Whānau-based placements in Aotearoa: A braided river approach

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This article examines a bicultural approach to work-integrated learning (WIL) in Ōtautahi Christchurch, New Zealand, where health and wellbeing students undertook placements within their whānau (extended family). Developed in response to student need, this braided river model enabled students to apply support practice skills in relational settings—caring for tamariki (children), kaumātua (elders), or whānau hauā (family members living with disability). Reflective practice drew on Māori wellbeing frameworks and values (e.g., manaakitanga (kindness) and whānaungatanga (relationship building) within a bicultural pedagogical approach. Supervision followed national pastoral care guidelines through reflection logs, group sessions, and individual check-ins. Students navigated relational boundaries, ethical tensions, and self-care, with varying levels of integration. Findings suggest that whānau-based placements supported the development of emotional awareness, professional capability, and culturally grounded learning. The braided river metaphor reflects the model's fluidity and interconnection, highlighting its relevance for reconsidering WIL design through inclusive, relational practice.

Keywords: Bicultural practice; whānau-based placement; relational care; student wellbeing

In Aotearoa New Zealand, work-integrated learning (WIL) provides students with essential practice-based knowledge aligned with their qualification and professional aspirations (Ferns & Zegwaard, 2014). In parallel with placement, an academic staff member supports students to deepen their learning through reflective practice, cultivating self-awareness, managing work-related stressors, and developing principles of self-care (Chilvers et al., 2021; Gillett-Swan & Grant-Smith, 2018; Knapp & Drewery, 2025). This paper introduces a novel bicultural innovation in WIL; a whānau-based placement model, implemented in Semester 2, 2024, within the Certificate in Health and Wellbeing (NZ2992 Level 4) at Ara Institute of Canterbury (New Zealand Qualifications Authority [NZQA], 2015). Ara is located in the South Island of New Zealand.

Within the New Zealand context, professional education is shaped by bicultural commitments arising from Te Tiriti o Waitangi (1840) (Treaty of Waitangi), which establishes an enduring partnership between Māori—the Indigenous people of New Zealand—and the Crown (Hill, 2010). In this context, biculturalism refers specifically to Te Tiriti-based obligations rather than to New Zealand's broader multicultural population. Biculturalism in practice, however, is neither fixed nor uncontested. Contemporary scholarship emphasizes that working biculturally involves ongoing negotiation, relational accountability, and cultural humility rather than the acquisition of cultural "competence" (Glubb-Smith & Cherry, 2023; Ide & Beddoe, 2022). These considerations are particularly salient in health and wellbeing education, where graduates are expected to engage respectfully with Māori values, concepts, and models of care as part of professional practice.

As a non-Māori researcher and practitioner, I do not position this work as Kaupapa Māori (Māori-centered) research. Rather, the whānau-based placement model is informed by a bicultural educational approach that draws selectively on Māori wellbeing frameworks alongside Western pedagogical traditions. This positioning aligns with He Awa Whiria (the braided river), a framework that allows distinct knowledge systems to flow alongside one another without being conflated or positioned as

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equivalent (Macfarlane, 2023). The use of te reo (language) Māori concepts in this paper reflects the bicultural context of health and wellbeing education in New Zealand. These concepts are used as pedagogical and relational learning frameworks, rather than as claims to Indigenous epistemic authority or Kaupapa Māori (Māori-centered) research positioning, consistent with approaches used in other mainstream professional education contexts (Riini & Lyford, 2022).

For the purposes of this study, whānau (family) support work is defined as the intentional, relational provision of practical, emotional, and wellbeing-oriented support within family and community networks, undertaken in ways that are responsive, ethical, and attentive to power, boundaries, and care responsibilities. While the concept of whānau originates within Māori philosophy, in contemporary use, it is widely understood to encompass kinship and relational networks that extend beyond biological family, including close friendships, learning communities, church groups, and workplaces (Te Pou, 2025; Te Pou & Ministry of Health, 2021). Framing whānau support work in this way positions it as a legitimate site of applied learning, while recognizing the informal, private, and relational nature of much care work.

In this study, whānau-based placements initially emerged from necessity—particularly for students unable to engage in full-time external placements due to personal, health, or environmental constraints—but evolved into a purposeful pedagogical approach. Most students completed this placement alongside a shorter agency-based placement, enabling comparative reflection, feedback from a field mentor, and opportunities for skill transfer across contexts. The whānau-based model enabled students to intentionally apply health and wellbeing practice skills—such as empathetic listening, relational engagement, and culturally responsive care—within their own familial and community settings. Such skills are recognized as central to support work practice in New Zealand (Te Pou, 2025; Te Pou & Ministry of Health, 2021) and internationally, particularly in community-based wellbeing roles (Kids Mental Health, 2025).

Given that placements occurred within private whānau contexts, the standard WIL agreement was deliberately rescoped to accommodate this setting. As part of this process, students were required to seek explicit agreement from whānau members prior to commencing placement activities, ensuring whānau understood the student's learning role and the scope of the placement. Consent was understood as relational and ongoing rather than procedural, with whānau able to withdraw from the placement at any time without consequence. Students were supported to reflect on permission, boundaries, and ethical responsibility through supervision.

