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Scholarship 2025

Health and Physical Education 93501

OUTSTANDING SCHOLARSHIP EXEMPLAR

Reframing the Youth Mental Health Crisis in Aotearoa: From Negative Liberty to Positive Wellbeing

1. Introduction

1.1. The crisis of youth wellbeing in Aotearoa

The wellbeing of rangatahi in Aotearoa is at a critical juncture. Recent evidence highlights an alarming increase in psychological distress among young people, with the *Overview of Youth Health 2024* reporting that nearly one in three secondary school students experience high or very high levels of distress, a figure that has steadily increased over the past decade.¹ Māori and Pacific rangatahi are disproportionately affected, reflecting long-standing inequities in the social determinants of health, including housing, education, income, and access to culturally responsive services.² National strategies, including the *Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy 2024–27* and the *Sport NZ Strategic Plan 2024–28*, have attempted to address these issues, yet their focus has largely been on harm reduction, such as reducing poverty, violence, and discrimination.³

However, crucially, while necessary, such a framework aligns with Isaiah Berlin's concept of 'negative liberty', which frames wellbeing in terms of freedom from constraints.⁴

¹Ministry of Health. (2024). *Overview of youth health 2024*

<https://www.health.govt.nz/system/files/2024-08/h2024036868-briefing-overview-of-youth-health.pdf>

² Statistics New Zealand. (2023). Child poverty statistics: Year ended June 2023. Stats NZ.

<https://www.stats.govt.nz/information-releases/child-poverty-statistics-year-ended-june-2023>

³ Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. (2024). *Child and youth wellbeing strategy 2024–27*. New Zealand Government.

<https://childyouthwellbeing.govt.nz/resources/child-and-youth-wellbeing-strategy-2024-27>

⁴ Berlin, I. (2017). Two concepts of liberty. In D. Miller (Ed.), *The liberty reader* (pp. 33–57). Routledge.

This report argues that the youth mental health crisis cannot be adequately addressed by negative liberty alone. Rather, it requires a shift towards positive liberty, which

Negative Liberty (freedom from...)	Positive Liberty (freedom to...)
- Freedom from poverty and material hardship (e.g., reducing child poverty through government strategies). - Freedom from discrimination and racism (e.g., anti-bullying and inclusion policies in schools). - Freedom from violence and unsafe environments (e.g., protective legislation, youth justice reforms).	- Freedom to explore identity and belonging (e.g., diverse representation in curriculum, kapa haka or Pasifika cultural groups). - Freedom to develop resilience through supportive stress (e.g., school challenges, sports participation). - Freedom to participate in culture, whānau, and community life (e.g., opportunities for leadership, access to creative and sporting activities).

⁵emphasises the freedom to explore, construct, and embody identities within supportive social and cultural contexts. Stress, often portrayed in policy as a pathology to be eliminated,

can also function as a catalyst for resilience and identity development when situated in environments that nurture rather than suppress rangatahi. Ultimately, wellbeing strategies must evolve to empower rangatahi not only to survive adversity but also to thrive as resilient, self-determining individuals with a strong sense of identity and belonging.

2. The Nature of the Challenge

2.1. Escalating distress and weakening resilience

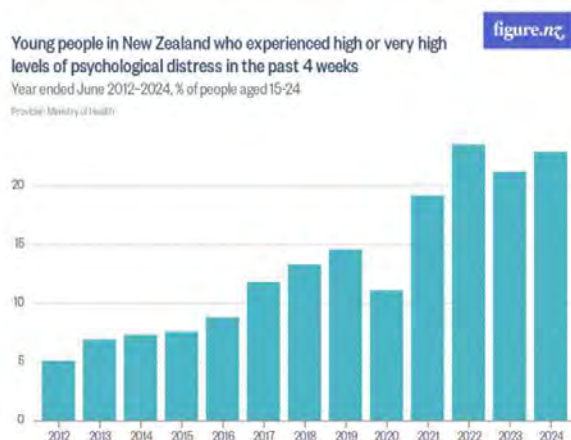
The scale of the youth mental health crisis is both significant and multifaceted. The *Overview of Youth Health 2024* identifies that psychological distress among adolescents has increased markedly since 2012, with females and Māori youth disproportionately represented in the highest levels of reported distress.⁶ Earlier findings from the Youth19 survey also showed that 23 per cent of secondary school students reported significant

⁵ Comparison table created using google drawings <https://docs.google.com/drawings>

⁶ Ministry of Health. (2024). Overview of youth health 2024 <https://www.health.govt.nz/system/files/2024-08/h2024036868-briefing-overview-of-youth-health.pdf>

depressive symptoms in 2019, compared to 13 per cent in 2012, illustrating a decade-long intensification of the issue.⁷ These increases represent not only a quantitative rise in distress but also a qualitative shift in the everyday experiences of rangatahi.

The *Active NZ Participation Report 2017–2023* further illustrates a decline in physical activity and sport participation among young people, particularly those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.⁸ Since participation in physical activity has well-documented protective effects for taha hinengaro (mental and emotional wellbeing), these trends reveal a concerning erosion of resilience factors that previously buffered rangatahi against distress. The loss of opportunities for social connection and belonging in sporting contexts also undermines taha whānau, further compounding vulnerability. Indeed, this compounding cycle entails a deterioration in overall psychological health:



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⁷ Fleming, T., Peiris-John, R., Crengle, S., Archer, D., Sutcliffe, K., Lewycka, S., & Clark, T. (2020). Youth19 Rangatahi Smart Survey, Initial Findings: Introduction and Methods. The Youth19 Research Group, The University of Auckland and Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand.

⁸ Sport New Zealand. (2023). Active NZ: Participation report 2017–2023. Sport NZ.

⁹ Source: Ministry of Health (2024) <https://figure.nz/chart/dJbnE3KDW64Tb5XP>

2.2. Structural influences: the socio-ecological lens

Understanding these outcomes requires consideration of broader influences.

