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Cultivating Social Cohesion Among New Zealand Youth

He aha te mea nui o te ao? He tangata, he tangata, he tangata.

What is the most important thing? It is people, it is people, it is people.¹

In a fragile world emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic, humanity urgently needs a glue to hold societies firmly together. Facing accelerating technological advancement, unrelenting shifts in global power dynamics, and climate degradation, social cohesion has repeatedly asserted itself as a pivotal antidote to achieving solidarity and improving the wellbeing of people, especially youths, who not only pave the cornerstone of our present, but also wield the potential to sculpt our future.

Because of the term's various uses and misuses, our first step is to define "social cohesion", particularly as it pertains to the youth. One of its earliest definitions comes from Émile Durkheim, a French sociologist, who understood it to be "the search for consensus" in fundamental social "values", "norms", and "beliefs".² However, the impact of globalisation and diversification in recent years has, in many ways, altered and broadened the definition of social cohesion, making the one proposed by New Zealander Dame Tariana Turia³ that "cohesive societies" are characterised by "high levels of participation, respect and trust among their members", more appropriate.⁴

While Dame Turia's definition is useful, I propose one with greater emphasis on youth, based on the outcomes measured by Dr Mason Durie's *Te Whare Tapa Whā* model⁵ of *hauora*. Social cohesion is, therefore, reflected by the sense of *taha*

¹ Natlib.govt.nz. Accessed October 18, 2023.

² Jansen, Th., N. Chioncel, and H. Dekkers. "Social Cohesion and Integration: Learning Active Citizenship." *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 27, no. 2 (2006): 189–205.

³ Turia, Tariana. "Social Cohesion and the Constitutional Status of Tangata Whenua." *The Beehive*, 2003.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ "Te Whare Tapa Whā." n.d. Mentalhealth.org.nz.

whānau (social wellbeing) and *taha wairua* (spiritual wellbeing) experienced by a young person, which will interdependently reinforce their sense of *taha hinengaro* (mental wellbeing) and *taha tinana* (physical wellbeing). This will be examined in a later section exploring the dynamic nature of social cohesion, the concept that addressing socioeconomic disparities can cultivate greater social cohesion, which will in turn promote socioeconomic equity, acting as a positive feedback loop.

The *Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy*⁶ does indeed recognise the prominence of trust, belonging and connectivity in young people, but its pragmatism and effectiveness are hindered by its vague and 'incohesive' planning. The framework does not place enough emphasis on the dynamic nature of social cohesion in enhancing youth wellbeing, and hence fails to recognise, in-depth, that social cohesion is a growing force, so its fostering at a developmental stage – in young people, is essential; hence, as we strive collectively towards societal and ecological sustainability goals, a multifaceted strategy is required to dismantle various barriers and foster a stronger sense of cohesion and unity in youth. Henceforth, I will use the *Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy*⁷ as a platform for analysis to critically evaluate the extent of social cohesion in NZ youth and further explore the nuanced aspects of social cohesion neglected by the Strategy.

Interrelationship Between Sociocultural Factors, Social Cohesion, and Wellbeing

Social cohesion, contrary to popular misconceptions, does not function as a unitary force. Instead, it is intrinsically linked to various sociocultural factors in a dynamic manner as they form a self-reinforcing cycle that contributes, collectively, towards youth wellbeing.

⁶ Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, *Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy*.

⁷ Ibid.

Limitations of Healthism

Traditionally, health has been perceived solely as an individual responsibility, ignoring the reality that social cohesion is a fundamental component of a healthy life. Even to this day, some argue that social cohesion is less significant than other determinants of health. In fact, the general lack of emphasis on dissecting these deep-rooted misconceptions has often hindered the development of a comprehensive understanding of health and wellbeing. Therefore, to foster social cohesion, we need to first begin by debunking the concept of healthism: the aforementioned notion that health is solely an individual responsibility which ignores sociocultural factors such as social practices, cultural norms and economic status.

