

The Rangatahi Social Capital

Reflections on the Landscape of
Relationships Kaupapa for Rangatahi

2025 Summer Internship Report

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Background

Ko wai au? Ko Jarna Flintoff toku ingoa, he uri tenei nō Ngā Rauru, Te Atihaunui a Pāpārangī, Ngāti Raukawa ki te Tonga, Ngāti Tūwharetoa me ngā iwi o Te Tau Ihu. I am beginning my third year at the University of Otago in 2025, where I am undertaking a Bachelors of Health Science (Māori Health) and a Bachelors of Law. During my summer employment with Waiora Whānau - Te Oranganui (2024/25), I developed this piece of writing as part of my role in creating a briefing paper for our Kaihautū. This document is designed to provide foundational support, background and backboning for the rangatahi innovation kaupapa which has taken a focus on healthy relationships.

Nurturing Connections: A Rangatahi Māori Perspective of Healthy Relationships

Purpose: A background essay, prepared by a rangatahi, reflecting aspirations for healthy relationships kaupapa.

Healthy relationships are the cornerstone of development for rangatahi, influencing their emotional, social, and mental wellbeing. In recent years healthy relationships for rangatahi has become a key focus for many organisations, educational settings, and communities. This ongoing exploration reflects a collective recognition of the vital role relationships play in shaping rangatahi hauora. While the concept of healthy relationships often brings to mind intimate partners, friendships, whānau connections, mātauranga Māori reminds us that relationships often extend much further than the tangible, interpersonal connections between us. This essay will explore how healthy relationships contribute to the holistic development of rangatahi, particularly through a kaupapa Māori lens. Drawing on the principles of tikanga, it examines how these traditional frameworks can be applied to address contemporary challenges faced by rangatahi, including the impacts of social media, vaping, and distorted perceptions of intimacy. By reconnecting with our indigeneity, we can offer rangatahi a pathway to more meaningful and sustainable relationships with themselves, others, and their environment.

Healthy relationships are essential for young people as they significantly influence their emotional, social, and mental well-being during critical developmental years (Pfeifer & Allen, 2020). Positive relationships provide emotional support, fostering a sense of belonging and security that helps rangatahi navigate challenges and build resilience (Office of Population Affairs, 2022). Relationships are also crucial for developing effective communication, empathy, and conflict resolution skills, which are key to maintaining future personal and professional connections (Pfeifer & Allen, 2020; Sims et al., 1997). Furthermore, healthy relationships are associated with better mental health outcomes, reducing stress and the risk of anxiety, depression, and engagement in risky behaviours, including substance abuse (Umberson & Karas Montez, 2010). For rangatahi, meaningful connections with peers, whānau, and mentors offer a foundation for forming a strong sense of identity and self-worth, enabling them to interact positively with the world around them. Conversely, unhealthy or toxic relationships can hinder development, leading to long-term emotional and psychological challenges (Forth et al., 2021). These findings underscore the importance of fostering environments that promote healthy relationships to support the holistic well-being of young people.

Typically, when we envision “healthy relationships for rangatahi” many people jump to intimate or romantic relationships, some explore friendships and whānau and others talk of relationship dynamics related to authority or power dynamics when

accessing services. I posed the question, “how does the concept of healthy relationships fit into our mātauranga and how can it fit into kaupapa Māori?”.

Kaupapa Māori educationalist, Tuki Nepe (1991) argues that Kaupapa Māori is distinctly different from Western approaches in that it is driven by tikanga Māori. Tikanga is relational – all of our mātauranga is underpinned by our relationships between each other and our relationships with the environments around us. This is exemplified through the transition from Hawaikian culture which Kupe brought on his haerenga to Aotearoa, developing into tikanga and mātauranga Māori before the arrival of colonists. The adaptation of Hawaikian culture into Māori culture in Aotearoa is a reflection of the dynamic interplay between knowledge and our environment – recognising that these two concepts have an unchangeable relationship with each other. As Kupe and his whānau settled, they integrated their Hawaikian values and practices with the unique environment of Aotearoa. Overtime, tikanga and mātauranga Māori evolved – it reflects the importance of our relationships as tangata, with the whenua, moana, and atua unique to their new environment.

The concept that tikanga is relational with our environment is further underpinned by the continual adaptation of our tikanga and mātauranga in contemporary settings. Now, our traditional values have been adapted to address modern challenges in education, health and governance through kaupapa Māori approaches, frameworks and contracts. These continually recognise tikanga as relational – prioritising ideas and concepts such as collective wellbeing, reciprocity, and kaitiakitanga. These concepts arise out of adaptation of our values and practices into a new colonial world, the same way Kupe adapted Hawaikian culture to the whenua of Aotearoa.

Across modern time, social media and the internet’s growing influence has begun to shape rangatahi. This current generation has been labelled “the anxious generation” by Jonathan Haidt emphasising the sky high levels of anxiety for rangatahi today. Here, Haidt recognises that unhealthy relationships between rangatahi and their phones with around ½ of rangatahi in the US reporting being “constantly online”, which he described as feeling “addicted” to (Vogels et al., 2022). The impact of this “addiction” resulted in negative outcomes for rangatahi in the US, highlighting a direct correlation between time spent on social media and the prevalence of mental health issues like anxiety and depression. Haidt describes social media’s influence as not just personal but systemic, altering the social environment in ways comparable to other addictive substances such as tobacco. He argues for age restrictions and other regulatory measures to foster more healthy relationships for rangatahi with their phones.

Furthermore, he argued smartphones and social media disrupt critical developmental processes. These platforms create unhealthy comparisons by showcasing curated and often unrealistic lifestyles – creating distorted perceptions of self-worth. Haidt’s research points to the “likes” and “comments” system as an encouragement for

compulsive use with rangatahi chasing constant validation and dopamine hits. This constant connectivity diminishes attention span but also opportunities for kanohi-ki-te-kanohi interactions, undermining the development of emotional regulation and meaningful relationships. Additionally, Haidt recognised how pornography exacerbates unhealthy sexual relationships and attitudes. The normalisation of unrealistic sexual expectations, combined with a lack of robust sexual education, resulted in negative hauora outcomes (Office of Film and Literature Classification, 2021). For rangatahi, pornography can negatively impact mental health by increasing anxiety, depression, and stress, and it distorts sexual norms and expectations, leading to unsafe sexual practices, earlier sexual activity, and challenges in forming meaningful relationships due to unrealistic views of intimacy (Rowley, 2016; Office of Film and Literature Classification, 2021).

Tikanga is described as being a fully relational system deeply embedded in balance and reciprocity. Central to this is the interplay of tapu and noa, concepts that regulate our relationships with our environment (whether this is between tangata, or our relationships with the physical and spiritual) to maintain a state of neutrality. For example tapu and the processes of whakanoa remind us of the importance of maintaining equilibrium to ensure well-being of our people – ā-tinana, ā-wairua, ā-hinengaro me ā-whānau. Furthermore, our mātauranga reminds us that relationships are a two-way street. The concept of kaitiakitanga teaches us that relationships are meant to be reciprocal, where what we are taking in return is matched by the care and protection we provide to ensure sustainability. This principle applies not only to our relationship with Papatuānuku but also to our interactions with people, the physical world around us and ourselves. If we take without giving back, we create an imbalance, ultimately harming the system we rely on. Likewise, if we give endlessly without replenishment, we compromise our ability to sustain ourselves and those we care for. Kaitiakitanga is a reminder that relationships thrive on mutual effort and respect, requiring a consistent flow of giving and receiving.