The braided river (He Awa Whiria) is used as a guiding metaphor and conceptual framework for this educational model, capturing the fluid and adaptive nature of learning across formal and informal contexts (Macfarlane, 2023). This metaphor holds particular resonance in the Canterbury region, where braided rivers traverse shifting terrain across the Canterbury Plains. Similarly, students navigate multiple relational contexts, ethical tensions, and wellbeing frameworks, interlacing personal experience with emerging professional identities. Importantly, the braided river approach signals a commitment to bicultural integrity: Māori and Western paradigms are understood as distinct yet interconnected knowledge streams, each retaining their own integrity while shaping learning at their points of encounter (Glubb-Smith & Cherry, 2023; Riini & Lyford, 2022).

Given that many students were already providing support within their whānau and communities, this placement model made visible forms of relational and emotional labor that are often undervalued or rendered informal within educational and professional systems (Malcolm, 2025). In this respect, the

project aligns with broader national concerns regarding wellbeing, equity, and the recognition of care work (Willis, 2024). Research consistently highlights the central role of families in providing emotional and material support, particularly for tamariki (children) and older adults (Cribb, 2009). At the same time, shifts in employment patterns and caregiving expectations have reduced the social visibility of such work (Cribb, 2009; Ockhuysen, 2020). Broader critiques of policy and data systems suggest that when unpaid and relational labor is systematically overlooked, it is rendered marginal within institutional definitions of work and value (Criado Perez, 2019). Whānau-based placements therefore represent a form of community-integrated learning that intersects with contemporary patterns of working from home and locally embedded care practices (Bissell et al., 2024; Rubila, 2025).

WHĀNAU-BASED WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING AND STUDENT WELLBEING

WIL has traditionally been framed around employability outcomes, with agency-based placements positioned as a bridge between academic study and professional practice (Martin et al., 2011). More recent scholarship, however, has called for a re-orientation of WIL toward student wellbeing as a central pedagogical concern, rather than a secondary or assumed benefit (Gillett-Swan & Grant-Smith, 2018). This shift reflects growing recognition of the emotional, cultural, and ethical dimensions of experiential learning, particularly in contexts where students navigate complex personal, familial, and community commitments alongside their studies.

Research suggests that students often prioritize WIL commitments over other areas of life, including paid employment, parenting responsibilities, friendships, and community engagement (Chilvers et al., 2021; Gillett-Swan & Grant-Smith, 2018). While such prioritization may support professional identity development, it can also introduce risks to student wellbeing if learning environments do not adequately account for these competing pressures. The whānau-based WIL initiative examined in this study responds to this concern by explicitly embedding wellbeing considerations into the design, delivery, and evaluation of placement experiences.

Approaches to student wellbeing and professional education in New Zealand are shaped by bicultural commitments arising from Te Tiriti o Waitangi (Treaty of Waitangi). Within health and wellbeing education, these commitments are reflected in expectations that graduates engage respectfully with Māori values, concepts, and models of care as part of professional practice (Glubb-Smith & Cherry, 2023; Ide & Beddoe, 2022).

Bicultural commitments are structurally embedded in the qualification design and graduate expectations that underpin vocational health and wellbeing education. The New Zealand Certificate in Health & Wellbeing (NZ2992) requires learners to engage with Māori models of wellbeing, tikanga (customs, values, and protocols), and culturally responsive support practices as part of preparing for roles that involve working alongside individuals, whānau, and communities in diverse settings (NZQA, 2015; Te Pou, 2025). Biculturalism within this qualification is therefore understood not as specialist cultural expertise, but as the development of relational capability, ethical awareness, and respect for Māori worldviews within everyday support work practice.

In this context, the whānau-based WIL model draws on Māori wellbeing values such as manaakitanga (kindness, hospitality) and whānaungatanga (relational connectedness) as they are taught within the NZ2992 Certificate in Health & Wellbeing program, situating these concepts as relational practice frameworks rather than as assertions of Indigenous authority. Whānaungatanga emphasizes respectful, familial-like relationships oriented toward supporting the wellbeing of others, while manaakitanga includes aroha (compassion, care), respect, and active listening as foundational practices

that sustain such relationships (Ministry of Education, 2025; Te Pou, 2025). Together, these values foreground the importance of relational care within health and wellbeing support work (Hoskins & Jones, 2022).

This approach aligns with the WIL wellbeing model proposed by Gillett-Swan & Grant-Smith (2018), which advocates for institutional responsibility in recognizing and managing risks to student welfare within placement learning. It is further informed by the Education (Pastoral Care of Tertiary and International Learners) Code of Practice 2021, which mandates a holistic framework for learner support that integrates wellbeing, engagement, and participation (Ministry of Education, 2021; NZQA, 2025). Rather than positioning wellbeing as an ancillary concern, these frameworks emphasize its foundational role in educational success.

Beyond institutional policy, scholarship consistently demonstrates that student mental health and wellbeing are closely linked to academic engagement, performance, and retention (Bartlett & Ross, 2022; Keesing-Styles, 2023). At the same time, resilience is increasingly conceptualized not solely as an individual trait, but as something shaped by educational environments that affirm belonging, agency, and relational support. Within this context, pedagogical approaches that recognize students' existing care responsibilities and community commitments may offer alternative pathways to meaningful learning, while also raising important ethical and supervisory considerations.