Health promotion based on healthism often seeks to raise awareness of “behavioural risk factors”, specifically “unhealthy diets, lack of physical activity, tobacco smoke, and excessive alcohol consumption” and therefore holds the individual entirely responsible for their own health, which may directly or indirectly support “moralisation of people’s behaviour”.⁸ By “moralisation”, I mean that the health of an individual is considered indicative of their morality, and hence making them criticisable for their choices regarding their own health. Such preconceptions are baseless and harmful, introducing stigma against young people who are often socioculturally disadvantaged, with further negative impacts on their mindset and self-esteem.

The Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy and Beyond

The Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy⁹ defies the concept of healthism and attempts to outline sociocultural indicators and measures related to child and youth

⁸ National Library of Medicine . 2001. “Home - PMC - NCBI.” Nih.gov. 2001.

⁹ Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy.

wellbeing, which is commendable. Unlike healthism, its indicators include the proportion of young people “who feel a sense of belonging to Aotearoa/New Zealand as a whole”, “find it easy to express their identity”, “report helping others in the neighbourhood or community”, and “have someone they can ask about their culture, whakapapa, or ethnic group.”¹⁰ Nevertheless, it fails to place these indicators in the wider context to consider socioeconomic equity and sociocultural factors alongside social cohesion. In fact, the Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy¹¹ does not even explicitly identify social cohesion as a key concept throughout, which is particularly problematic as it is a fundamental basis to all other sociocultural factors in the form of both a pre-requisite and an enhancer – social cohesion must be present for any form of sociocultural equity to be present, and the extent of sociocultural equity may be considered proportional to the strength of social cohesion. I describe this as the dynamic nature of social cohesion and will explore this in further depth.

Dynamic Nature of Social Cohesion

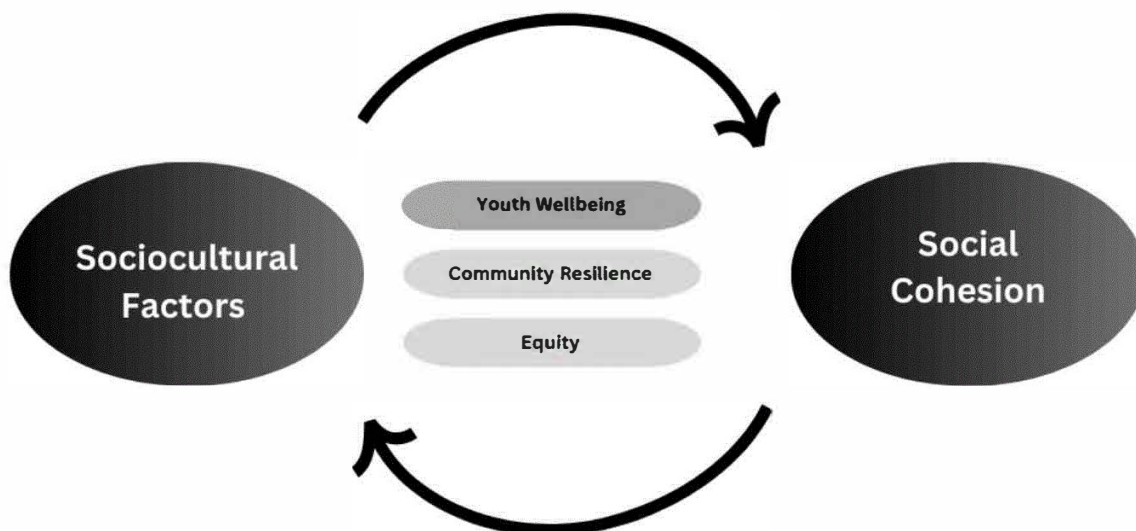
Addressing the effects of sociocultural disadvantages creates a stronger sense of community for young people among their friends and *whānau*, enhances their available support networks, and fosters greater social cohesion; at the same time, greater social cohesion provides a robust foundation for addressing these disadvantages and hence promotes socioeconomic equity, producing a self-reinforcing virtuous cycle. When networks that hold communities, especially less privileged ones, together are nurtured, communities and young people within them are empowered. As a result, the more socially cohesive community will act as a support network for young people within it by fostering a sense of belonging, trust

¹⁰ Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy, p. 82.