From the perspective of a rangatahi myself, I believe this concept is often overlooked by my generation and among our mokopuna of the future. Many of us fail to recognise that kaitiakitanga applies not just to others but also to ourselves. I believe that this is evident in behaviours like vaping, where reciprocity is absent. *What do we need?*, a survey by *Whatever* demonstrated that 31% of rangatahi in Whanganui vaped, but only 34% wanted support to vape less and conversely 37% of those vapers did not want support to vape less (Whatever, 2023). Instead of giving back, vaping takes: it drains pūtea, risks physical health, and often serves as a temporary coping mechanism for issues in the lives of rangatahi that require more sustainable solutions (Whatever, 2023). The same survey also demonstrated that over 50% of rangatahi recognise that it is unhealthy and/or bad for them, yet the capability to quit or even recognise that they need to quit is missing for over 30% of rangatahi who

vape. Similarly, high rates of phone addiction, bullying, and rangatahi reoffending rates highlight the imbalanced relationships we cultivate.

This relational foundation of tikanga Māori – our connection to the environment and to each other – provides a framework for understanding what healthy relationships should look like for rangatahi. What we invest our time, energy, and pūtea into should provide as much benefit as it takes from us. For rangatahi, this means advocating for ourselves and ensuring the things we consume – be it habits, media, or people – nurture us in return. Just as our interactions with our whenua and our moana inform collective wellbeing, the relationships rangatahi form with people and their surroundings play important roles in shaping their overall health and resilience.

Healthy relationships are pivotal for the growth and wellbeing of rangatahi, providing a foundation for resilience, identity, and mental health. By examining relationships through a kaupapa Māori lens, we can further understand that tikanga lays a framework for the dynamics of healthy relationships with others, the environment and oneself. The challenges faced by rangatahi today - such as social media overuse, vaping, distorted perceptions of intimacy - highlight the need to re-establish connections to mātauranga Māori and those concepts that underpin the relational nature of our tikanga. For the well-being of our rangatahi and the generations to come, it is essential to nurture environments that foster positive, reciprocal relationships, empowering them to engage meaningfully with the world around them.

Understanding the Normative Need: Insights from Epidemiology and Research of Unhealthy Relationship Indicators for Rangatahi in Whanganui

Purpose of this section: To provide a foundational understanding of the issue based on epidemiological data and research evidence. This section establishes the scale, prevalence, and key patterns of unhealthy relationships among rangatahi by initiating a rapid literature review of recent statistics and grey literature for relationship indicators.

Indicators

Unhealthy relationships in Aotearoa are associated with adverse outcomes, including mental health issues, substance abuse, early pregnancy, poor educational achievement, and intimate partner violence (IPV) later in life (Forth et al., 2021). These outcomes are significant because their impact extends beyond the individual and will impact whānau and community health outcomes over time (Pihama et al., 2019). The following is a brief literature and statistical review of epidemiological data providing insights into the scale, prevalence, and underlying patterns of unhealthy relationships across Aotearoa and some specific data from Whanganui (from the *What do we need survey by Whatever*). These statistics inform the need for targeted interventions related to healthy relationships and rangatahi.

Physical Violence – A National Insight

The *Youth19 – a Youth2000 Survey* reveals troubling levels of violence experienced by rangatahi in Aotearoa and underscores a pattern that can contribute to unhealthy relationships. Around half (51%) of all rangatahi in Aotearoa experienced physical violence in the past 12 months, often inflicted by siblings (41%) and parents (13%). What is alarming here is that our rangatahi are exhibiting this same behaviour with 20% of rangatahi experiencing physical harm by their peers and 6% by a romantic partner. Approximately 18% reported experiencing unwanted sexual violence or abuse, a statistic linked to trauma and challenges in forming safe relationships. Exposure to violence is a significant risk factor for future unhealthy relationships as it normalises harm and creates cycles of victimisation or perpetration, impacting emotional and behavioural development (Pihama et al., 2019).

Physical Violence – What’s happening in our rohe?

What do we need?, a survey by *Whatever* illustrates that statistics for physical violence are even higher in our rohe, painting a concerning picture for our rangatahi. In the last year, 29% of rangatahi were harmed by another young person and this figure rises to 31% for rangatahi Māori. Physical harm inflicted by siblings is also disproportionately higher, with 42% of rangatahi experiencing this, increasing to 52% for rangatahi Māori. Another harrowing statistic is that rangatahi in Whanganui experience physical violence from a romantic partner 3% more than the national average, at 9% and 10% for rangatahi Māori, who also report higher rates of romantic relationships overall (32% compared to 23% for the general youth population) (MSD, 2021).

Bullying

Bullying is another indicator of rangatahi forming an unhealthy ideology about relationships. The recent survey by *Whatever* in 2023 found that 46% of rangatahi experienced bullying in the past 12 months, with 12% facing bullies more than once a week. Conversely, 25% admitted to bullying others, including 4% engaging in frequent bullying. These behaviours are indicators of unresolved interpersonal conflict and poor emotional regulation, fostering power imbalances that can manifest in future unhealthy relationships (Arseneault, 2018; Riggs, 2010). This is an indicator suggesting that rangatahi are struggling with interpersonal relationships beyond those with whānau and romantic partners. Bullying not only disrupts immediate peer dynamics but also reinforces negative patterns of dominance and submission, which may carry over into adult relationships (Dombeck, 2020). This cycle can manifest in future intimate partner violence or difficulty maintaining healthy friendships.

Relationship Dynamics

Relationship indicators from recent data (Whatever, 2023) delineate the characteristics of both healthy and unhealthy relationships. Healthy relationships were described as non-violence, consent, equality, boundaries, inclusion, support, and honest communication. Conversely, unhealthy relationships were described as physical abuse, sexual coercion, cyber abuse, mental abuse, isolation, threats, and verbal and emotional manipulation. Among rangatahi, the perception of what type of relationships they had with whānau, friends and romantic partners varied:

- Relationships with whānau: 4% described their relationships as unhealthy, while 37% identified mixed traits and 59% as healthy.
- Friendships: 2% unhealthy, 36% mixed traits, 62% healthy.
- Romantic relationships: 6% unhealthy, 33% mixed traits, 62% healthy.

These insights highlight that while most rangatahi recognise healthy relational patterns, a significant proportion still navigate environments where unhealthy traits persist.

Mental Health and Suicide

Relational stress among rangatahi is closely tied to mental health issues, with affected individuals being at higher risk of depression and suicidal ideation, highlighting the mental health burden of unhealthy relationships (Fallahi-Khoshknab et al., 2023). Persistent relational conflict and violence contribute to feelings of helplessness and despair, driving some rangatahi toward suicidal thoughts as a perceived escape (Fallahi-Khoshknab et al., 2023). Research connects these patterns to unmet emotional needs and chronic exposure to unsafe relational environments (Fallahi-Khoshknab et al., 2023).

