It was a big, proud moment for me*  
- wahine, nō Tauranga Moana

*Getting the message from my dad saying my son's proud of me... he watched the whole thing, that's my baby*

- wahine, nō Ngāti Kahu

*When we got out onto stage, and there was nothing but bright lights, couldn't see anything, so fuck [LAUGHTER] couldn't see the crowd couldn't see anything, but could hear them, my kids. My kids were watching me. That was pretty cool*

- tane, nō Tauranga Moana

*I was really nervous until we got out on stage, then I heard my mum. My mum, my aunty was there, my partner, my brother, my sister... they were rapt ay? Everyone looked at me different*

- tane, nō Whangarei

*My moko... she loves kapa haka. This is her [from footage] 'GO NAN!' Here's her little head, and that's the echo of her voice*

- wahine, nō Te Hokianga

Responses to the regional performance from whānau a-whakapapa are significant, because when kaihaka first stood to kōrero and set out their personal context, the majority of kaikōrero expressed they felt they'd either let their whānau down, or had been let down. The passages they brought to the fore demonstrate that a great deal of personal work had been done by these kaihaka prior to the campaign. Yet evidence in practice was making it to the stage, and to be acknowledged and enjoyed by their whānau. As indicated by tane, nō Waikato/Tainui, "When I made it home, they were all buzzing," the polar opposite of the sad narratives of letting the whānau down, now in their pasts.



### AUĒ!: Confidence

*I can't really explain it...  
it was like I could do anything in that moment.  
I could really do anything, you know, with my kids cheering me on*  
- wahine, nō Tauranga Moana

The regionals campaign solidified confidence of identity in the kaihaka, demonstrated in the plethora of kōrero such as this opening passage. A good proportion of the rōpū whānau expressed both directly and indirectly that at times in their life there was 'shame to be Māori'. However, parallel with this wahine, having accomplished a regional kapa haka campaign in a short span of time, fielding exceptional responses from audiences, and affirmations by whānau, Aroha Noa have reframed their shame into a strong sense of pride. Another wahine asserted she was ashamed to have been "born and bred in Māngere, and raised in poverty" but post-kapa haka has refocused herself because, "it made us focus, it made us have a cause and a kaupapa. I'm so proud to be Māori and to have [had our] mokopapa here" (wahine, nō Waikato/Tainui), having received her moko kauae during the campaign alongside other Aroha Noa performers.

The tane who lead the haka didn't know how he would appear leading up to the competition, "The night before, I thought, 'what do I actually look like?' I had a look in the mirror and OH WOW... oh shit, I had to review the whole thing [LAUGHTER]" (tane, nō Tauranga Moana). He continued that, "Ever since we finished doing regionals, I'm not scared to stand in front of a crowd [...] it's given me the confidence to do anything. Just proud to be Māori. That's me."

Another tane was schooled in the Māori boy's boarding system, grew up in kapa haka and speaks te reo rangatira. He said he wanted to prove everybody who was negative about Aroha Noa wrong, "They reckoned, youse are just gonna get up there and sing *He Honore* or something... I really wanted to pull it off, and wipe that smirk off their faces, and they were all gob-smacked when it happened..." (tane, nō Waikato/Tainui). More significantly, he was unaware of the impact the campaign had, and was overwhelmed that their stand meant so much to so many people in the community who took strength from their performance ("I was just up there having fun and I didn't realise it was such a big thing until after"), and was even acknowledged by people shopping at the local supermarket.

### HĀ! Healing

*Right there in my heart, it was beautiful cos I know haka heals;  
it was like a hug. Like all the hugs that we never got...*  
- wahine, nō Te Hokianga

*[Kapa Haka] is a place where you can express yourself; if you've got any kind of hara or any kind of hurt, you can go into that space and pretty much unleash it [...] a yell, a roar, but leave it there...*