Broader critiques of policy and data systems also highlight how forms of informal and relational care work are frequently rendered invisible within formal definitions of work, productivity, and value. While earlier sociological research has demonstrated the centrality of family-based care to social wellbeing (Cribb, 2009), such work is often excluded from institutional measures of contribution and success. Criado Perez (2019) argues that when unpaid or relational labor is systematically underrepresented, the experiences and contributions of those performing such work are marginalized within institutional design and decision-making. Although not specific to educational settings, this analysis provides useful context for understanding why whānau-based support roles—described earlier as both commonplace and undervalued within students' lives (Malcolm, 2025)—may fall outside conventional placement models in WIL, despite their relevance to health and wellbeing practice. Recognizing such work as a legitimate site of learning therefore raises important questions about visibility, equity, and the boundaries of what counts as WIL.

The provision of pastoral care within tertiary education also has a longer historical lineage. Pickles' (2001) research on women academics in Anglo-Canada, Australia, and New Zealand documents how early educators assumed roles of care and advocacy for women students in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While such roles were often framed through maternalist discourses, they laid foundations for contemporary understandings of academic responsibility for student wellbeing. Today, these responsibilities are formalized through legislation and quality assurance mechanisms, requiring all tertiary institutions to engage actively in learner care (Ministry of Education, 2021).

The whānau-based WIL initiative examined in this study sits at the intersection of this historical trajectory, contemporary bicultural practice, and current policy frameworks. It aligns with national priorities to improve health, wellbeing, and educational outcomes (Tertiary Education Commission, 2018; Willis, 2024), while raising critical questions about how relational and community-based care work is recognized within WIL. Rather than presenting whānau-based placements as a replacement for conventional agency placements, the literature positions them as a complementary and contextually

responsive model that foregrounds wellbeing, relational learning, and ethical reflexivity within WIL practice.

Student feedback, gathered through an online survey with open-ended responses, indicated that participants valued the recognition of their existing support roles as sites of learning. Students reported increased confidence, reflective capacity, and awareness of ethical and relational boundaries when providing care within whānau settings. While the scope of student voice in this phase of the project is necessarily limited, examining the quality of learning within whānau-based placements is relevant to the health and wellbeing sector, fieldwork educators, and WIL practitioners seeking flexible and contextually responsive placement models (Venville et al., 2018). This study contributes to the WIL literature by exploring how bicultural principles and relational pedagogy can inform placement design, while raising critical questions about ethics, supervision, and equivalence in non-traditional practice settings.

METHODS: CAPTURING WELLBEING IN WHĀNAU-BASED WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING

Drawing on literature that positions student wellbeing as central to the quality of WIL experiences (Gillett-Swan & Grant-Smith, 2018), this study examined a whānau-based placement model implemented within the Certificate in Health and Wellbeing (Level 4, NZ2992) at Ara Institute of Canterbury. A mixed-methods design was employed to explore how students enacted support work within whānau contexts and how these experiences related to wellbeing, learning, and professional capability development.

The study was informed conceptually by Macfarlane's (2023) braided river framework, which shaped both the placement model and the research approach. Within the research design, the braided river metaphor functioned as an epistemic guide, supporting a bicultural educational orientation in which Māori and Western knowledge systems were understood as distinct yet interconnected, flowing alongside one another without being conflated or positioned as equivalent. This orientation influenced how learning activities, reflective practices, and interpretive decisions were approached, rather than treating the framework as a purely illustrative device. The framework also acknowledges the geographic and cultural significance of braided rivers within the Canterbury region, where Ara is located, and provided a means of conceptualizing the complexity, fluidity, and relational nature of student learning across multiple contexts.

Whereas conventional WIL research often emphasizes employability outcomes and institutional partnerships (Martin et al., 2011), this initiative foregrounded relational care, cultural responsiveness, and holistic wellbeing. These principles align with New Zealand's Education (Pastoral Care of Tertiary and International Learners) Code of Practice 2021, which requires tertiary institutions to adopt proactive and integrated approaches to learner wellbeing (Ministry of Education, 2021). The study explored how students applied support-work skills within whānau (extended family and relational) settings, and how these learning experiences were shaped through supervision, reflection, and institutional support.

Background to the Project

Of the 53 students enrolled in the program, nearly one third (n = 16) elected to undertake a whānau-based placement during Semester 2, 2024. In this study, whānau refers not only to immediate family but to extended relational networks grounded in care, reciprocity, and social connection (Durie, 1998; Ministry of Education, 2025). Prior to commencing placement, students were supported by the

WIL coordinator (and author of this paper) to adopt a reflective insider perspective, drawing on ethnographic sensibilities that encouraged attention to everyday practice and meaning-making (Richardson, 1990).

Students were guided to document their placement experiences in a Placement Workbook, recording what they did, why they acted in particular ways, and how values, skills, and ethical considerations shaped their practice. These entries functioned as learning narratives, emphasizing reflective engagement with support work activities rather than data generation for formal assessment purposes (Te Pou & Ministry of Health, 2021).