Rangatahi Reoffending

Rangatahi reoffending provides insight into skewed relationships with authority and societal structures. The youth reoffending rate underscores the extent of this issue, with 45% of 14–16-year-olds who appeared in the Youth Court in 2016/17 reoffending with a new proven offence within 12 months. When disaggregated, this figure highlights significant disparities, with 49% of Māori youth reoffending compared to 38% of non-Māori (Oranga Tamariki | Ministry for Children, 2020). This overrepresentation of Māori rangatahi reflects broader systemic inequities and highlights the need for culturally grounded interventions.

Reoffending among rangatahi is often linked to broken or absent relationships with positive role models and a lack of trust in authority, perpetuating unhealthy relational dynamics. These statistics demonstrate the cyclical nature of disengagement, where rangatahi feel disconnected from systems designed to support them. Such experiences can lead to further negative outcomes, including poor educational achievement, limited employment opportunities, and ongoing interaction with the justice system.

Community and Disproportionate Impact Profile

Demographics and Social Conditions

The median age in Whanganui was 43 in 2018, reflecting an aging population overall (Statistics NZ, 2018). However, within the Māori population, the median age was just 26 years, indicating a much younger profile (WDC, 2023). This means that approximately half of our Māori population consists of rangatahi and tamariki. Rangatahi Māori represent a significant proportion of the community, underscoring the urgency of addressing their specific needs and supporting rangatahi Māori as a

demographic imperative – our future. Whanganui’s population profile highlights significant socio economic challenges, with a significant proportion of our population residing in high-deprivation areas nearly doubling national averages (WDC, 2023). We know these areas are often characterised by limited access to quality housing, healthcare, and essential services creating perpetual cycles of inequality (Howden-Chapman et al., 2021). Additionally areas of high deprivation are characterised by high levels of criminal activity and economic hardship, which amplify risks associated with unhealthy relationships (Family Violence Death Review Committee, 2021).

Ethnic Disparities

Rangatahi Māori are disproportionately represented in statistics related to relational violence, sexual violence, and exposure to family harm (Youth 2000, 2021; Whatever, 2023). These disparities are underpinned by systemic inequalities, intergenerational trauma, and disconnection from te ao Māori (Ministry of Social Development, 2008). Further American research indicates that unstable familial and romantic relationship problems are a significant risk factor for youth suicide, via the creation of emotional stress creating feelings of disgrace, humiliation, burdensomeness, worthlessness, and insignificance (Fallahi-Khoshknab et al., 2023). Using this model, the disparities in Māori youth suicide rate is 23.2 per 100,000, significantly higher than the non-Māori rate of 14.3 per 100,000 (Te Whatu Ora, 2023). This statistic becomes even more concerning when we acknowledge that 50% of our whānau Māori in Whanganui are rangatahi or tamariki (WDC, 2023).

Research demonstrates that IPV rates are higher among Māori women with 58% experiencing IPV within their lifetimes, compared with 34% for non-Māori (Fanslow & Robinson, 2011). The social deprivation hypothesis suggests that Māori are no more likely to experience IPV than non-Māori of similar socioeconomic backgrounds, emphasizing the role of structural inequities rather than cultural predisposition (Marie et al., 2008). Nonetheless, Māori men and women remain overrepresented in IPV and trauma statistics, highlighting the urgent need for intersectional and equity-driven interventions (Fanslow et al., 2023; Mellor et al., 2023).

Limitations

While this section provides key insights into the prevalence, scale, and patterns of unhealthy relationships among rangatahi, several limitations impact the robustness and scope of the findings:

Gaps in Epidemiological Data: Although physical violence and family harm are well documented in national surveys such as the *Youth19* and MSD reports, there is a lack of comprehensive and recent data on psychological and emotional abuse specific to rangatahi. These forms of harm, which often underpin unhealthy

relationships, remain underreported and understudied in both national and local research. Surveys tend to prioritise measurable indicators like physical harm, limiting an understanding of broader relational harm.

Narrow Conceptualisation of Relationships: Much of the existing evidence focuses on immediate interpersonal relationships (e.g. whānau, peers, romantic partners), reflecting Western frameworks of relational dynamics. On the other hand, Māori perspectives on relationships are grounded in whakapapa beyond us as individuals. Since a Māori worldview didn't exist within "relationship" literature, we intentionally adopted a Māori perspective to emphasise the interconnected relationships and broader social indicators. This approach led us to analyse youth reoffending rates as an alternative indicator of unhealthy relationships, reflecting disconnection from whānau, role models, and societal structures. This perspective of relationships is not completely missing from Western literature e.g. Jonathan Haidt on young people and internet consumption. However, the lack of Māori perspective in national and local observational research was a limitation for exploring the normative need for an intervention for rangatahi and healthy relationships.

Equity Gaps in Rangatahi-Specific Data: While family violence and IPV statistics are robust for women, Māori, and other intersectional groups, there is limited disaggregated data specific to rangatahi, particularly within smaller regions like Whanganui. Existing reports often combine youth experiences into broader family harm statistics, which can obscure the unique relational challenges faced by rangatahi.

Survey Design Limitations: Surveys, such as *What do we need?* and *Youth19*, offer objective measures of unhealthy relationships but fail to capture more about complex traits like coercion, manipulation, or emotional neglect. Self-reported surveys may also reflect social desirability bias, underreporting harm and over emphasising positive traits in relationships.

Regional Comparisons: While national data provides a useful benchmark, regional insights remain scarce. Whanganui-specific findings highlight higher rates of harm but lack comprehensive comparative analysis.

These limitations underscore the need for culturally responsive research that aligns with a Māori worldview, expands the scope of unhealthy relationship indicators, and ensures equitable reporting stands specific to rangatahi in Whanganui.

Analysis of Contributory Risk Factors for Unhealthy Relationships

Purpose of this section: To analyse the broader structural and individual-level contributors of healthy relationships for rangatahi.

The Upstream- Downstream Model of Determinants of Health

The upstream-downstream model of determinants of health illustrates how health outcomes are shaped by interconnected factors at different levels of influence. Health challenges “flow” from upstream to downstream - meaning systemic barriers or inequities upstream can cascade to interpersonal issues midstream, which in turn impact individual behaviours and outcomes downstream. Addressing upstream determinants had a ripple effect, improving midstream and downstream outcomes, whereas focusing solely on downstream issues may treat symptoms without addressing root causes.



The upstream-downstream model aligns with the 6 conditions of change - particularly structural drivers such as policies and practices, which shape upstream determinants, and the importance of mental modes that guide midstream and downstream behaviours. Both frameworks emphasise that transformative change requires intervention at all levels for sustainable outcomes.

Upstream Factors

- These are systemic and structural factors that broadly influence health, such as policies, socioeconomic conditions, and cultural norms.
- These determinants are harder to address directly due to their systemic nature but have the most significant impact on health disparities.