- tane, nō Muriwhenua

Up until this point, we've heard primarily about how doing kapa haka has impacted on the kaihaka, which we'll return to momentarily. But the moment this wahine refers to was underlined by the majority of kaikōrero as one of *the* most pivotal instances throughout the 2024 campaign. As Aroha Noa departed from the carpark of the Grace Foundation residence in their bus, the leadership of the organisation alongside other supporters, acknowledged the team with a heartfelt rendition of *Ka Mate!* "This is exactly how haka heals; like knowing your rangatira is so proud of you, and he's out there... just so proud, that he gives us a haka," (wahine, nō Te Hokianga), and of course, her tears flowed as she'd never had that feeling before. It was an emotional moment, "I cried. The whole bus cried" (wahine, nō Ngāti Kahu), and a meaningful, empowering moment, "They did a haka tautoko for us, and that was cool; you know I just carried that on, on stage... I just felt like, connected to our tūpuna" (tane, nō Tauranga Moana). He continued on in relation to the momentum the leadership's haka tautoko instilled into Aroha Noa at that critical time, that when he made it to the stage, "I was still energised; it didn't matter what we were going to do," suggesting the timing of the haka was helpful in facilitating the āhua the group needed, and to acknowledge that getting to stage in 3-weeks was a win.

The passage of kōrero by tane, nō Muriwhenua is significant in relation to healing, particularly for tāne, because it points to the directed aggression that is required in haka. Too much, risks a loss of control; too little, potentially depleted ihi, wehi, and wana. Such expression is important in therapeutic relief, and thus it is valuable to consider the benefits of targeting grief, fury and rage in kapa haka, useful as a physical outlet, moving forward. Healing in kapa haka comes in an array of forms, and there is space for one more here, where kaihaka heal relationships in learning haka from their children. This wahine, who had experienced decades of domestic violence, spoke of how she'd been a hard mum to her tamariki, but during the campaign, "I started practicing in the mirror [which is] really hard to do when you've been through a lot of trauma... but then my own kids were... encouraging me... [my girl said] Mum, 'do it like this'... and when you make a mistake, just carry on," (wahine, nō Waikato/Tainui), in part, a metaphor for life. Since her daughter is a kura kaupapa graduate with years of kapa haka experience, the mum becomes the taura, and the tamaiti is the kaiako, a significant role reversal which this kaihaka acknowledged is a beautiful part of having adult children. However, despite best efforts in actions, singing, and pulling off poi actions, she claims her tamariki still feel sorry for the kaiako ("awwww, Mum, poor tutor [LAUGHTER] and they're rolling around on the ground laughing at me"). The ability to laugh in such a way, demonstrates solid progress in healing possibly tenuous relationships.

Arero: Transformative leadership

*I'd do what I had to do for the gang. Now leading my race,  
standing up for Māori [...] what it's done for my kids, seeing me on  
stage... my end goal is to stand in front of my children and  
whaikōrero*  
- tane, nō Tauranga Moana

This passage of kōrero displays the goals this tane has set for himself; that kapa haka is simply the starting point to lead his family by example, seeking out his reo, and being able to formally address people on a marae. Prior to this passage, he'd spoken about his life-long commitment to the gang, Harley Davidson motorcycles, and some of his parenting decisions in retrospect. It's important to identify that kapa haka is likely a catalyst for this tane pursuing these fundamental cultural aspirations. Equally significant, that this tane led the haka; "It didn't sink in that I'd been asked to lead haka on stage... I thought I was just leading [it] while we were practicing [LAUGHTER] so two days before the performance, I was thinking, "Ayyy? Is he gonna choose someone? [MORE LAUGHTER] It was cool," and other tane agreed that this item was indeed powerful, led by this tane. When the rōpū exchanged kōrero about leadership and role modelling, the kāea of the haka automatically redirected the attention to the tane who performed their whaikōrero, which the others asserted that despite being one of the youngest on stage, "You inspired all of us [...] and you speak Māori and all of that, you don't know what a role model you are to all our kids, but you are" (tane, nō Muriwhenua).

To conclude Arero, wāhine acknowledged the leadership of their Kaiako, and other haka experienced wahine who showed patience and aroha whilst helping them learn. Having been raised in kura kaupapa, this wahine found herself, "Teaching them how to turn the poi, these three here! The angers [LAUGHTER] so bad!" (wahine, nō Ngāti Kahu), elemental of a generous, manaaki/tiaki kaiako. Continuous and often raucous laughter aside, this kaihaka was quick to help and slow to judge, as the focus was that "Everyone's at different levels" (kaiako, nō Te Tairāwhiti) and there was a need to be simple and indeed effective.

## PŪKANA | CONCLUDING REMARKS

The Aroha Noa kaupapa demonstrates profound impacts of kapa haka as a performance art and more critically as a platform for reconnection, restoration, and identity formation. The stories demonstrated in this report show the enduring strength of whānau, the transformative power of cultural reclamation, and the role of kaupapa like Te Matatini in fostering belonging, and pride in our communities.