Given the familial and private contexts in which these placements occurred, regular one-to-one supervision was provided to support student learning, wellbeing, and boundary negotiation (Chilvers et al., 2021). Supervision was delivered by the WIL coordinator—who was also the researcher and co-designer of the whānau-based placement model—and by other academic staff within the Health & Wellbeing program at Ara. This shared approach ensured consistent pastoral oversight, reflective guidance, and culturally responsive support across the cohort. Supervision sessions emphasized reflective dialogue and relational support, shifting away from deficit-focused or problem-solving models toward an appreciative orientation that prioritized sustainability, safety, and ethical awareness. This approach shares affinities with participatory and relational practice traditions that emphasize collaboration and reflexivity, though the study does not claim formal participatory action research methodology (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2025).

Supervision was informed by the Māori values of whānaungatanga (relationship-building) and manaakitanga (kindness and hospitality), as these align with the relational aims of supervision within a bicultural educational context at Ara Institute of Canterbury (Ministry of Education, 2025; Te Pou, 2025). These values shaped the supervisory relationship between student and coordinator, supporting emotional safety, reflective learning, and cultural responsiveness. Student feedback indicated that supervision was valued as a space for emotional support, cultural affirmation, and guided reflection on practice, while also enabling the coordinator to refine WIL supervision approaches in non-traditional placement contexts.

Students were informed that the whānau-based placement model would be examined following graduation (March 2025) as part of a broader evaluation of its credibility within WIL. Within New Zealand, WIL in health and wellbeing education increasingly recognizes relational learning, cultural responsiveness, and community engagement as core pedagogical considerations, making this model a timely subject for inquiry.

Research Design and Ethics

The research design incorporated multiple qualitative data sources, including the author's reflective notes, informal discussions with internal and external stakeholders, and student responses to an online survey. Consistent with WIL evaluation literature, a systemic but proportionate approach to student feedback was adopted, with qualitative methods considered appropriate given the small cohort size and exploratory focus of the study (Venville et al., 2018).

Concepts associated with Māori ethics and relational practice informed the ethical orientation of the study—particularly attention to cultural safety, collective wellbeing, and relational ethics—while the research itself is positioned within a bicultural, rather than Kaupapa Māori (Māori-centered), research

design (Macfarlane, 2023). This distinction is important in ensuring methodological integrity and avoiding claims of Indigenous authority beyond the scope of the project.

Ethical approval was granted through Ara Institute of Canterbury's internal review process (Project 25007: *Understanding Student Whānau-Based Placement Experiences*). As part of this process, the author engaged with other WIL coordinators and professional staff through a series of talanoa sessions. These sessions were used as relational dialogue practices grounded in cultural humility, rather than as a Pasifika methodological claim. Talanoa is commonly understood as open, respectful dialogue informed by Pasifika values of storytelling, relationality, and collective understanding (Maniam, 2022), and is increasingly used in New Zealand educational contexts to support culturally responsive practice.

Consistent with the rescoped WIL agreement for private contexts, consent within whānau-based placements was approached as relational and negotiated rather than procedural. Students were required to seek explicit agreement from whānau prior to commencing placement activities, with consent understood as ongoing and with whānau able to withdraw from the placement at any time.

Informal, non-attributable conversations with experienced WIL practitioners and health and wellbeing educators, both internal and external to the institution, further informed the project. These discussions focused on feasibility rather than evaluation, particularly in relation to supervision requirements, ethical safeguards, and the comparability of whānau-based placements with established non-traditional placements, such as business placements within family-owned enterprises. The purpose of these conversations was not to generate data or stakeholder testimony, but to test the conceptual validity and professional credibility of a whānau-support placement model within existing WIL frameworks. Collectively, these perspectives supported the positioning of whānau-based placements as potentially credible WIL experiences, when appropriate structures of supervision and ethical oversight are in place and aligned with wellbeing models that recognize the home and community as central sites of care and relational support (Durie, 1998; Pulotu-Endemann, 2001).

The overall research design drew on best-practice principles in WIL evaluation, including attention to WIL processes (Venville et al., 2018), student wellbeing (Gillett-Swan & Grant-Smith, 2018), assessment credibility (Ferns & Zegwaard, 2014), the theory–practice nexus (Sunnemark et al., 2023), and the role of supervision in placement learning (Chilvers et al., 2021). The study acknowledges a key limitation; while whānau-based placements may offer credible learning opportunities, they do not resolve broader structural questions concerning students' capacity to study full-time while undertaking intensive caregiving responsibilities. This tension highlights the need for further research and institutional reflection, particularly regarding flexibility, study suspension options, and ethical responsibility.

Participant Selection

Following ethics approval in April 2025, all students who had completed a whānau-based placement in Semester 2, 2024 were invited to participate in an online survey. Sixteen students were eligible to participate. The survey was piloted with two participants to identify technical issues and ensure that questions generated relevant and meaningful responses (Cleave, 2021).

Survey Design and Structure

The online survey comprised 22 questions designed to explore student experiences of the whānau-based placement model through a bicultural wellbeing lens informed by Macfarlane's braided river framework (2023). The survey was structured to support both descriptive and reflective inquiry,

consistent with best-practice evaluation approaches within WIL (Venville et al., 2018). Items combined open-ended questions, multiple-choice responses, and Likert-scale statements to capture students' motivations, relational experiences, and perceptions of learning related to self-care, boundary awareness, emotional resilience, and theory-practice integration (Joshi et al., 2015).