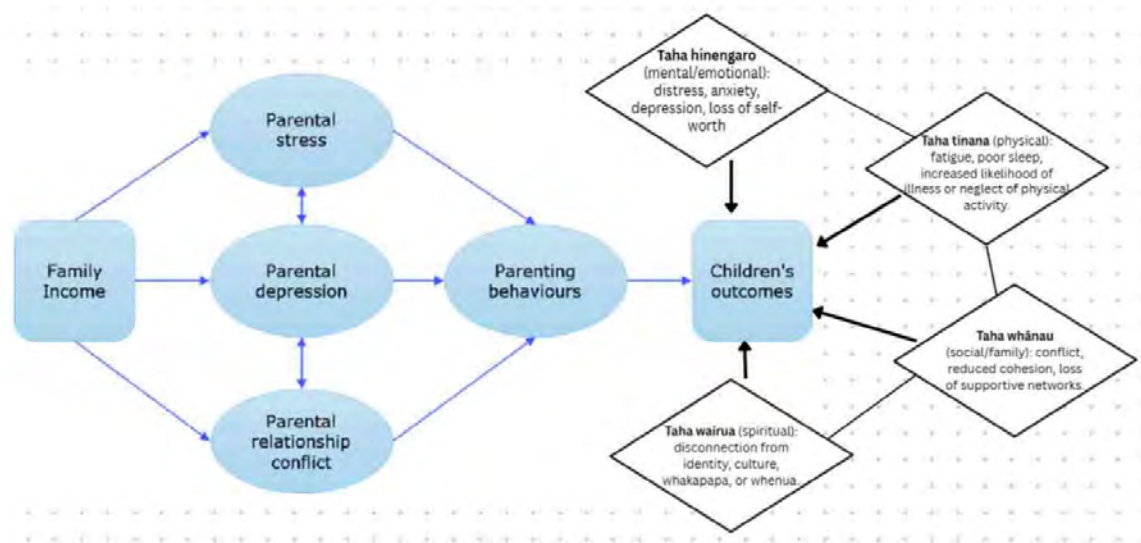
Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory highlights the interplay between micro-level environments, such as whānau and peers, and macro-level influences, including cultural norms and political systems.¹⁰ For instance, students who experience bullying or social exclusion at school often report higher levels of distress, yet these experiences are also shaped by wider cultural attitudes towards gender, ethnicity, and sexuality. This layered view underscores the importance of considering wellbeing as a product of multiple, interacting determinants rather than an individual issue.

Conger's Family Stress Model further clarifies how material hardship ripples across generations. Economic strain intensifies parental stress, undermines effective parenting practices, and elevates youth distress.¹¹ In Aotearoa, this model is particularly salient for Māori and Pacific whānau, who are overrepresented in lower income brackets. The stress of financial insecurity affects not only taha hinengaro but also taha whānau, straining family cohesion, and taha wairua, as disconnection from whenua and whakapapa is compounded by material deprivation.¹² The way in which economic hardship reverberates across all domains of hauora can be seen in the adapted family stress model below:

¹⁰ Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*. Harvard University Press.

¹¹ Conger, R. D., Ge, X., Elder, G. H., Lorenz, F. O., & Simons, R. L. (1994). Economic stress, coercive family process, and developmental problems of adolescents. *Child Development*, 65(2), 541–561.

¹² Ka'ai-Mahuta, R. (2011). The impact of colonisation on te reo Māori: A critical review of the state education system. *Te Kaharoa*, 4(1), 195–225.



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2.3. Reframing stress: pathology or catalyst for growth?

The *Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy 2024-27* acknowledges inequities but continues to prioritise harm reduction, such as eliminating child poverty and violence.¹⁴ This reflects negative liberty, prioritising freedom from external obstacles. However, as the Yerkes–Dodson law argues, stress can have a dual function: moderate levels encountered in supportive contexts can promote focus, motivation, and performance.¹⁵ Moreover, psychoanalyst Erik Erikson's model in his 'theory of psychosocial development' situates adolescence as the critical period of "identity versus role confusion", where challenges can actually catalyse exploration and the achievement of coherent identity.¹⁶ Hence, to frame all stress as inherently pathological is reductive and

¹³ Adapted Family Stress Model with hauora overlay. Sources: Conger et al. (1994); Durie (1994). Created using Canva <https://www.canva.com/>

¹⁴ Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. (2024). *Child and youth wellbeing strategy 2024–27*. New Zealand Government.

¹⁵ Yerkes, R. M., & Dodson, J. D. (1908). The relation of strength of stimulus to rapidity of habit formation. *Journal of Comparative Neurology and Psychology*, 18(5), 459–482.

¹⁶ Erikson, E. H. (1968). *Identity: Youth and crisis*. W. W. Norton & Company.

risks stripping rangatahi of opportunities for growth. During a year 11 Health lesson, stress management was presented through strategies such as sleeping eight hours and exercising regularly. While theoretically valid, these recommendations were met with scepticism from classmates, many of whom faced structural barriers that made such strategies impractical. For students balancing part-time employment, crowded households, and academic demands, the advice seemed disconnected from lived realities. In this way, wellbeing education risked reducing stress to an individualised issue rather than acknowledging its socio-economic and cultural determinants. In fact, as highlighted by Mason Durie's *Te Whare Tapa Whā* model, poor mental health destabilises the entire whare, while disconnection from cultural identity undermines taha wairua and belonging.¹⁷ Current policy framing does not sufficiently recognise these interconnections: rather, addressing distress requires not only reducing harm but enabling rangatahi to develop resilient identities, supported by positive liberty and mana motuhake (self-determination).

3. Perspectives

3.1. Psychological perspectives: adolescence, identity, and stress

Psychological theory provides a useful lens for understanding the developmental challenges rangatahi face. Erikson identified "identity versus role confusion" as the central psychosocial task of adolescence, where young people explore values, roles, and affiliations in order to establish coherent self-concepts.¹⁸ Developmental psychologist James Marcia extended this notion into four identity statuses: diffusion,

¹⁷ Durie, M. (1994). *Whaiora: Māori health development*. Oxford University Press.