¹¹ Ibid.

and identity, and hence create a stronger sense of resilience against future challenges and adversity.

Nevertheless, this dynamic cycle (see below) works both ways. When societies are fractured and unequal, they suffer a vicious cycle of social fragmentation: a lack of cohesive bonds, connections, and shared values within a community, resulting in divisions and conflicts. Young people who are less educated and live in sole-parent families as well as *tangata whenua* and *Pasifika* are especially vulnerable to being subjected to such a vicious cycle due to their unique constitutional and historical position within Aotearoa. Hence, they require specific support in order to strengthen not only the social cohesion of their local community, but also that of Aotearoa New Zealand. Therefore, the Strategy's oversight of this symbiotic relationship between sociocultural factors and social cohesion could limit its efficacy. The Strategy needs to form a more sustainable and holistic framework that aims to generate the aforementioned self-reinforcing virtuous cycle, working to break the generational cycle of socioeconomic disadvantage faced by certain *tamariki and rangatahi* in Aotearoa:



Determinants of Social Cohesion

As I have pointed out before, social cohesion has a reciprocal relationship with various sociocultural factors; therefore, to better understand and foster social cohesion as a whole, it is essential to first break it down into parts.

1. Cultural Pluralism Against Hegemony

New Zealand, a multiethnic society with more than 30% of the population being made up of non-European ethnicities¹², is a melting pot of identities, traditions, and values. Nevertheless, this great diversity also comes with the increasing difficulty of maintaining cohesion within societies, and one of the most significant barriers is cultural hegemony – the existence of a dominant ruling group in society that forces other groups to be compliant with the status quo of power imbalances. Particularly with Aotearoa New Zealand's complex history of colonisation, land alienation and cultural marginalisation, great emphasis must be put on the opposing concept of cultural pluralism – minority groups being able to maintain their unique cultural identities to coexist alongside, instead of within larger groups. Therefore, I will establish the concept of cultural pluralism by exploring the common misconceptions surrounding racism and discrimination, the distinctive factors influencing Māori and Pasifika youth wellbeing, as well as multiracial youths' belonging.

1.1 Racism, Discrimination and Micro-aggression

Unfortunately, the consequences of cultural hegemony often manifest in the form of racism and discrimination, terms that are riddled with misconceptions and negligence. In a survey that I carried out, my peers defined racism and discrimination using words like “aggressive”, “verbal abuse”, and “systematic”. While these

¹² Environmental Health Intelligence New Zealand. 2018. “EHINZ.” www.ehinz.ac.nz. 2018.

characterise certain forms and incidents of racism and discrimination, the modern definition is much broader. I then asked them whether they had ever been “patronised, neglected, or subjected to other subtle actions” with regard to their cultural identity, and almost 90% of them replied “yes”, which is about 20% higher than the response for when I originally asked them using solely the word “racism” instead of its description. These actions are known as micro-aggressions and are highly prevalent yet often misunderstood in contemporary society.

It is commendable that the Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy¹³ acknowledges the extent and severity of racism and discrimination. However, it only alludes to microaggressive racism when it states, “some classmates, peers, teachers, doctors and other adults act in unfair ways.”¹⁴ No coherent solution is provided to specifically tackle microaggression. However, instances of racial microaggression are rampantly felt by New Zealand youth on a daily basis. For instance, a female Tongan art and law undergraduate reported that she frequently had to endure other students’ surprise at “Māori and Pacific students’ high academic standing” and that this kind of stereotyping “just sucks”.¹⁵ While these acts of racism and discrimination may often go unnoticed, their consequences are deeply ingrained in the wellbeing of youth, especially those of minority ethnic backgrounds.