This report offers only a glimpse into a deeply moving, affirming space created in, by and for the communities. It exhibits the core value of listening, of culturally grounded, strengths-based research methods, and of investing in kaupapa that honour the lived realities of whānau.

Reflections depicted here must inform future initiatives, policy considerations, and resourcing decisions. In the case of Aroha Noa, we have demonstrated what is possible when community, culture, and commitment intersect. Through kapa haka, Aroha Noa has changed and developed lives; it has created a legacy for healing and transformative leadership for the future of our tamariki/mokopuna.



## GLOSSARY: *TE REO MĀORI* TO ENGLISH

<i>Āhua</i>	characteristic, personality
<i>Akonga</i>	learner
<i>Arero</i>	tongue or point of a taiaha
<i>Aroha Noa</i>	name of kapa haka group, also grace
<i>Auē</i>	a howl, wail, groan
<i>Haka</i>	posture movement
<i>Hā</i>	outward breath
<i>Hī</i>	a type of breath
<i>Hui</i>	meeting
<i>Hūmārie</i>	beautiful, soft humility
<i>Kāea</i>	leader
<i>Kai</i>	food
<i>Kaiako</i>	teacher
<i>Kaihaka</i>	haka exponent
<i>Kaikaranga</i>	ceremonial ‘caller’
<i>Kaikōrero</i>	speaker, narrator
<i>Kapa haka</i>	a Māori performing art
<i>Karakia</i>	incantation/s
<i>Karanga</i>	ceremonial call
<i>Kaupapa</i>	topic, subject, platform
<i>Kaupapa Matua</i>	main topic
<i>Kia mau</i>	be ready
<i>Koha</i>	gesture, gift without expectation of reciprocity
<i>Kōkiri</i>	spearhead, thrust forward
<i>Kōrero</i>	narrative, speaking, talk
<i>Kura kaupapa</i>	limited definition, Māori immersion school
<i>Mamae</i>	hurt, sore, pain
<i>Manaaki</i>	limited definition, to support, take care, host, bless
<i>Māngere</i>	a suburb in South Auckland
<i>Mihi</i>	acknowledgements
<i>Moko kauae</i>	a woman’s chin tattoo
<i>Mokopapa</i>	a facial tattooing event
<i>Mokopuna</i>	limited definition, grandchildren
<i>Pakiwaitara</i>	stories, yarns, ‘jibber-jabber’
<i>Pepeha</i>	tribal saying incorporating geographical locators
<i>Pou</i>	pillar
<i>Pūkana</i>	eye dilation
<i>Pūtātara</i>	conch shell
<i>Rangatahi</i>	limited definition, youth
<i>Rangatira</i>	limited definition, leader or chief
<i>Reo</i>	language or voice
<i>Rōpū</i>	group
<i>Rōpū Whānau</i>	a whakawhiti kōrero research method

<i>Tamaiti</i>	limited definition, child
<i>Tāmaki Makaurau</i>	also known as Auckland City
Tamariki	limited definition, children
<i>Tane/tāne</i>	man/men
Tangi	grieving ceremony, funeral
<i>Taonga</i>	treasured item
<i>Tauira</i>	student <i>and</i> exemplar
<i>Tautoko</i>	support
<i>Te ao Māori</i>	limited definition, the Māori world
<i>Te reo rangatira</i>	chiefly language, Māori language
<i>Tiaki</i>	limited definition, guardianship, custodian
<i>Tikanga Māori</i>	correct or proper procedures according to Māori
<i>Tūpuna</i>	ancestors
<i>Wahine/wāhine</i>	woman/women
<i>Wānanga</i>	intensive session of learning
<i>Whakaeke</i>	entrance; in kapa haka, entrance item
<i>Whakakai</i>	ornaments such as earrings or necklace
<i>Whakamana</i>	legitimise, give authority, validate
<i>Whakapatapātai</i>	questioning asking
<i>Whakataetae kapa haka</i>	competitive kapa haka
<i>Whakawātea</i>	exit; in kapa haka, exit item
<i>Whakawhanaungatanga</i>	establishment of relationships
<i>Whakawhiti kōrero</i>	exchange of narratives, talking, speaking
<i>Whānau</i>	limited definition, family

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<sup>i</sup> The Rōpū Whānau research approach is a whakawhiti kōrero facilitation methodology, designed by Associate Professor Jani Wilson.