The design of the survey was guided by three overarching evaluative questions:

1. What did students do during their whānau-based WIL placement?
2. What forms of support did students need while on placement?
3. How could Ara improve its support infrastructure for future cohorts?

These guiding questions align with established principles for WIL evaluation, which emphasize capturing both learning processes and the institutional conditions that support student success (Venville et al., 2018). They were supplemented by prompts exploring students' self-confidence, career aspirations, and overall wellbeing, reflecting national and sector-level priorities for learner development and graduate readiness (Knapp & Drewery, 2025; Universities New Zealand, 2025).

The survey instrument was organized into two sections informed by these guiding questions. Section One focused on placement experiences, values-based practice, and perceived learning outcomes related to students' activities and support needs during placement. Section Two collected demographic information to contextualize responses and examine how identity factors related to wellbeing, engagement, and support requirements.

Open-ended questions invited participants to reflect on motivations for selecting a whānau-based placement, relational responsibilities within the placement context, and the application of cultural values in practice. Example prompts included: "Why did you choose a whānau-support placement?" and "Describe how manaakitanga and whānaungatanga were expressed in your placement context." These questions were intentionally framed to elicit reflective narratives rather than evaluative judgements of placement effectiveness.

Structured items gathered categorical data related to placement context, client relationships, caregiving responsibilities, and identity markers. Likert-scale statements assessed levels of agreement with aspects of learning such as boundary awareness, self-care practices, emotional resilience, and theory-practice integration, using established guidance for attitude and perception measurement in educational research (Joshi et al., 2015).

Cultural Reflection and Demographic Context

Given that graduates of the Certificate in Health & Wellbeing are expected to demonstrate values-based and culturally responsive practice (Te Pou, 2025; Te Pou & Ministry of Health, 2021), the survey invited explicit reflection on whānaungatanga (relationship-building) and manaakitanga (kindness, hospitality) as foundational principles of relational and support work. Some students also drew on Te Whare Tapa Whā (a Māori holistic wellbeing model) to articulate holistic dimensions of wellbeing encompassing physical, emotional, spiritual, and whānau domains (Durie, 1998).

Demographic data collection was informed by Fuimaono Karl Pulotu-Endemann's Fonofale Model of Health, a Pacific framework that situates wellbeing within family, culture, and broader contextual influences (Pulotu-Endemann, 2001). This framework guided the selection of demographic items, which included age, gender, ethnicity, language spoken at home, and hauā (disability) status. Survey

design protocols followed established guidelines for inclusive and culturally responsive data collection (Allan, 2001; Ministry of Health, 2004; NCWIT, n.d.).

Together, these methods supported a culturally attuned and ethically grounded exploration of student experiences within a whānau-based WIL model, positioning wellbeing as integral—not peripheral—to placement learning and evaluation.

DEMOGRAPHIC FACTORS

Demographic data were interpreted through Pulotu-Endemann's Fonofale Model of Health, a holistic Pacific framework that conceptualizes wellbeing using the metaphor of a traditional Samoan fale (house). In this model, the foundation represents aiga (family), the roof symbolizes cultural values and beliefs, and the four pou (posts) reflect spiritual, physical, mental, and other dimensions of wellbeing, including factors such as gender, sexuality, and socioeconomic position. The fale is enclosed within a cocoon that acknowledges the influence of environment, time, and context (Pulotu-Endemann, 2001).

Widely used in New Zealand educational contexts, Fonofale supports culturally responsive interpretations of learner experience by foregrounding identity, relationships, and cultural context (Open Polytechnic of New Zealand, 2025). Applied here, the framework provides a lens for understanding how students' demographic characteristics intersect with wellbeing, engagement, and participation in whānau-based WIL placements. Rather than treating demographic variables as fixed descriptors, Fonofale enables analysis that attends to the relational and contextual dimensions shaping students' placement experiences.

Informed by this framework, the second section of the survey gathered demographic information to contextualize student responses and explore how identity factors may influence wellbeing and engagement. Items included age, gender, ethnicity, language spoken at home, and hauā (disability) status. These dimensions were selected to reflect the holistic orientation of Fonofale and to support analysis of wellbeing outcomes across diverse student profiles. For example, the question "How would you describe your ethnicity?" offered options for Māori iwi/hapū, Pacific Island groups, and open-text responses—recognizing the cultural, gendered, and linguistic dimensions that may shape placement experiences (Open Polytechnic of New Zealand, 2025; Pulotu-Endemann, 2001).

Survey design protocols were drawn from multiple sources to ensure methodological rigor and cultural relevance. Gender and ethnicity questions followed established guidelines from the National Science Foundation and Statistics New Zealand (Allan, 2001; NCWIT, n.d.), while age categories were adapted from SmartSurvey (2025) to reflect contemporary survey practice. Hauā- (disability) related items were based on protocols from the New Zealand Ministry of Health (2004), ensuring consistency with national standards for inclusive data collection. SurveyMonkey's design tools (SurveyMonkey, n.d.) enabled branching logic and response validation, enhancing usability and ensuring that open-ended reflections were contextually relevant. This supported the braided river approach by allowing diverse experiences and cultural perspectives to flow through the survey in responsive, relational ways.