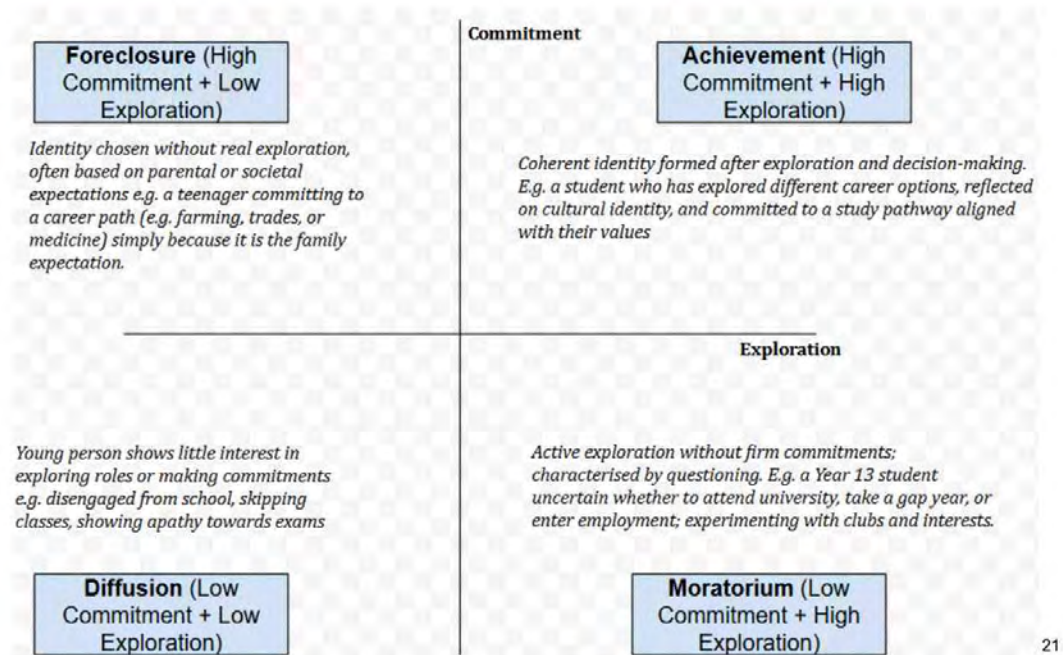
¹⁸ Erikson, E. H. (1968). *Identity: Youth and crisis*. W. W. Norton & Company.

foreclosure, moratorium, and achievement.¹⁹ Each status reflects an adolescent's level of commitment to an identity and their exploration of different options: diffusion involves no exploration and no commitment, while foreclosure is commitment without exploration. Moratorium is a period of active exploration without commitment, and identity achievement is the final stage, characterised by both exploration and commitment. In his framework, stress and uncertainty are not inherently detrimental but can act as catalysts for growth when youth are supported to progress from moratorium to achievement. In the New Zealand context, many rangatahi experience moratorium through the pressures of examinations, part-time work, and decisions about tertiary education or employment. The disruption of Covid-19 intensified this process, creating widespread uncertainty but also opportunities for reflection and resilience.²⁰ The

¹⁹ Marcia, J. E. (1966). Development and validation of ego-identity status. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 3(5), 551–558. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0023281>

²⁰ Fleming, T., Peiris-John, R., Crengle, S., Archer, D., Sutcliffe, K., Lewycka, S., & Clark, T. (2020). Youth19 Rangatahi Smart Survey, Initial Findings: Introduction and Methods. The Youth19 Research Group, The University of Auckland and Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand.

relevance of the theory to a NZ youth context is illustrated below:



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Stress arising from these challenges illustrates the aforementioned Yerkes-Dodson law, which proposes that moderate levels of stress enhance performance, whereas excessive stress leads to burnout and disengagement.²² The current mental health discourse, however, tends to categorise stress as inherently detrimental. This risks obscuring its developmental role and denying rangatahi the opportunity to develop coping strategies that can strengthen (mental and emotional) flexibility.

Nevertheless, there are limitations to these theories. Erikson and Marcia were writing within a Western framework that presumes linear identity development, with independence and self-assertion as endpoints. For Māori and Pacific youth, identity

²¹ Source: adapted from Marcia (1966). Created using Google Drawings

²² Yerkes, R. M., & Dodson, J. D. (1908). The relation of strength of stimulus to rapidity of habit formation. *Journal of Comparative Neurology and Psychology*, 18(5), 459–482.

may be more relational, grounded in whānau, hapū, iwi, or community.²³ In these cases, the assumption of a singular, individually “achieved” identity risks misrepresenting lived realities. In year 12, I noticed vast differences in how peers responded to external examination pressures. Some found assessment deadlines motivating, spurring them to organise their time and prioritise tasks. Others became overwhelmed and disengaged. These varied reactions highlight the principle that stress is not uniform: rather, context, resources, and cultural grounding all shape whether it becomes a pathway to resilience or a source of harm.

3.2. Philosophical Perspectives: liberty, autonomy, and injustice

Philosophical inquiry illuminates how youth wellbeing is framed and why current strategies may fall short. Isaiah Berlin’s distinction between negative liberty (freedom from) and positive liberty (freedom to) is directly applicable.²⁴ The *Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy 2024–27* emphasises freedom from poverty, harm, and discrimination. While these protections are necessary, they do not in themselves enable rangatahi to imagine and enact diverse identities. The absence of discrimination does not automatically confer the presence of affirmation. This, in turn, links to Miranda Fricker’s concept of ‘hermeneutical injustice’: when groups lack the shared concepts to make sense of their own experiences.²⁵ Queer youth, for example, may have their identities formally protected through anti-discrimination measures, but still lack the positive scripts that model what thriving queer lives can look like. Similarly, urban Māori

²³ Mila-Schaaf, K. (2010). Polycultural capital and the Pasifika second generation: Negotiating identities in diasporic spaces. PhD thesis, Massey University.

²⁴ Berlin, I. (2017). Two concepts of liberty. In D. Miller (Ed.), *The liberty reader* (pp. 33–57). Routledge.

²⁵ Fricker, M. (2007). *Epistemic injustice: Power and the ethics of knowing*. Oxford University Press.

disconnected from iwi or hapū may struggle to reconcile their lived identities with narrow policy representations of Māoritanga. Positive liberty, understood as mana motuhake (self-determination), becomes essential in overcoming these silences.