1. Colonisation and Intergenerational Trauma

Colonisation and intergenerational trauma continues to have a significant influence on rangatahi relationships by disrupting tikanga Māori, Māori structures and support systems. Pre-colonisation, Māori thrived within collectivist society where whānau provided guidance and support, and acts of violence were collectively addressed and not tolerated. It is well known that colonisation introduced systemic violence, land dispossession, and foreign ideologies of race, gender, and class, fragmenting whānau, hapu, iwi structures eroding mātauranga (Pihama et al., 2019). This disconnection has left many rangatahi without the strong foundations that tikanga Māori provides for healthy relationships. Historical injustices of the past like systemic oppression and violence continue to affect Māori communities—fostering cycles of emotional and relational harm (Pihama et al., 2019). The legacy of colonisation has normalized violence within some whānau, undermining traditional practices that once ensured well-being (Pihama et al., 2019).

Furthermore, when we expand our focus and we think about our relationships with the environment around us. Colonisation has led to the over saturation of alcohol and other substances, gambling, sugar, fast food and many other downstream determinants of health which lead to addiction and overtime negative health outcomes (Paterson et al., 2018).

2. Socioeconomic Inequities

Socioeconomic inequities are a significant contributing risk factor to the development of healthy relationships with rangatahi. When we consider that around 60% of our population in Whanganui live in our highest deprived areas this information becomes concerning (WDC, 2023). Socioeconomic status (SES) primarily affects rangatahi relationships through their influence on social environments and stress levels. International research highlights that adolescents with high subjective SES often experience better peer and teacher relationships, which reflect their perception of social status and identity within the broader societal context (Li et al., 2020). Subjective SES, which incorporates an individual's perception of their current and future prospects, is strongly linked to stress levels and social dynamics, as lower subjective SES correlates with higher stress and adverse relationships (Conger et al., 2010).

The Family Stress Model (FSM) further alludes to how economic hardship impacts relationships, demonstrating that financial pressures create emotional distress, leading to conflict and reduced relationship quality (Conger et al., 2010). Adolescents from low-SES backgrounds often face compounded stressors, such as unmet material needs and limited emotional support, which affects their interactions with family and peers. These economic pressures disrupt not only romantic relationships but also broader social connections.

Objective SES indicators, such as parental education, significantly shape family dynamics and adolescent relationships. Parents with higher education levels can provide enhanced emotional and social guidance, fostering better parent-child and teacher-student relationships. This aligns with findings that higher parental education predicts better interpersonal outcomes and resilience in adolescents (Li et al., 2020).

Midstream Factors

- These focus on community-level factors and interpersonal influences, such as family support, workplace environments, and access to community resources like schools, healthcare, and safe spaces.
- They represent the mediators between upstream structures and individual experiences.

3. Exposure to Unhealthy Relationships Models - Intergenerational Trauma and Peer Relationships

Exposure to unhealthy relationships or intergenerational trauma is an important midstream determinant of relationships for rangatahi. Witnessing or experiencing violence within whānau normalises harmful relationship behaviours, perpetuating cycles of abuse (Pihama et al., 2019). Exposure to unhealthy relationship models acts as a form of relational contagion, where behaviours and dynamics are learned and replicated across generations. For rangatahi, witnessing harmful relationship dynamics as a direct result of colonisation, perpetuates a cycle of dysfunction (Pihama et al., 2019). This is further exacerbated by the trauma responses ingrained in whānau through colonisation. Behaviours such as avoidance, aggression, or hypervigilance can be modeled as coping mechanisms, subtly teaching rangatahi maladaptive ways to navigate emotional and relational challenges (Kruger et al., 2004). This creates a feedback loop of learned behaviors, where rangatahi internalize harmful relationship dynamics as “normal.” Furthermore, another study noted that witnessing peer violence was associated with negative relationship outcomes, allowing us to recognise that learning relationship dynamics are not just a result of those teaching us directly but also the influence of our wider community (Stroem et al., 2021).

4. Access to Education and Support Programs

Access to education and support programs significantly influences rangatahi relationships in Whanganui. Literature indicates that a lack of comprehensive and quality healthy relationships education in low-decile schools, which many of our schools in Whanganui are, results in poorer outcomes for students in understanding healthy relationships, consent and emotional wellbeing (Dixon et al., 2022). Furthermore, the absence of targeted, culturally relevant relationship support services in Whanganui further promotes this issue, as rangatahi have fewer opportunities to access resources that promote positive relationship skills and emotional health. This combination of inadequate education and limited support services contributes to a cycle of poor relationship outcomes and persistent challenges in addressing the needs of rangatahi in Whanganui.

Downstream Factors

- These are individual-level factors, including behaviors, attitudes, and health conditions, such as diet, exercise, mental health, and substance use.
- They are the most immediate and visible determinants, often addressed through interventions like education, clinical care, or behavior change campaigns.

5. Mental Health Challenges

The relationship between mental health and relationships is complex. Mental health challenges influence the quality and dynamics of rangatahi relationships. Poor mental health can lead to reduced emotional and practical support, increased caregiving burdens, and altered interpersonal dynamics (Mokoena et al., 2019). Partners with mental illness often experience distress, including anger, anxiety, and guilt, while caregiving partners face exhaustion and isolation (Mokoena et al., 2019). Symptoms of mental illness, such as rapid emotional shifts, hinder participation in enjoyable activities, creating detachment and insecurity within relationships (Mokoena et al., 2019). Conversely, strained or abusive relationships can lead to chronic stress, anxiety, depression, and feelings of isolation - negatively impacting mental health (Braithwaite & Holt-Lunstad, 2017). The relationship between the two is reciprocal—when mental health declines, relationships often suffer, and when relationships falter, mental health can deteriorate.

6. Substance Abuse and Behavioural Issues

Substance abuse, particularly alcohol consumption, significantly impacts the relationships of rangatahi. A study found that elevated alcohol use is linked to a twofold increase in adolescent relationship abuse victimisation (Stroem et al., 2021).

Examining the Gaps: What Are Schools Providing in the Context of Healthy Relationships Education?

Purpose of this section: This section of the report aims to offer a brief overview of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) within the mainstream curriculum. It delves into the intended framework and objectives of RSE, its practical application and effectiveness in reality, and explores how these dynamics are influenced by the evolving educational priorities of the National, Act, NZF coalition government.

The State of the Current Curriculum

The Current Ministry of Education Approach (Ministry of Education, 2020)

The RSE component of the New Zealand Curriculum is designed to equip children and young people with the knowledge and skills to foster healthy relationships, build self-confidence, and support overall well-being. RSE is delivered as a part of the Health and Physical Education Curriculum and adopts a holistic approach, focusing on mental, physical, and emotional development through age-appropriate learning experiences.

Key Curriculum Focus Areas

The curriculum is structured to ensure students build their understanding overtime. Early learning emphasises friendships, consent, respect, and basic body awareness. As students progress into intermediate, they learn about puberty, reproduction, and managing internet safety. Secondary students address more complex issues such as intimate relationships, contraception, cultural perspectives on gender and sexuality, and the societal factors that influence attitudes and behaviours. The progression of material is meant to ensure students are equipped with tools and knowledge to navigate increasingly complex challenges as they grow.

A key objective of RSE is fostering an inclusive school culture that respects diversity and promotes safety. The curriculum explores topics like gender identity, consent, and ethics while addressing challenges related to online behaviour and media representation. These lessons aim to prepare students for real-world interactions and encourage respect for others' perspectives.