Taken together, these demographic items provided a culturally attuned framework for interpreting student responses and identifying patterns in wellbeing, engagement, and values-based practice. The survey functioned as both a reflective tool and a mechanism for program enhancement. By inviting students to articulate their values, practices, and challenges, it reinforced the principle that wellbeing in WIL is not peripheral but foundational—particularly within bicultural and culturally responsive educational contexts informed by Māori wellbeing philosophies. By interweaving Fonofale into the

research methods, the study acknowledges the inclusion of Pasifika cultural and wellbeing values within a broader culturally responsive framework. While biculturalism in New Zealand is formally grounded in Te Tiriti o Waitangi (the Treaty of Waitangi) and the Māori–Crown relationship, the integration of Pasifika perspectives reflects the lived realities of diverse learners and the relational ethos of WIL practice (Hill, 2010).

DATA ANALYSIS APPROACH

Survey data were analyzed using an inductive thematic approach, appropriate for small-scale qualitative studies that seek to identify patterns in participant experience rather than produce generalizable findings. Open-ended responses were read multiple times and coded inductively, with emergent themes grouped into categories including motivations for selecting a whānau-based placement, relational dynamics, expressions of cultural values, and perceived impacts on wellbeing and learning. Particular attention was paid to how students described relational practices associated with manaakitanga (kindness, hospitality) and whānaungatanga (relationship-building) within their placement contexts.

Likert-scale items were used descriptively to gauge the strength of student agreement with statements related to theory-practice integration, boundary awareness, and self-care. These items supported triangulation with qualitative reflections, helping to identify areas of convergence across participants while remaining cautious about interpretation given the small sample size.

Demographic data were summarized descriptively to provide contextual insight into the cohort rather than to enable comparative or inferential analysis. Variables included age, gender, ethnicity, disability or chronic health status (hauā), and caregiving responsibilities. These factors were considered only insofar as they shaped the feasibility and nature of students' placement experiences.

FINDINGS

Defining Whānau-Based Placement

Whānau-based placements are a form of WIL in which students apply health and wellbeing practice skills within their own family or close relational networks. In this study, whānau-based placement learning emphasized intentional support work rather than incidental caregiving, with students drawing on both Māori and Western wellbeing frameworks introduced through the Certificate in Health & Wellbeing curriculum. Student activities included caregiving routines, tamariki-(child) focused support, emotional engagement, and structured reflection. These practices were informed by frameworks such as Te Whare Tapa Whā (a Māori holistic wellbeing model) (Durie, 1998; Mental Health Foundation, 2025), person-centered care (Te Pou, 2025), and reflective learning tools (Gibbs, 1988), which students used to make sense of relational care, emotional labor, and boundary management within everyday contexts.

Participant Context and Care Responsibilities

Of the 53 students enrolled in Semester 2, 2024, sixteen (30%) undertook a whānau-based placement. Six students completed the online survey, including two pilot participants, representing 11% of the total WIL cohort. All respondents identified as women, with 60% aged between 25–34 and 40% aged 35–44. This age profile is consistent with the adult learner demographic within New Zealand's tertiary education sector (Tertiary Education Commission, n.d.).

Ethnically, 60% of participants identified as Pākehā and 40% as Māori, representing a higher proportion of Māori students than is typically seen within New Zealand's Institute of Technology and Polytechnic (ITP) sector (Stats NZ, 2024). Māori students were therefore meaningfully represented within the respondent group. In addition, 20% of respondents reported living with hauā, a term commonly used in New Zealand to describe disability or lived experience of impairment (Ministry of Health, 2004). This proportion aligns with national disability statistics and reflects the intersectional realities often present within caregiving, health, and support-focused education (Stats NZ, 2025).

These contextual characteristics shaped students' placement decisions, particularly in relation to time availability, caregiving demands, and the need for flexible learning environments. Such pressures are well-documented in WIL and health-related education, where students—particularly women—frequently balance study with paid employment, family responsibilities, and emotional labor (Chilvers et al., 2021; Gillett-Swan & Grant-Smith, 2018).

For some participants, whānau-based placements enabled continuity of care while maintaining academic progression. One student explained, "I had been doing placement with an organization and finding it difficult to get the hours done with the sudden need one of my children had" (Student 1). Another noted that whānau support "gave me a way to achieve my studies while furthering my understanding of my own teen in need of support" (Student 2).

By foregrounding gender, ethnicity, disability, and caregiving responsibilities, this cohort illustrates how whānau-based placements may function as a culturally responsive and inclusive WIL model, particularly for Māori students, women with caring roles, and those navigating hauā alongside study.

Reasons for Choosing Whānau-Based Placement

Students selected whānau-based placements primarily for pragmatic reasons, including limited availability for external placements and a desire to align learning with existing caregiving roles. Four participants combined a whānau-based placement with an agency placement, while two focused exclusively on whānau support. One student stated, "It was a suitable option that allowed me to use my own experiences that related to my work experience requirements" (Student 6).

These decisions highlight how placement accessibility intersects with life circumstances, raising broader questions about equity and participation within traditional WIL models.

Relational Contexts and Practice Activities

Most students supported tamariki (children), often within parental or extended whānau roles. Others worked with elders, partners, or close friends. In one case, a student coordinated support across home and school contexts, describing the need to be "present" while implementing wellbeing strategies across settings.