Philosophical critiques also extend to health discourse itself. Robert Crawford introduced the concept of “healthism” to describe the moralisation of health behaviours and the tendency to individualise responsibility.²⁶ In New Zealand, this is evident in health education lessons that advise more sleep, exercise, or mindfulness. Although such recommendations are valid, they overlook the systemic conditions, from overcrowded housing and economic hardship to unsafe neighbourhoods, that mitigate young people’s ability to act on this advice. Such perspectives obscure structural inequities and inadvertently reinforce stigma for those unable to comply.

These philosophical insights ergo sharpen critique of current strategies. By focusing narrowly on protection from harm and individual behaviour, policies risk failing to empower rangatahi to become authors of their own lives. They also risk reproducing injustices by leaving minority experiences underrepresented or misrepresented.

3.3. Māori and socioeconomic perspectives: holistic wellbeing and structural barriers

Māori frameworks conceptualise wellbeing as holistic and relational. Considering Mason Durie’s *Te Whare Tapa Whā* model, in the case of youth mental health, distress cannot

²⁶ Crawford, R. (1980). Healthism and the medicalization of everyday life. *International Journal of Health Services*, 10(3), 365–388. <https://doi.org/10.2190/3h2h-3xjn-3kay-g9ny>

be isolated from disconnection from whakapapa or from strained whānau relationships.²⁷ Similarly, *Te Pae Mahutonga* situates mauriora (secure cultural identity) as central to health promotion.^{28 29}

While government strategies acknowledge the importance of Māori culture, they often promote conventional markers of identity, such as te reo or marae participation. Yet for many urban Māori, identity is constructed in other ways, such as



community pride or blended cultural affiliations. Belinda Borell's research on Māori communities in South Auckland illustrates this complexity, where belonging is expressed through local identity rather than traditional markers.³⁰ A narrow policy lens risks marginalising these voices, undermining mana motuhake and perpetuating hermeneutical injustice.

Socioeconomic perspectives further highlight the structural barriers rangatahi face. French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's concept of capital explains how access to cultural, social, and economic resources shapes opportunities.³¹ For example, sport

²⁷ Durie, M. (1994). *Whaiora: Māori health development*. Oxford University Press.

²⁸ Durie, M. (1999). *Te Pae Mahutonga: A model for Māori health promotion*. Health Promotion Forum of New Zealand

²⁹ Image Source: Durie (1999)

³⁰ Borell, B. (2005). Living in the city ain't so bad: Cultural identity for young Māori in South Auckland. In J. Liu, T. McCreanor, T. McIntosh, & T. Teaiwa (Eds.), *New Zealand identities: Departures and destinations* (pp. 191–206). Victoria University Press.

³¹ Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education* (pp. 241–258). Greenwood.

participation, known to support taha hinengaro, is increasingly stratified by cost, with lower-income youth excluded from extracurricular opportunities that build networks and confidence. Again, Conger's Family Stress Model reinforces this point, demonstrating how economic hardship heightens parental stress, erodes family cohesion, and negatively impacts youth outcomes.³² Despite recent improvements in child poverty statistics,³³ many rangatahi continue to experience the psychosocial imprint of deprivation, which policies focused only on numbers fail to address. In fact, even in my own school, I have observed peers unable to participate in sports tournaments across New Zealand or cultural trips abroad due to financial barriers. While small in scale, these exclusions illustrate broader inequities: access to activities that build social and cultural capital is stratified by income, entrenching disadvantage across generations. Hence, it is clear to see the importance of systemic change. Individual behaviour change models cannot address structural inequities or cultural alienation. Effective strategies must therefore empower rangatahi with mana motuhake while simultaneously dismantling socioeconomic barriers.

4. The Ineffectiveness of Current Strategies

4.1. The Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy: equity through negative liberty

The *Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy 2024–27* positions equity as its central aim, emphasising reductions in poverty, violence, and discrimination.³⁴ These aims are critical, particularly for Māori and Pacific rangatahi who are disproportionately

³² Conger, R. D., Ge, X., Elder, G. H., Lorenz, F. O., & Simons, R. L. (1994). Economic stress, coercive family process, and developmental problems of adolescents. *Child Development*, 65(2), 541–561.

³³ Statistics New Zealand. (2023). *Child poverty statistics: Year ended June 2023*. Stats NZ.

³⁴ Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. (2024). *Child and youth wellbeing strategy 2024–27*. New Zealand Government.

represented in child poverty statistics: 13.4 % of all children (about 156,600) are estimated to live in material hardship, with nearly one in four Māori children and over one in three Pasifika children falling into this category.³⁵ However, the strategy is framed predominantly around 'negative liberty', the removal of obstacles that restrict wellbeing. While this reduces harm, it leaves underdeveloped the promotion of positive liberty: opportunities for rangatahi to envision and inhabit identities that reflect their values, cultures, and aspirations. By focusing narrowly on conventional markers, the strategy risks alienating Māori youth whose realities do not conform.

A further limitation is the strategy's handling of gender. While it acknowledges inequities facing women and girls, it fails to meaningfully address masculinity and the harmful effects of rigid gender norms. Toxic masculinity, associated with emotional suppression and violence, remains one of the most pressing gendered wellbeing challenges in Aotearoa.³⁶ Its absence in the strategy reflects a reluctance to engage with contested issues that nevertheless profoundly shape taha hinengaro and taha whānau.

4.2. Sport NZ Strategic Plan 2024-2028 and Active NZ: participation as prevention

The *Sport NZ Strategic Plan 2024–28* and *Active NZ* data frame physical activity as a key protective factor for youth wellbeing.³⁷ Participation in sport and recreation is linked to enhanced resilience, social connection, and belonging. These are important contributions, yet their implementation often reproduces inequities. Data from *Active NZ*

³⁵ Office of the Auditor-General. (2025). *Child poverty: Our 2025 monitoring report on reducing child poverty*. Office of the Auditor-General | Tumuaki o te Mana Arotake.
<https://oag.parliament.nz/2025/child-poverty/overview.htm>

³⁶ Umbrella. "What being masculine really means for men's mental health in New Zealand social norms." Umbrella NZ.