How it works

RSE is mandatory for all state and state-integrated schools for students in Years 0-10. It forms part of a broader health curriculum that includes mental health, safety

and violence prevention, and food and nutrition education. In secondary school, RSE is optional and it is integrated into the broader Health and Physical Education curriculum without prescribed outcomes or dedicated units, giving schools flexibility but resulting in inconsistent delivery (Education Review Office, 2024). The content is typically delivered by classroom teachers, with occasional input from external providers like the *Life Education Trust* or *Mates and Dates* depending on the school's needs. The Ministry of Education also provides over 150 online resources, featuring both Māori and Pākehā approaches to RSE.

Topics such as puberty, reproduction, contraception, and sexual health are taught at an age-appropriate level, often toward the end of the school year. Parents are informed in advance through notices, emails, or newsletters and can request more details from teachers. Parents may withdraw their children from specific lessons by formally notifying the principal, who must provide alternative supervision. However, if questions on sexuality arise during other lessons, teachers are not obliged to exclude students.

Community Consultation and Legal Framework

Schools are required to engage with their communities at least every 2 years to shape how relationships and sexuality education is delivered. This ensures alignment with local values and the diverse needs of students. The Education and Training Act 2020 outlines parental rights to withdraw children from specific lessons and mandates community consultation and transparency through public health education statements.

[Why it's Being Dumped - The Findings of the Education Review Office on RSE \(2024\)](#)

The evaluation of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) by the Education Review Office (ERO) identified 21 key findings across five areas and proposed three main actions to improve RSE delivery in New Zealand schools, published in November 2024.

A Short Summary of the Findings

1. Support for RSE

RSE has broad support from students (91%) and parents/ whānau (87%), although Pasifika parents, primary school parents, and faith-based families show less support due to culture and religion. Although not common, there are parents who opt for their children to not participate in RSE.

2. Content Variation

RSE content varies significantly between schools, with no compulsory topics by the MOE. Students at girls schools are more likely to learn about consent and gender identity than those at co-ed schools. Sensitive topics, such as sexual identity and

human reproduction are taught later in education (ages 12-14) but are sometimes missed entirely.

3. Meeting Student Needs

Most students believe RSE is age-appropriate, but some topics (e.g. personal safety) should be introduced earlier, while others (e.g. human reproduction) might come too soon. Boys generally prefer learning topics later than girls, while rainbow community students want topics introduced earlier.

4. Parent and Whānau Expectations

One third of parents want changes to RSE content or delivery. Many support earlier education on safety and emotions but have divided opinions on teaching gender identity and sexual diversity. Faith and gender influence parent perspectives.

5. Schools Challenges

Schools face difficulties in consulting with communities on RSE, especially rural and high-Māori roll schools. Schools lack consistency in delivering RSE, and many primary school teachers often feel underprepared and stressed about teaching RSE topics.

Areas for Action according to ERO

1. Extend RSE to Senior Secondary Levels: to address gaps, particularly regarding increased risks from online content.
2. Ensure Equity in RSE Access: Provide consistent and comprehensive content nationwide, especially in diverse schools.
3. Strengthen Teacher Support and Resources: Equip teachers with resources and training to confidently deliver RSE.

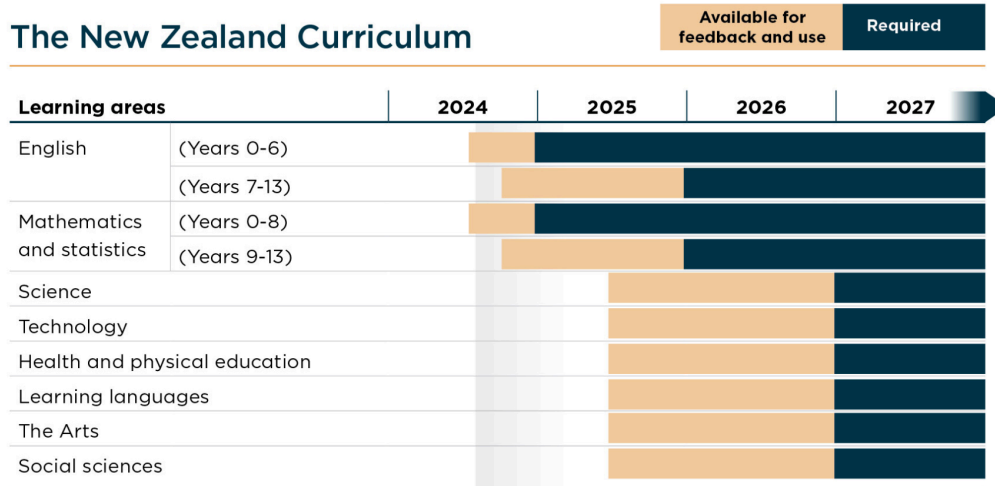
New Government, Changed Landscape

What's Next? - The Incoming Curriculum Refresh (New Zealand Government, 2024)

The new National, Act, NZF coalition government has proposed a New Zealand Curriculum Refresh - years 0 to 13 - from 2024 onwards for both the New Zealand Curriculum (NZC) and Te Marautanga o Aotearoa (Ministry of Education, 2024). Although the Minister Erica Stanford wrote a press release in December 2024 about the ERO report detailing the reasoning why RSE would get a refresh, it was already planned for one when she announced details of this whole curriculum refresh in June 2024 (New Zealand Government, 2024; Ministry of Education, 2024).

The Ministry of Education is developing updated content for English, Te Reo Rangatira, mathematics, statistics, and Pāngarau in collaboration with experts and

ERO to create a new curriculum that is “knowledge-rich and clear about what students need to understand, know and do in each year” (Ministry of Education, 2024). For Years 11-13, learning areas and wāhanga ako will be reorganised into distinct subjects for clearer alignment with NCEA standards and senior secondary programs. There will be opportunities for feedback and use of the new RSE from 2025 till 2026, before it is fully implemented in 2027 (see timeline below).



Comparative Need: A Literature Review of Existing Healthy Relationships Kaupapa for Rangatahi

Purpose of this section: To examine existing interventions, both locally and internationally, that promote healthy relationships for rangatahi. This section should identify best practices and evidence-based strategies & gaps or limitations in current interventions to inform new strategies.

International Literature and Useful Background Information (D’Cruz et al., 2023)

The Rainbow Violence Prevention Network (RVPN), is a national collective with not-for-profit social services and community groups who work directly with and for rainbow individuals across Aotearoa. Apart of the implementation of *Te Aorerekura*, the National Strategy for Eliminating Family and Sexual Violence was the establishment of *Te Puna Aonui*, an Interdepartmental Executive Board under the Public Service Act 2020 (Te Puna Aonui, 2025). This interdepartmental, collaborative approach led to ACC investing ~45 million dollars towards healthy consensual relationships kaupapa (ACC, 2021). RVPN received funding from *Te Puna Aonui* to establish a range of initiatives, including a respectful relationships program developed by RainbowYOUTH and InsideOUT Kōaro. The programme is called “Aro ki te Hā” and emerged from anecdotal evidence highlighting significant gaps in rainbow-specific education around healthy relationships and consent in schools. To address these gaps, RainbowYOUTH and InsideOUT Kōaro adopted a youth-led, participatory, co-design approach to design the intervention.