Across placements, students emphasized intentionality. Support activities were framed as deliberate practice rather than habitual caregiving, with students reflecting on communication strategies, emotional regulation, boundary setting, and self-care.

Integrating Bicultural Practice Knowledge

All participants described engaging with bicultural practice knowledge during their placements. Te Whare Tapa Whā (a Māori holistic wellbeing model) was most frequently referenced, with some

students also integrating Western reflective tools and psychological frameworks. This synthesis was student-initiated and reflective rather than prescribed.

One student reflected: "I honestly use all of it without even thinking … this course has enabled me to put a structure around what it means to deal with people" (Student 3).

These reflections suggest that students were learning to navigate multiple frameworks in parallel, aligning with the braided river concept adopted in the program.

Manaakitanga (hospitality, kindness) and Whānaungatanga (relationship-building) in Skill Development

Students consistently identified manaakitanga (hospitality, kindness) and whānaungatanga (relationship-building) as foundational to their practice. These values shaped communication, emotional support, and relational engagement across whānau-based placements. For Pākehā students, applying these values contributed to new understandings of respectful, intentional, and relational care. For Māori students, manaakitanga and whānaungatanga were described as continuous, with existing ways of being rather than as newly acquired skills. In several cases, students' reflections also aligned with Pasifika values associated with the Fonofale Model of Health and wellbeing, which conceptualizes wellbeing as grounded in family, culture, and relational connectedness (Pulotu-Endemann, 2001). Although Pasifika frameworks were not always named explicitly, themes resonant with alofa (love and compassion), vā (relational space), and collective responsibility were evident in descriptions of mutual care, respect, and attentiveness to relational depth. These values were expressed through students' commitment to culturally attuned support within family and community contexts, rather than through formal application of the model itself.

Challenges, Growth, and Reflections

Students reported challenges related to confidence, emotional labor, and self-care. Reflective journaling and supervision were identified as critical supports. One student noted becoming "very strict on self-care" after recognizing its importance (Student 1), while another described significant personal growth despite initial self-doubt (Student 2).

Supervision was consistently valued as a space for reflection, boundary negotiation, and emotional support. Participants suggested that involvement from multiple supervisors could further strengthen learning.

DISCUSSION

Reconsidering WIL through Whānau Support

This study suggests that whānau-based placements can function as credible but bounded forms of WIL when supported by appropriate supervision and ethical oversight. Consistent with established definitions of WIL that emphasize the integration of theory and practice across diverse settings (Martin et al., 2011), whānau-based placements extend existing conversations about non-traditional and flexible placement models rather than displacing conventional agency-based approaches (Northlake Behavioral Health System, n.d.). Rather than replacing agency placements, whānau-based placements offer a complementary model that foregrounds relational learning, wellbeing, and accessibility for students with significant caregiving responsibilities.

At the same time, positioning the home as a site of learning raises critical questions for WIL practice, particularly in relation to supervision, emotional labor, and the visibility of care work. Broader scholarship has shown that informal and relational labor is frequently undervalued or excluded from institutional definitions of work and productivity (Criado Perez, 2019). While the findings of this study do not resolve these structural tensions, they highlight their relevance for WIL design and point to the need for ongoing ethical and pedagogical scrutiny when learning occurs within private and relational domains.

Bicultural Practice as Negotiated Learning

Students' engagement with Māori and Western frameworks reflects bicultural learning as a negotiated and situated practice rather than a unified or mastered competency, consistent with contemporary understandings of biculturalism in professional education as relational, provisional, and ethically attentive rather than definitive (Glubb-Smith & Cherry, 2023; Ide & Beddoe, 2022). The braided river approach (He Awa Whiria) provided a conceptual structure that enabled students to hold multiple frameworks in parallel without conflating them (Macfarlane, 2023). Importantly, while Māori values shaped learning, this project does not claim Kaupapa Māori (Māori-centered) outcomes; instead, students' reflections illustrate engagement and responsiveness within a bicultural educational context rather than assertions of cultural authority or transformation.

The findings indicate that students did more than apply course content mechanically; they integrated bicultural practice knowledge into their understanding of support work in ways that shaped everyday relational practice. The use of Te Whare Tapa Whā (a Māori holistic wellbeing model) (Durie, 1998), manaakitanga (hospitality, kindness), and whānaungatanga (relationship-building) influenced how students approached relationship-building, boundary awareness, and the fostering of hauora (wellbeing) within whānau contexts (Te Pou, 2025). This learning aligns with Macfarlane's (2023) articulation of braided knowledge systems, in which Mātauranga Māori (Māori knowledge) and Western knowledge streams remain distinct yet interconnected. Students described weaving together reflective tools (e.g., Gibbs, 1988), psychological concepts, and Indigenous wellbeing frameworks to support relational and ethical practice. One participant reported applying "knowledge of Te Whare Tapa Whā, the Recovery Star and Carl Jung's shadow work" alongside communication skills and open-ended questioning in their support practice (Student 2), illustrating how students navigated multiple knowledge traditions in parallel rather than relying on a single framework. This highlights how bicultural learning became embodied through practice rather than abstract knowledge acquisition.