³⁷ Sport New Zealand. (2024). *Strategic plan 2024–2028*. Sport NZ.

shows declining participation among low-income and Māori youth, illustrating that current initiatives are not reaching those who might benefit most.³⁸

The strategy has sought to expand opportunities through school-based initiatives and community partnerships. However, these often privilege those already engaged in sport. At my sister's school, she described how the new equipment funded through a Sport NZ programme was quickly adopted by confident athletes, while less active students remained on the margins. This mirrors national patterns, where interventions can inadvertently widen rather than close participation gaps.

Another shortcoming is the narrow conceptualisation of activity. Sport NZ tends to valorise structured, competitive sport, reflecting Pākehā traditions, while undervaluing informal or culturally specific forms of movement such as kapa haka, waka ama, or cultural dance.³⁹ This risks excluding forms of activity that are more culturally resonant and may provide deeper benefits to taha wairua and taha whānau. By treating participation as primarily physical, the strategy underestimates its potential as a vehicle for identity exploration and positive liberty.

4.3. Fragmentation and the deficit paradigm

Taken together, these current strategies reveal two overarching limitations. First, they are fragmented, addressing separate domains (poverty, health data, physical activity) without integration. This siloed approach fails to capture the interconnectedness of hauora. For example, while the *Child and Youth Strategy* focuses on poverty, and Sport

³⁸ Sport New Zealand. (2023). *Active NZ: Participation report 2017–2023*. Sport NZ.

³⁹ Hokowhitu, B. (2004). Tackling Māori masculinity: A colonial genealogy of savagery and sport. *The Contemporary Pacific*, 16(2), 259–284.

NZ on physical activity, neither fully accounts for how economic stress limits participation in sport, nor how cultural identity mediates resilience. Second, they remain largely deficit-focused. Youth are positioned as vulnerable populations to be protected rather than as active agents capable of resilience and creativity. Positive liberty, the freedom to imagine and enact diverse identities, is conspicuously underdeveloped. Without this, the strategies risk perpetuating a cycle of harm reduction rather than enabling flourishing.

5. Future Solutions and Health Promotion

5.1. Reorienting towards holistic and culturally grounded wellbeing

Future solutions to the youth mental health crisis in Aotearoa must begin with a reorientation away from fragmented harm-reduction approaches and towards holistic, culturally grounded models of flourishing. Mason Durie's *Te Pae Mahutonga* offers a compelling framework: its four central stars - mauriora (cultural identity), waiora (physical environment), toiora (healthy lifestyles), and te oranga (participation in society) - capture the interconnected conditions for wellbeing.⁴⁰ This contrasts with current strategies, which address issues such as poverty, violence, or participation in isolation.

When compared to global wellbeing frameworks, the strength of *Te Pae Mahutonga* becomes clearer. The World Health Organisation identifies social determinants such as income, education, and housing as key to health outcomes.⁴¹ The OECD's "Beyond

⁴⁰ Durie, M. (1999). *Te Pae Mahutonga: A model for Māori health promotion*. Health Promotion Forum of New Zealand.

⁴¹ World Health Organisation. (2008). *Closing the gap in a generation: Health equity through action on the social determinants of health*. WHO.

GDP" initiative similarly attempts to measure wellbeing holistically, including life satisfaction, environmental quality, and social connections.⁴² However, neither captures the centrality of cultural identity and spirituality that *Te Pae Mahutonga* embeds in mauriora and taha wairua. This makes Māori frameworks uniquely suited for Aotearoa, where disconnection from identity is a defining driver of rangatahi distress. Policy in practise, however, has tended to invoke these frameworks symbolically rather than structurally. For example, the *Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy* acknowledges the Treaty of Waitangi and Māori worldviews, but implementation has focused on reo and tikanga initiatives without fully addressing urban Māori identities or systemic racism. Embedding *Te Pae Mahutonga* structurally would mean that all policy is assessed not just against poverty or safety outcomes, but also against whether it strengthens mauriora, mana motuhake, and collective participation.

5.2. Stress reframed: neuroscience, resilience, and identity

Reframing stress as both a risk and an opportunity is central to future solutions. Neuroscience research demonstrates that adolescence is a period of heightened plasticity in the brain's prefrontal cortex and limbic system, making young people particularly sensitive to stress.⁴³ Prolonged, toxic stress elevates cortisol levels, impairing memory and emotional regulation, but short-term stress can strengthen neural pathways associated with learning and adaptation.⁴⁴ This biological evidence supports the aforementioned Yerkes–Dodson law, which suggests that moderate stress optimises

⁴² OECD. (2019). *Beyond GDP: Measuring what counts for economic and social performance*. OECD Publishing.

⁴³ Casey, B. J., Getz, S., & Galvan, A. (2008). The adolescent brain. *Developmental Review*, 28(1), 62–77.

⁴⁴ Lupien, S. J., McEwen, B. S., Gunnar, M. R., & Heim, C. (2009). Effects of stress throughout the lifespan on the brain, behaviour and cognition. *Nature Reviews Neuroscience*, 10(6), 434–445.

performance.⁴⁵ This biological backing of the law can be elucidated by the following

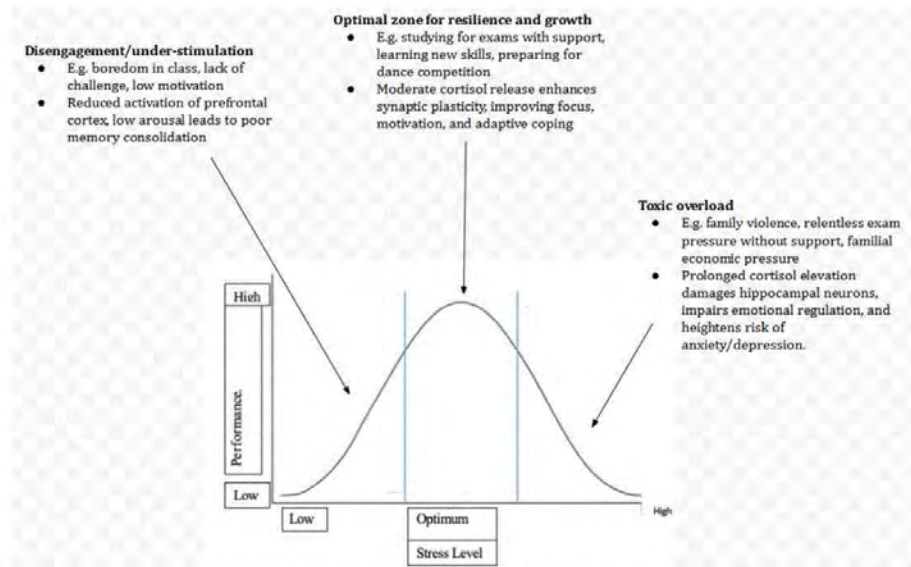


diagram:

In New Zealand, the problem is that stress is largely treated as a symptom to be minimised rather than a process to be managed. School wellbeing programmes emphasise mindfulness or time management but rarely encourage rangatahi to reflect critically on the meaning of stress in their lives. By contrast, resilience psychology positions stress as a normal developmental experience that can build coping strategies.⁴⁷ Key to this is whether rangatahi perceive stress as a threat or a challenge, a distinction shaped by cultural frameworks, social supports, and access to resources. Future interventions, therefore, should focus on cultivating “stress mindsets” that encourage adaptive interpretations. This could involve integrating reflective practices into curricula, where students consider how challenges, from exams to cultural

⁴⁵ Yerkes, R. M., & Dodson, J. D. (1908). The relation of strength of stimulus to rapidity of habit formation. *Journal of Comparative Neurology and Psychology*, 18(5), 459–482.

⁴⁶ Annotations added to Yerkes-Dodson Curve using Google Drawings

⁴⁷ Yeager, D. S., & Dweck, C. S. (2012). Mindsets that promote resilience: When students believe that personal characteristics can be developed. *Educational Psychologist*, 47(4), 302–314.

responsibilities, shape identity and values. It also required teachers to model vulnerability and resilience themselves. For example, a teacher sharing how they navigated personal stress can legitimise open discussion and reduce stigma. In this way, schools can become environments where stress is not only managed but harnessed for growth.

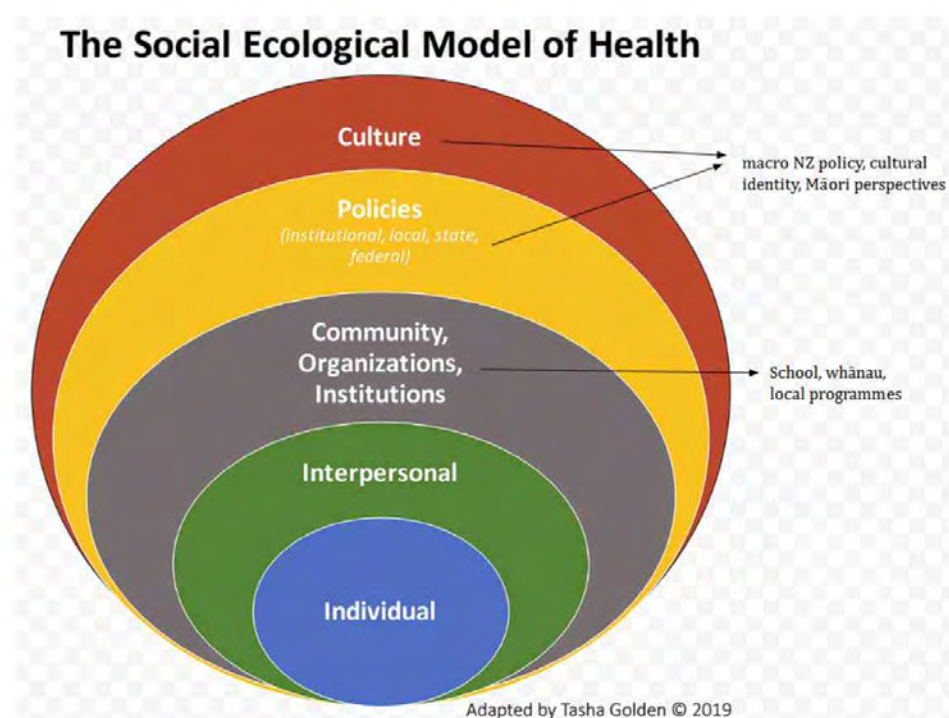
5.3. Socio-ecological and whānau-centred solutions

Because rangatahi mental health is influenced at multiple levels, solutions must also consider socio-ecological aspects. American psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner's 'Ecological Systems' model highlights how individual outcomes are shaped by nested systems: family, school, community, and wider society.⁴⁸ Current strategies often target one level at a time, but youth resilience requires alignment across systems. At a micro level, whānau ora initiatives have shown promise. Ngā Tini Whetū, a collaborative programme integrating housing, education, and health support, has reduced stress for tamariki and rangatahi by addressing structural barriers.⁴⁹ Scaling up such initiatives could provide holistic support to families, reducing the socioeconomic stressors that flow through to youth outcomes. At a meso level, schools must become hubs for wellbeing, not just education, integrating texts, discussions, and projects to explore taha hinengaro, taha wairua, and taha whānau alongside academic content. In fact, beyond classrooms, structural support (such as subsidising extracurricular costs or providing transport) would reduce inequities in participation. Such initiatives disrupt the way

⁴⁸ Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*. Harvard University Press.

⁴⁹ Whānau Ora Commissioning Agency. (2021). *Ngā Tini Whetū: Integrated whānau-centred initiative*. Whānau Ora Commissioning Agency.

cultural and social capital, as described by Bourdieu, stratifies opportunities.⁵⁰ Finally, at the macro level, community partnerships are critical. Sport NZ could expand beyond mainstream sports to elevate culturally resonant forms of activity - not just kapa haka and Pacific dance, but possibly also aspects from Indian or Chinese folk dance - as legitimate avenues for wellbeing.⁵¹ Funding diverse arts, cultural festivals, and youth-led initiatives would affirm identity, provide belonging, and counter stigma. Ultimately, New Zealand should strive toward policy that addresses the interconnectedness of these different 'levels' of socio-ecological policy, as seen in Tasha Golden's 'Socio-Ecological Model of Health':



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⁵⁰ Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education* (pp. 241–258). Greenwood.