RainbowYOUTH and InsideOUT Kōaro developed a research report providing transparency into the background research used to inform the development of *Aro ki te Hā*. The report outlines the methodologies and community consultation report of *Aro ki te Hā*, but begins with a needs-analysis for IPA (intimate partner aggression) and a section on the global evidence base for rangatahi relationships kaupapa. This section “Evidence-Based Program Development” effectively synthesises an expansive body of research, offering an expansive overview of the current literature behind HRPs in Aotearoa. The researcher demonstrates a clear understanding of depth, objectivity, currency, authority, and purpose - allowing this summary to be only distilling this information even further to provide essential context for the state of HRPs in Aotearoa.

Summary of Evidence-Based Program Development (D’Cruz et al., 2023)

They found that global evidence underscored the significance of consistency in designing and delivering these types of kaupapa. Programs built on theoretical models tend to achieve better outcomes by providing more cohesive facilitation, consistent messaging, and more effective delivery in terms of timing and dosage. However, evidence also highlights the need to design these programs with diversity in mind to ensure inclusivity. Programs that fail to reflect the diverse experiences of indigenous, disabled, and marginalised rangatahi often result in disengagement and reduced effectiveness. They further explore how co-designing programs with target groups is recommended to ensure these programs are contextually relevant, using non-stigmatising approaches to address rangatahi realities.

Programs rooted in conservative messaging, such as promoting abstinence or traditional family structures, often fail to reduce sexual and physical violence in relationships. Instead, they reinforce harmful social norms tied to patriarchy, ableism, and misogyny. Effective programmes focus on empowering youth autonomy, fostering critical thinking, and equipping participants with skills to recognise and respond to harmful behaviours. Theoretical foundations such as the Duluth model (The Power and Control Wheel) are widely used but faces criticism for assuming men are the primary perpetrators of violence against women, ignores violence in same-sex marriages, can be overly confronting and having a limited focus of supporting long-term engagement for sustained impact.

The predominance of Eurocentric paradigms in evidence-based research limits the relevance of many HRPs in settler-colonial contexts like Aotearoa. As the next section reflects, the majority existing HRPs in Aotearoa are still formally unevaluated. Majority of the evidence which underpins the existing landscape of HRPs comes from overseas due to eurocentric conceptualisations of evidence being exclusive of indigenous and non-Pākehā research and knowledge. They further explore the relevance of the principles of manaakitanga, kaitiakitanga, and rangatiratanga as existing frameworks for fostering respectful relationships – but they are under-utilised in mainstream program design.

Conclusions are drawn here that many programs in Aotearoa lack inclusivity, particularly for rainbow (LGBTQIA+) communities, and evaluations often fail to account for their realities. While some programs, like *Mates & Dates*, advocate for cultural and gender diversity, their effectiveness hinges on facilitator competence, which varies widely in practice. Programs in Aotearoa rarely adopt anti-colonial, anti-racist, or queer perspectives, leaving significant gaps in addressing intersectional challenges. They also explored examples of new models of HRPs from Australia and Turtle Island (North America), who have a similar settler-colonial landscape and could help inform program design in Aotearoa but the kōrero here was not very expansive.

Existing Kaupapa in Aotearoa

Aro ki te Hā (InsideOUT Kōaro, 2023; D’Cruz et al., 2023)

Aro ki te Hā is a youth programme developed by InsideOUT Kōaro and RainbowYOUTH to support rainbow rangatahi (LGBTQ+ youth) in cultivating safe, respectful, and nurturing relationships with themselves and others. Launched in early 2023, the programme has received positive feedback, with all participants reporting improvements in their relationships.

The programme spans seven sessions, typically conducted as 2-hour workshops over seven weeks. Facilitators guide groups of rangatahi through core aspects of relationships including; establishing boundaries, effective communication, navigating conflict, accountability, seeking support and building stronger connections. They also offer various participation forms, such as online sessions, in-person programmes in select regions, and 2-day overnight wānanga ā marae. The programme encourages both individual participation and joining with friends, fostering new friendships and connections among participants. In addition to the sessions, Aro ki te Hā has developed a free reflective journal resource. The journal covers topics like connection, consent, communication, conflict, and community care, offering information, ideas, and exercises for personal reflection. This resource is accessible to all, regardless of participation in the group programme.

The development of Aro ki te Hā was informed by comprehensive research (summary can be found in the previous section) and community consultation, ensuring the programme addresses the specific needs of the rainbow community. The Aro ki te Hā methodology report, and a community consultation review, providing transparency and an evidence-based approach to the programmes development however, the programme remains unevaluated, leaving its long-term impact and effectiveness unclear. Without formal outcome data, it is difficult to assess how well the programme meets its objectives or addresses the diverse needs of rainbow youth across different delivery formats, such as online, in-person, and marae-based wānanga.

Mates and Dates (Duncan & Kingi, 2015; ACC, 2022)

Mates and Dates is a health education programme aimed at promoting healthy relationships and preventing sexual and dating violence among rangatahi. Developed by ACC, it is delivered to Years 9-13 in order to equip them with the skills and knowledge to navigate relationships safely and respectfully.

The programme consists of 5 hour-long sessions across 5 weeks per year level. It covers topics such as consent, healthy relationships, communication skills, and recognising harmful behaviours. Age-appropriate content is tailored to each year group with the goal to meet students' developmental needs and understanding with maturation of wahine and tane occurring at different age levels. Mates and Dates teaches rangatahi about the importance of fostering safe and respectful relationships by learning about how to identify and respond to unhealthy behaviours, support peers, and understand the impact of sexual and dating violence. It also addresses

bystander intervention emphasising the importance to act when witnessing harmful situations.

Trained facilitators deliver the sessions using interactive methods such as group discussions and role-playing scenarios. The programme aims to create a supportive environment where students feel comfortable discussing sensitive topics. Evaluations have shown that Mates and Dates improved attitudes towards rape and confidence in ability to recognise risky situations and inappropriate sexual behaviour and to seek help or support for self or others if needed (Duncan & Kingi, 2015). By attempting to address the root causes of relationship violence, Mates and Dates is a primary prevention model contributing to long-term societal change surrounding relationships.

However, the programme faced challenges with inconsistent implementation across schools, including varying delivery models and scheduling conflicts that limited participation (Duncan & Kingi, 2015). Facilitators lacked sufficient training in classroom management and struggled with engagement, affecting the overall effectiveness of the programme (Duncan & Kingi, 2015). Additionally, the programme did not adequately address the cultural needs of Māori, Pacific, and disabled students, nor was it sufficiently inclusive of diverse learning styles (Duncan & Kingi, 2015).

After operating nationally for over 7 years, Mates and Dates lost its funding in 2022. Primarily due to the proliferation of Te Aorerekura, the National Strategy to Prevent and Address Domestic Violence and Sexual Violence. The government's increased investment in improving systems for supporting rangatahi through Te Puna Aonui was prioritized (ACC, 2021; ACC, 2022). Additionally, feedback and evaluations of the program revealed that it had predominantly been delivered in higher-decile schools, which often have more affluent student populations. Furthermore, responses highlighted that Mates and Dates had engaged a disproportionate number of Pākehā students, raising concerns about its reach and accessibility for Māori, Pasifika, and other marginalized rangatahi (Haupt, 2022).