Engagement in whānau-based placements also prompted reflection on self-care, emotional regulation, and confidence, reinforcing arguments that wellbeing must be central to WIL design rather than treated as incidental (Gillett-Swan & Grant-Smith, 2018). The relational intensity of whānau contexts amplified the need for reflective supervision and ethical attentiveness, particularly for students balancing study with caregiving responsibilities.

While the research design explicitly acknowledged Pasifika wellbeing perspectives through reference to the Fonofale model (Pulotu-Endemann, 2001), student reflections also revealed organic resonance with Pasifika values centered on family, spirituality, and relational care. These resonances did not displace bicultural foundations but instead enriched the learning environment by reflecting the lived realities of a diverse student cohort. In this way, Pasifika values operated alongside Māori and Western frameworks, supporting a more inclusive and relationally grounded understanding of wellbeing within WIL practice.

Wellbeing, Supervision, and Institutional Responsibility

Consistent with WIL wellbeing literature, supervision emerged as central to sustaining student wellbeing and learning. The relational nature of whānau-based placements intensified emotional engagement, making structured reflection essential. At the same time, the model raises questions about institutional responsibility when learning occurs within private relational spaces, including how emotional labor is recognized and supported.

These findings reinforce the importance of designing WIL models that are flexible yet ethically bounded, particularly for cohorts balancing study with caregiving and wellbeing demands.

CONCLUSION

Braiding Knowledge in Whānau-Based Work-Integrated Learning

This study explored the implementation of whānau-based placements as a contextually responsive model of WIL within a vocational health and wellbeing qualification in New Zealand. Developed in response to student need, this approach enabled learners to apply health and wellbeing practice skills within their own whānau and community settings, supported by structured supervision and aligned with the requirements of the Education (Pastoral Care of Tertiary and International Learners) Code of Practice 2021. The findings suggest that, when accompanied by appropriate ethical oversight and reflective support, whānau-based placements can operate as credible and bounded forms of WIL that complement, rather than replace, conventional agency-based placements.

Students engaged with bicultural practice knowledge introduced through the curriculum, drawing on frameworks such as Te Whare Tapa Whā (a Māori holistic wellbeing model) (Durie, 1998), manaakitanga (hospitality, kindness), and whānaungatanga (relationship-building) to guide relational support within whānau contexts (Te Pou, 2025). These values shaped students' approaches to communication, emotional support, and boundary awareness, and were reflected in reported gains in confidence, self-awareness, and ethical reflexivity. Importantly, this project does not claim Kaupapa Māori (Māori-centered) outcomes; rather, it illustrates how bicultural learning can be enacted as a negotiated, situated practice within mainstream health and wellbeing education.

While students recognized the importance of self-care, its application remained uneven, highlighting the need for clearer wellbeing frameworks when learning occurs within emotionally resonant and relational environments. Challenges relating to time pressure, self-doubt, and caregiving responsibilities underscore the importance of supervision, curriculum design, and institutional responsibility in supporting students whose learning intersects with private domains of care. These findings align with broader WIL scholarship that positions wellbeing as foundational to placement quality rather than peripheral (Gillett-Swan & Grant-Smith, 2018).

By making visible forms of relational and care-based work that are often rendered informal or undervalued, whānau-based placements prompt reflection on what counts as legitimate WIL. As wider scholarship has noted, informal and relational labor frequently falls outside institutional definitions of work and productivity (Criado Perez, 2019). While this study does not resolve these structural tensions, it demonstrates their relevance for WIL design and ethical decision-making.

Consistent with Macfarlane's (2023) braided river framework, the model described here supports learning that flows across Māori and Western knowledge systems while maintaining the integrity of

each. Student reflections also revealed resonance with Pasifika values associated with family, relational care, and holistic wellbeing, as articulated in the Fonofale model (Pulotu-Endemann, 2001). These perspectives did not displace bicultural foundations but enriched the learning environment by reflecting the lived realities of a diverse student cohort.

Taken together, the findings contribute to ongoing conversations about flexibility, equity, and ethical responsibility in WIL. For programs operating within culturally diverse and caregiving-intensive contexts, whānau-based placements may offer one pathway for supporting student engagement and wellbeing while maintaining academic and professional standards. While the model is context-specific and exploratory, it raises questions of relevance for educators and WIL practitioners who are seeking to design placement experiences that are relationally grounded, ethically attentive, and responsive to the realities of students' lives.

Suggestions For Future Research

Future research could build on this exploratory work by examining student learning in greater depth through ethically approved analysis of reflective workbooks, learning logs, or supervised practice portfolios, with particular attention to how students integrate wellbeing frameworks over time. Comparative studies that examine whānau-based placements alongside agency-based placements may further illuminate questions of equivalence, supervision, and assessment credibility within WIL. Additional research is also needed to examine how institutional policies, resourcing, and supervision practices can support relational and community-embedded placements while safeguarding learner and whānau wellbeing.

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DISCLOSURE OF THE USE OF GENERATIVE AI

Microsoft 365 Copilot was used during manuscript preparation to improve readability, clarify written expression, and support consistency in terminology across the manuscript. Its use was limited to language editing and copyediting functions. AI was not used to generate research ideas, collect or analyze data, interpret results, formulate conclusions, or produce original scholarly content. All intellectual content, interpretation, and final editorial decisions remain the responsibility of the author.

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