⁵¹ Hokowhitu, B. (2004). Tackling Māori masculinity: A colonial genealogy of savagery and sport. *The Contemporary Pacific*, 16(2), 259–284.

⁵² Golden, T. (2019). *The Social Ecological Model of Health* [Diagram]. Adapted from original work by Tasha Golden. Retrieved from Mass Cultural Council blog. Annotations done using Google Drawings

5.4. Reimagining education: dialogical pedagogy and youth agency

Education is a critical site for reimagining youth mental health promotion. Currently, Health classes are dominated by a “banking model” in which teachers deposit information (often generic strategies like ‘get more sleep’) into passive students. Brazilian philosopher Paulo Freire argues that this type of transfer of education is dehumanising, arguing instead for dialogical pedagogy in which learners and teachers engage in shared exploration.⁵³ For rangatahi, this means creating spaces where identity, stress, and wellbeing are openly discussed rather than presented as checklists. For instance, classroom dialogues about gender could unpack harmful norms, providing boys with opportunities to redefine masculinity beyond stoicism. Similarly, discussions of familiar pieces of literature, art, or history could become entry points into conversations about taha hinengaro and taha wairua. These organic engagements are more effective at cultivating resilience than isolated wellbeing modules. In one of my English classes last year, during a discussion about masculinity in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, some students began sharing personal reflections on gender expectations. This unplanned dialogue provoked more genuine engagement with wellbeing than most of our other lessons, and definitely more so than our usual structured Health lessons. It demonstrated how curricula outside Health can play a vital role in promoting hauora, provided teachers are willing to facilitate such talks. In order to embed this approach, teacher training must expand to include cultural competency and dialogical facilitation skills. Professional development should prioritise enabling teachers to weave wellbeing into diverse subject areas, ensuring that mental health is not isolated but integrated across the curriculum.

⁵³ Freire, P. (1972). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Penguin.

5.5. Policy reform and youth voice: embedding positive liberty

Embedding youth voice in policy is not a peripheral option but a rights-based obligation. Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child affirms the right of young people to be heard in matters affecting them.⁵⁴ The 'Lundy model of child participation' translates this into four requirements: Space, Voice, Audience, and Influence.⁵⁵ These criteria highlight that participation is meaningful only when youth are given safe opportunities to speak, are listened to by decision-makers, and see their views influence outcomes. Hence, systemic reform is needed to embed positive liberty and authentic youth voice at the centre of policy. Current strategies consult youth but often fail to share decision-making power. This creates the illusion of participation without shifting authority. Future models must move to co-design and co-decision, where rangatahi are involved in shaping programmes and policies that affect them. For example, VOYCE - Whakarongo Mai, an organisation established with care-experienced young people, demonstrates how rangatahi can govern and advocate effectively when structures empower them.⁵⁶

Policy reform should operate across three levels. At the service level, mental health providers could adopt co-production, where young people contribute to designing services and outcome measures.⁵⁷ At the school and community level, participatory budgeting offers a mechanism for youth to allocate wellbeing funds, making voice

⁵⁴ UNCRC. (1989). *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*. United Nations.

⁵⁵ Lundy, L. (2007). Voice is not enough: Conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. *British Educational Research Journal*, 33(6), 927–942.

⁵⁶ VOYCE – Whakarongo Mai. (2023). *About us*. <https://www.voyce.org.nz/>

⁵⁷ NHS England. (2017). *Co-production: definition and principles*. NHS England.

consequential. In Boston, for example, “Youth Lead the Change” enabled young people to direct millions of dollars in city spending.⁵⁸ Finally, at the national level, youth should be embedded in governance structures: for instance, seats on mental health commissioning boards or statutory youth co-design panels for new initiatives.

Safeguards are essential to prevent tokenism or inequity. Participation must be resourced, with stipends, transport, and culturally safe practices so that marginalised youth can engage. Māori data sovereignty principles must govern Māori youth data, ensuring rangatiratanga over information that shapes policy.⁵⁹ Without these supports, participation risks reinforcing the very inequalities it aims to address.

For example, in Finland, youth wellbeing is integrated into education policy through flexible curricula, reduced testing, and high trust in teachers.⁶⁰ In Iceland, the “Youth in Iceland” model reduced substance use by involving parents, schools, and communities in collaborative agreements.⁶¹ Both examples demonstrate how systemic reform, grounded in youth voice and socio-ecological thinking, can yield measurable improvements. In Finland, youth wellbeing is integrated into education policy through flexible curricula, reduced testing, and high trust in teachers.⁶² In Iceland, the “Youth in Iceland” model reduced substance use by involving parents, schools, and communities in collaborative agreements.⁶³ Both examples demonstrate how systemic reform,

⁵⁸ ICMA. (2018). *Youth lead the change: Participatory budgeting in Boston*. International City/County Management Association.

⁵⁹ Te Mana Raraunga. (2018). *Principles of Māori Data Sovereignty*.
<https://www.temanararaunga.maori.nz/>

⁶⁰ Sahlberg, P. (2011). The fourth way of Finland. *Journal of Educational Change*, 12(2), 173–185.

⁶¹ Kristjánsson, Á. L., Sigfusdóttir, I. D., Allegrante, J. P., & Helgason, Á. R. (2013). Substance use prevention for adolescents: The Icelandic Model. *Health Promotion International*, 28(1), 122–132.

⁶² Sahlberg, P. (2011). The fourth way of Finland. *Journal of Educational Change*, 12(2), 173–185.

⁶³ Kristjánsson, Á. L., Sigfusdóttir, I. D., Allegrante, J. P., & Helgason, Á. R. (2013). Substance use prevention for adolescents: The Icelandic Model. *Health Promotion International*, 28(1), 122–132.

grounded in youth voice and socio-ecological thinking, can yield measurable improvements.

For Aotearoa, embedding mana motuhake requires more than symbolic inclusion. It demands structural power-sharing with rangatahi, Māori, and Pacific communities in designing policies and evaluating outcomes. Success must be measured not only by reduced harm (lower suicide rates or reported distress), but by indicators of flourishing: pride, resilience, and identity security, aligning with both Berlin's positive liberty and Durie's call for Māori self-determination. Policies must treat youth not only as vulnerable populations to be protected but as active agents capable of resilience and creativity. Reforming participation structures to co-design, resource, and protect youth voice is therefore central to addressing the mental health crisis.