Attitude (Attitude, 2024)

Attitude, a flagship brand for The Youth Impact Foundation, is a youth education initiative in Aotearoa that delivers presentations to students from intermediate through to high school levels. Their presentations aim to equip young people with the knowledge and skills to navigate adolescence effectively. Delivered by engaging rangatahi, the sessions are designed to resonate with students, making serious topics accessible and relatable.

Attitude has a designed a few presentations designed for Year 9-10 which align with rangatahi relationships kaupapa including "Connected" which explores online friendships, safety and citizenship to help rangatahi reflect on how technology

influences their life, “Get a life” is designed to give rangatahi insight into their whānau dynamics and a “Sex and relationships” presentation which discusses sexuality and a decision-making guide. The “Building and maintaining healthy relationships” presentation is designed for Year 11-13 students, providing guidance on building and maintaining relationships, dealing with peer pressure, and coping with break-ups.

In addition to in-person presentation, Attitude offers online resources, including a podcast and digital resources aimed at building self-esteem and empowering rangatahi to make positive choices around vaping, hauora, and habits. Through these initiatives, Attitude equips young people with the knowledge and skills to navigate relationships and personal challenges, fostering resilience and well-being among New Zealand’s youth.

While Attitude has been widely delivered in schools across New Zealand, they have not yet undergone formal evaluation to measure their long-term effectiveness. This means there is limited evidence about their impact on changing behaviours or improving relationship outcomes for rangatahi. However, anecdotal feedback from educators and students is very positive, with testimonials highlighting the programmes relevance, engaging and ability to be vulnerable delivery, and the practical tools provided to navigate relationships.

Keep It Real Online (Department of Internal Affairs, 2024)

Keep it Real Online is a campaign led by the Department of Internal Affairs to protect tamariki and rangatahi from online harms like cyberbullying, porn, grooming, and misinformation. Developed by the creative agency Motion Sickness, the campaign focuses on empowering parents, caregivers and rangatahi to navigate online risks through education and practical tools.

Its key components include:

→ Parents and Caregivers

Launched in July 2020, ads on TV, radio, social media, and billboards highlighted managing online risks, The campaign reached 870,000 parents, with 68% exposed through advertising and many reporting it sparking safety conversations with their tamariki.

→ The Eggplant

A comedy-drama web series for teens (12-18) addressing online harms like sexting, bullying and grooming. Internationally recognised, it prompted 88% of surveyed parents to discuss digital safety with their children.

→ Inter-Yeti

A digital storybook for tamariki (5-11) which is narrated by Stan Walker, teaches online safety in a way which is engaging for tamariki. It prompted 92% of surveyed parents to have safety conversations with their kids.

The campaign achieved raising awareness of online harms, increasing website visits (115,620 visitors), and encouraging proactive online safety measures. Data from schools also indicated a decline in attempts to access pornography during the campaign.

Ngā Rangatahi Toa (Ngā Rangatahi Toa, 2016; Ngā Rangatahi Toa, 2022)

Ngā Rangatahi Toa (NRT) is a South Auckland-based creative youth development organisation that works with rangatahi who face challenges within the traditional school systems. NRT was established in 2009 to support rangatahi in alternative education (AE) and the Y-NEET category (Youth in No Education, Employment or Training) to “become themselves”. This initiative utilises creativity and cultural knowledge as tools for leadership and transition, guided by Paulo Freire’s pedagogy of love. Through a mixture of weekend wānanga, in-school programmes, peer workshops, and business-based mentoring, NRT attempts to foster self-determination, build social networks, and bridge the gap between rangatahi and wider society.

The programme tries to address the system inequities faced by Māori and Pasifika youth, who make up the majority of AE participants. By recognising their lived experiences and promoting self-representation through creative arts, NRT provides opportunities to reconnect with their cultural identities and contextualise their experiences through a strength-based approach by developing creative responses, like art installations, poetry, and theatre. Public events showcase the work of rangatahi sparking dialogue and cross-societal engagement in the hope that the “trickle-down” effect will build community resilience to the topics explored. A key indicator of NRT’s success is its 100% transition rate of alumni into tertiary education, mainstream schooling, or employment. This outcome reflects the impact of a culturally responsive and strengths-based approach that validates and extends rangatahi social capital (network of relationships).

The Light Project (The Light Project, 2024a; The Light Project, 2024b)

The Light Project is a national organisation established in 2017 focused on equipping an initiative designed to support rangatahi, parents, educators, and health professionals with tools and resources to navigate the challenges of online porn. Established to address the growing concerns about the accessibility of porn and its potential impacts on young minds, the project offers research-informed resources and workshops. It aims to let rangatahi adopt the skills to have open and informed conversations about healthy relationships, consent, and sexuality in a safe and non-judgmental manner. The Light Project uses strength-based approach by utilising existing talent through the likes of schools, community organisations, and health professionals to foster awareness and provides practical tools to build resilience in rangatahi navigating the complexities of modern sexuality.

In the Know

“In the Know” is a website launched in 2020, developed by The Light Project supported by SPARK Foundation and the Ministry of Social Development, to provide

accessible evidence and community-informed resources for rangatahi age 13+. The platform offers lots of practical advice around porn and sexualised content, including about porn addiction, online sexual relationships, violent sex education, nudes and making or selling nudes/ porn. Resource types include conversation guides, expert interviews and FAQs to empower rangatahi to find information, seek help or feel confident discussing sensitive topics surrounding porn delivered on an engaging website suited to rangatahi.

Loving for Life (Loving for Life, 2024)

Loving for Life is a Auckland-based Christian organisation offering age-appropriate, bicultural, and curriculum-aligned programmes that equip rangatahi and their whānau with knowledge and tools to navigate adolescence, relationships, and human sexuality. Their programmes are research-based and facilitated by accredited professionals who undergo ongoing professional development. All scientific and medical content is reviewed by their Medical Advisory Board. Loving for Life offers various programmes tailored to different age groups, fostering positive relationships and wellbeing:

- *Growing & Changing (Years 5–6, Ages 9–11)*
A 120-minute session designed to open communication between parents/caregivers and children. Delivered as separate Mother/Daughter and Father/Son sessions, it covers topics such as puberty, whānaungatanga (friendships), and aroha (love within whānau).
- *Toward Loving (Years 7–8, Ages 11–13)*
A 120-minute interactive session that introduces rangatahi to the physical and emotional changes of adolescence, fostering discussions on friendships, media use, and online safety.
- *Learning to Love (Years 7–8, Ages 11–13)*
A full-day programme with small group activities guiding rangatahi through the changes of adolescence, focusing on friendships, puberty, and hauora (well-being).
- *Choosing to Love (Years 9–10, Ages 13–15)*
Available as in-class sessions or a full-day retreat, this programme helps rangatahi explore topics like healthy relationships, media influence, consent, and the effects of pornography.
- *Healthy Loving (Years 10–11, Ages 14–16)*
Similar to *Choosing to Love*, this programme delves deeper into relationship dynamics, life goals, and fertility management, offering tailored content for boys and girls.
- *Loving Today (Years 11–13, Ages 15–18)*
Building on earlier modules, this workshop series explores healthy masculinity and femininity, respect and consent, relationship stages, and reproductive health management.

