



Cultural classes earn positive report card for police

By Brett Davis, Media and Public Affairs Branch

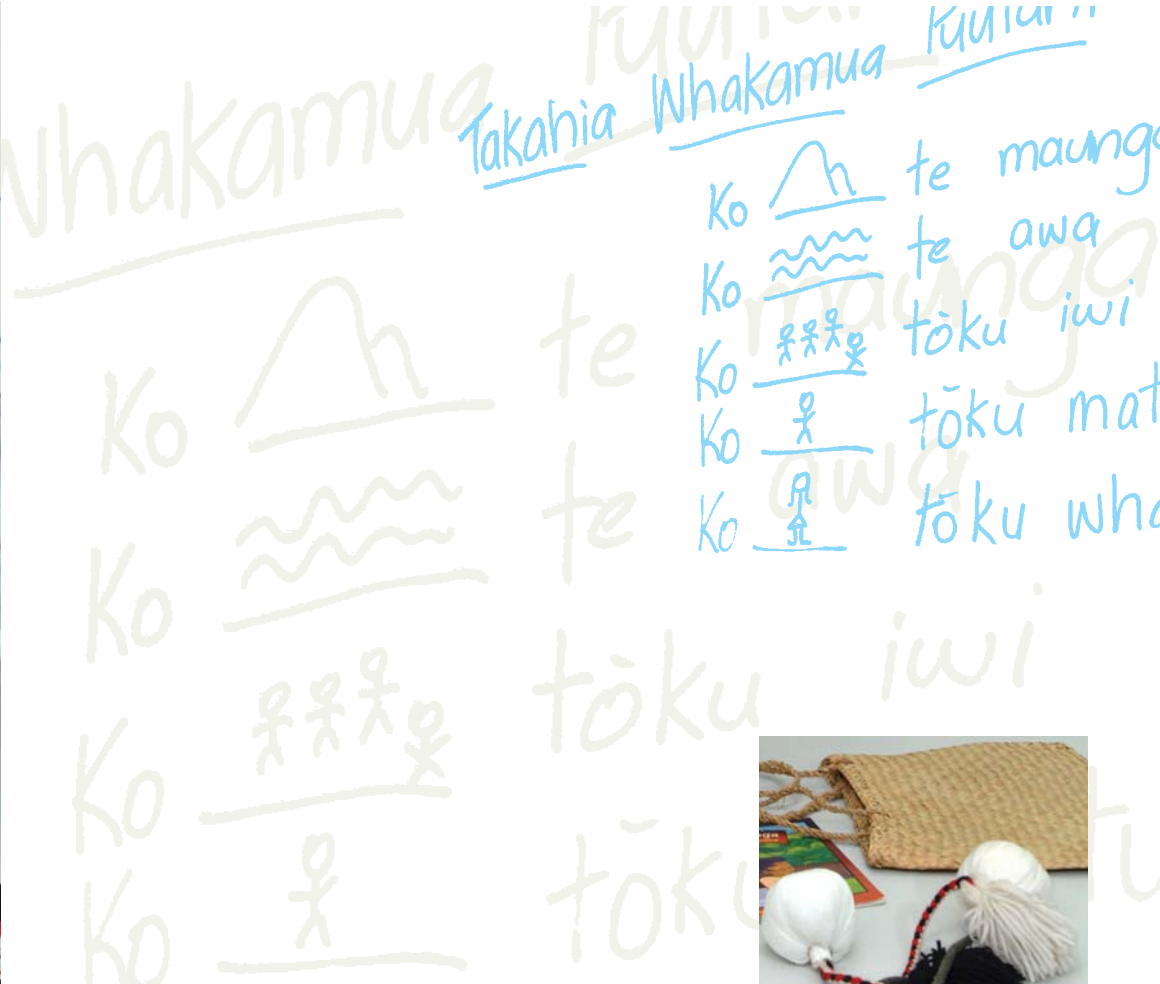


Constable Brenda Cookson in teaching mode.



Takahia Whakamua Ruitahi

Ko te maunga
 Ko te awa
 Ko tōku iwi
 Ko tōku mā
 Ko tōku wh



For the past two years Constable Brenda Cookson from Moorooka Police Station has been working with inmates at the Brisbane Youth Detention Centre, passing on the intricacies of Maori culture.

The program, called Takahia Whakamua Puutahi – literally meaning “stepping forward from the crossroads” – teaches participants the Maori language, traditional Maori values and cultural activities such as the Haka and other action songs.

“I love my culture and I think it has so much to offer,” Constable Cookson said. “There is a lot to share and the culture is very family orientated, very respectful.”

People from all different ethnic backgrounds take part in the course. In the last group there were inmates from Greek, Chinese and Islander

backgrounds, and even some staff members of the centre graduated the course.

“For the Maori kids, they are able to learn a lot more about their culture because some of them have really lost touch with it.

“This is important because you can’t begin your future until you know your past,” she said.

Constable Cookson is one of two tutors from Maori cultural organisation Te Kohanga Reo o te Whenua Hou to teach the 16-week course to inmates.

The aim is to use a cultural context to empower people through a sense of belonging and develop confidence and maturity. In turn it is hoped these traits can help young offenders cope with detention.

“Some of the kids do find it very difficult because they are away from their family and friends and they can feel lonely and isolated,

and they can lose those connections to other people and how to relate to them.”

The program is based on the principles of whanau (family grouping) based learning and tuakana teina (older members helping younger members).

The idea is to provide a trusting and respectful atmosphere where students can learn. Kaumatua, or Maori elders, are also invited to attend classes and workshops to impart their special knowledge.

It has proven to be one of the most popular programs at the Youth Detention Centre, with the number of people wanting to take part far exceeding the available places.

“The kids are different when they are in the course, very respectful,” Constable Cookson said.

The general duties officer said she did not initially tell the



members of the class she was a police officer, but when she did they were shocked.

“One boy who I had developed a good bond with was really shocked and he just walked out on the course, because the one person he felt comfortable with and trusted was a police officer and the whole attitude he had developed all his life was to be anti-cop.

“But he came back the next weekend and apologised and ended up completing the course.

“You really get another insight into what they are like when you take them out of a bad environment.

“They often were involved in drugs or alcohol or bad family situations, but you can see at heart they are really good kids.”