6. Concluding Comments

The youth mental health crisis in Aotearoa is one of the defining challenges of our generation. It is not simply a matter of rising distress statistics but a deeper reflection of how society frames, supports, and constrains rangatahi as they navigate identity, belonging, and wellbeing. Across this report, I have argued that current strategies, while essential in their harm-reduction focus, remain too narrowly anchored in negative liberty. They protect youth from certain risks but fail to cultivate the freedom to flourish, to explore identity, and to transform stress into resilience. Although the *Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy 2024–27* and the *Sport NZ Strategic Plan 2024–28* identify real inequities and vulnerabilities, the persistent escalation of psychological distress among

rangatahi indicates that information and incremental policy are insufficient. What is required is a paradigmatic shift: a movement from fragmented, deficit-driven strategies towards holistic, empowering approaches that embed hauora, mana motuhake, and positive liberty at their core.

One of the most consistent themes across this report has been the role of identity. Psychological theories remind us that adolescence is defined by exploration and self-construction. Philosophical inquiry reveals that freedom from harm is necessary but incomplete without freedom to envision and enact identities. Māori frameworks such as *Te Whare Tapa Whā* and *Te Pae Mahutonga* show that identity is not a solitary project but inseparable from whakapapa, whānau, and wairua. Socioeconomic analysis demonstrates how deprivation constrains identity exploration, entrenching disadvantage across generations. Taken together, these perspectives make clear that rangatahi cannot thrive when policy merely manages risks. They thrive when environments support the freedom 'to be': to be Māori, to be queer without shame, to be young men who can express vulnerability, to be diverse and proud.

This, in turn, calls for a reframing of stress. For too long, youth wellbeing has been discussed as though all stress is inherently pathological. Yet, both neuroscience and lived experience reveal that moderate stress, encountered in supportive contexts, is a crucible for resilience. Exams, performances, and challenges in sport or art can build confidence and adaptability when buffered by strong whānau, peers, and cultural anchors. Conversely, chronic, unsupported stress corrodes hauora. The distinction is

not stress itself, but the ecological context in which it occurs. Future strategies must therefore shift from eliminating stress to cultivating environments where stress becomes opportunity rather than harm. Central to this transformation is participation. If rangatahi are to flourish, they must be seen not as vulnerable populations to be protected, but as co-creators of their futures. This requires more than token consultation. It demands co-design, participatory budgeting, Māori data sovereignty, and youth seats at decision-making tables. It requires recognising that young people hold expertise in their own lives, and that the authenticity of their voices is essential for effective, equitable policy. In this sense, embedding youth voice is not just democratic fairness: rather, it is a mental health intervention in itself, affirming mana motuhake and positive liberty.

Success can no longer be measured solely in harm reduction: although these metrics matter, they tell only half the story. The true measure of a flourishing Aotearoa will be rangatahi who are secure in their identities, connected to their cultures, confident in their voices, and proud of their place in the world. Flourishing must be our new benchmark: resilience, belonging, pride, and participation.

As I reflect on my own experiences within school and community, I am struck by the mismatch between the generic solutions we are offered and the complex realities we live. Advice to “just sleep more” or “exercise regularly” often feels hollow when it ignores economic pressures, cultural identity, or family obligations. At the same time, I have also witnessed how powerful it can be when teachers create space for authentic dialogue, or when peers come together in cultural performance or sport, finding strength in shared

identity. I know that mental health cannot be reduced to individual behaviours or single interventions, but is shaped by the interplay of structural conditions, cultural anchors, and the freedoms we afford our young people.

The youth mental health crisis in Aotearoa is not inevitable. It is the outcome of choices: choices about how we frame wellbeing, how we design policy, and how we engage with youth. To change the trajectory, we must choose differently. We must choose to embed Māori frameworks not as symbolic add-ons but as structural guides. We must choose to view stress not as a threat to be eradicated but as a resource to be cultivated within supportive contexts. We must choose to see youth not as passive recipients but as active agents of resilience, identity, and change. In the end, this is not just about reducing harm but about imagining possibility. If Aotearoa commits to empowering rangatahi with positive liberty, to aligning policy with hauora, and to addressing inequities systematically, then the future can be one of not only survival but of flourishing. Rangatahi can grow up not only free from harm but free to become: to become resilient, connected, proud, and self-determining. That is the vision of wellbeing this country must now pursue - and the measure by which our strategies should ultimately be judged.

Outstanding Scholarship

Subject: Health and Physical Education

Standard: 93501

Total score: 22

Q	Score	Marker commentary
Application of knowledge	07	The report clearly identifies the wellbeing challenge early on and integrates evidence from several of the required documents to ground the critical evaluation. It draws effectively on multiple perspectives, including psychological, philosophical, Māori and socioecological, to examine the issue from a range of angles. Higher level theories and concepts are introduced thoughtfully, and these are generally very well integrated and synthesised across the report. Personal experience and independent reflection are woven in to support the development of ideas. The HPE underlying concepts are evident, but hauora could have been embedded more deliberately throughout. Future actions are coherent and link logically back to earlier analysis.
Critical thinking	08	A consistently strong critical response is taken throughout the report. A unique approach to the wellbeing challenge is taken and the report critiques dominant assumptions, such as prevailing attitudes towards stress. It shows excellent insight and perception through the way it adapts existing models to synthesise and extend ideas. The critique of national strategies (CYS and Sport NZ Strategic Plan) is perceptive and supported with reasoning. Divergent thinking is evident and the report remains tightly focused on the wellbeing challenge throughout.
Communication	07	The report is clear and coherent, using a numbered heading and sub-heading structure to support a logical flow of ideas. The argument is well substantiated with reference evidence, and makes clear links between concepts, theories and examples. The introduction effectively outlines the issue, establishes the scope of the report, and uses evidence from the required documents, alongside wider research, to justify why the selected wellbeing issue is important. The footnoting is clearly formatted, and overall communication is convincing and sophisticated.