While the programmes receive positive testimonials from participants, they have not been formally evaluated, meaning their overall efficacy remains unknown. Loving for Life's programmes are designed to foster informed-decision-making, respect, and aroha, empowering rangatahi to build healthy, fulfilling relationships and navigate the challenges of adolescence.

Drawing Conclusions

Strengths of Existing Kaupapa

Primary Prevention: Programmes exemplify primary prevention efforts for relationship violence in Aotearoa by equipping rangatahi with tools to navigate relationships safely and respectfully in the future. By giving rangatahi the skills and capability to navigate relationships now, the prevention model includes proactive education around consent, respect, and healthy boundaries, which are fundamental to fostering safe and respectful interactions. These programmes also aim to challenge harmful social norms and attitudes, encourage bystander intervention, and provide pathways for help-seeking, ensuring that rangatahi are prepared to identify and address potential risks in relationships. Moreover, by focusing on early intervention and providing ongoing support, the prevention model contributes to breaking the cycle of violence before it can take root, promoting long-term societal change and healthier relationship dynamics across generations.

Secondary Prevention ("the trickle down effect"): Empowering rangatahi to actively engage in conversations about healthy relationships within their communities. This "trickle-down effect" occurs as rangatahi build the capability to lead discussions around consent, respect, and boundaries, effectively changing attitudes and shifting the narratives surrounding relationship violence in their own communities. By fostering open dialogue, rangatahi can become catalysts for transforming social norms within their circles, leading to long-term change.

Diverse Delivery: The interventions *Keep It Real Online* and *Attitude* use a combination of in-person workshops, online resources, and multimedia campaigns. This multifaceted approach enhances accessibility and caters to different learning preferences and contexts.

Culturally Responsive Approaches: *Ngā Rangatahi Toa*, *Loving for Life* and *Aro ki te hā* integrate mātauranga and tikanga Māori into their delivery, supporting rangatahi to reconnect with their identities and engage in kaupapa aligned with te ao Māori. Knowing that these are available in our communities in Aotearoa informs us that there will be incoming evidence for diversity in RSE but at this current point in time evaluation scarcity is still a limitation for more culturally responsive approaches.

Gaps and Limitations

Limited Intersectionality: While some programmes such as *Ngā Rangatahi Toa*, *Loving for Life* and *Aro ki te Hā* advocate for cultural and gender diversity, mainstream and others fail to adequately address the unique realities for Māori, Pasifika, rainbow, disabled and other rangatahi that come from marginalised intersectional backgrounds. We saw in *Aro ki te Hā's* Report that this also results in disengagement and reduced effectiveness for these groups.

Under Utilisation of Mātauranga Māori: Despite the richness we know exists within our tikanga, with specific reference to whanaungatanga, kaitiakitanga, manaakitanga, it is under utilised in mainstream HRPs. This reflects a lack of adherence to Te Tiriti o Waitangi, as mainstream approaches often fail to acknowledge the unique realities we spoke of above. As a result, this oversight not only perpetuates inequitable outcomes for Māori youth but also diminishes the potential effectiveness and impact of these programs.

Predominance of Eurocentric Models: A conclusion drawn by the *Aro ki te Hā Report* was that much of the evidence underpinning HRPs in Aotearoa is drawn from overseas studies, this is reflected in the Eurocentric models of these programs. *Ngā Rangatahi Toa* do a good job at incorporating Māori models of learning like *toi Māori* and *wānanga* but the majority of programs are delivered through traditional Westernised models of learning, with the exception of the creative mediums utilised in *In the Know*, *Keep it Real Online* and *Ngā Rangatahi Toa*.

Predominance of Westernised Conceptualisations of "Relationships": Similarly to the indicators of unhealthy relationships research, many healthy relationships programs, such as *Mates and Dates* and *Attitude*, often focus on immediate interpersonal dynamics and measurable outcomes like reducing physical harm. While valuable, this approach can limit understanding of broader relational harm, unlike how *mātauranga Māori* recognises the interconnectedness of every part of our biosphere. *Aro ki te Hā* and *Ngā Rangatahi Toa* begin addressing these gaps, with the latter taking a more holistic approach by reconnecting rangatahi with their cultural identity. However, most programs still operate within Western relational frameworks, which overlook intergenerational and spiritual dimensions central to a Māori worldview.

Prioritising Evaluation Planning - A Recommendation for Future Investments

Majority of these programs lack formal evaluations to measure true effectiveness. Although testimonials can provide us with some insight into what types of impact these programs are making in rangatahi lives, they can be biased, and without a backboneed evidence-base it is hard to draw conclusions about their methodologies or impacts on rangatahi relationship outcomes.

Building robust evaluation mechanisms into programme design can provide critical insights into what works and why. Furthermore, this evidence base will be essential for refining interventions and securing sustainable funding. In the true interests of our rangatahi, if further investment is made into HRP's or changing the RSE curriculum, evaluation planning and robust evaluation should be made a priority. This is vital to avoid repeating mistakes, such as *Mates and Dates*. Although it was perceived as effective due to its large-scale delivery, over ~7 years and the absence of comparable programmes, prior evaluations provided insufficient evidence to substantiate its impact, ultimately jeopardising its funding sustainability.

This does not mean that evaluation should be limited to Eurocentric frameworks; rather, it highlights the necessity of incorporating diverse approaches that reflect the unique cultural and contextual realities of Aotearoa, including kaupapa Māori methodologies. Quantitative data, such as measurable outcomes and statistical trends, combined with qualitative insights, such as lived experiences and community narratives, provide holistic understanding of an intervention's efficacy. The recommendation for future investments would be adopting an evaluation model that balances the two concepts for confirmation of efficacy.

Summary

This briefing paper provides a comprehensive overview of the current understanding and challenges surrounding unhealthy and healthy relationships for rangatahi in Whanganui, with specific focus on the structural and individual-level risk factors. Through a combination of epidemiological data, research insights, and analysis of contributory factors, this document highlights the critical issues affecting rangatahi relationships, including physical violence, bullying, mental health and more.

The upstream-downstream model of determinants of health is used to analyse the broader context, including colonisation, intergenerational trauma, and socioeconomic inequities, which all play a pivotal role in shaping rangatahi relationship dynamics. Midstream factors, such as exposure to unhealthy relationship models and access to education and support, also contribute to the issue, while downstream factors such as mental health challenges can exacerbate the problem.

The report examines gaps in the current educational system, particularly within Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE), and provides an overview of the evolving landscape of educational policy under the National, Act, NZF coalition government. Furthermore, it compares existing interventions, both locally and internationally, offering evidence-based strategies to promote healthy relationships for rangatahi and identify areas for future investment.

In conclusion, addressing unhealthy relationships among rangatahi requires a multi-faceted approach, encompassing cultural, structural, and educational reforms, along with the development of targeted interventions that are grounded in Māori cultural frameworks and values. The report also emphasizes the importance of prioritizing evaluation and planning for future investments in initiatives that support rangatahi in building and maintaining healthy relationships.

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