Dealing with microaggression can result in “racial battle fatigue”¹⁶, where young people feel psychologically and physiologically stressed and exhausted. Subtle yet belittling and unfair treatment can induce feelings of frustration, but can also create a sense of helplessness; as microaggressions are by their nature implicit,

¹³ Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy, p. 17.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 52.


¹⁵ Mayeda, David Tokiharū. Māori and Pacific student experiences with every-day colonialism and ..., 2014, p. 10.

¹⁶ Smith, William A., Man Hung, and Jeremy D. Franklin. 2011. “Racial Battle Fatigue and the MisEducation of Black Men: Racial Microaggressions, Societal Problems, and Environmental Stress.” The Journal of Negro Education 80 (1): 63–82.



young people often feel powerless to respond. This can in turn lead to low self-esteem and self-efficacy in young people who lose confidence and hope and start questioning whether it is their own 'sensitivity' causing them to over-interpret the hostility. In even more severe cases, young people may begin to question their cultural and ethnic identity, impacting their *taha wairua* (spiritual wellbeing). One Māori student reported that many of her peers immediately concluded that she is "not Māori" because she is succeeding at school.¹⁷ This is a direct reflection of the consequences of microaggression on youth's *taha hinengaro* (mental wellbeing).


These psychological impacts can in turn affect youth's *taha tinana*. Stress triggers physiological responses such as unbalanced hormones, cardiovascular diseases¹⁸, and insomnia¹⁹. This induces behavioural changes in young people as they develop coping mechanisms, causing them to withdraw from potentially harmful social connections, as learned through past experience. This results in a higher level of isolation and social fragmentation and hence decreases the overall sense of social cohesion, which we know will work in a cyclic manner to affect other sociocultural factors such as cultural pluralism. The following illustration demonstrates the vicious cycle created by micro-aggressive racism and discrimination:



¹⁷ Mayeda, David Tokiharu. Māori and Pacific student experiences with every-day colonialism and ..., 2014.

¹⁸ "Coping with Racial Trauma | the Department of Psychology." n.d. Psychology.uga.edu.

¹⁹ Kingsbury, John H., Orfeu M. Buxton, Karen M. Emmons, and Susan Redline. 2013. "Sleep and Its Relationship to Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Cardiovascular Disease." *Current Cardiovascular Risk Reports* 7 (5): 387–94.



We must tailor solutions to dismantle the “unfair behaviours, lower expectations, reduced opportunities, racial profiling and structural bias” young people of certain cultures and ethnicities suffer from, which the Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy²⁰ identifies. The reason that such micro-aggressive racism and discrimination are easily neglected and perpetuated is because their ambiguity and, often, unintentionality allow their perpetrators to remain oblivious to the harmful effects of their words and actions. Educators who make microaggressive comments fail to fulfil a key function of the education system, which is to instil a comprehensive understanding of cultural diversity and foster cultural empathy and respect. Hence, simply implementing a “government work programme to address racism and discrimination”, as the Strategy suggests²¹, is neither sufficient nor effective. Instead, a nuanced approach based on education and edification is required²².

The basis of racism and discrimination, especially on a micro-aggressive level, lies in the lack of understanding and education on cultural diversity from an early age. However, this is difficult to achieve through textbook-focused teaching, but should instead be based on showcasing one another’s cultural values and practices. For instance, my school celebrates different cultures in the forms of “Cultural Diversity Week” and “Cultural Nights”, during which different cultures are celebrated for their values, cuisine, customs, language, and fashion. Students that I interviewed labelled these events as “fun”, “inclusive” and “eye-opening”. However, it is crucial to note that the most important but also the most easily misunderstood characteristic of these cultural activities is that students of all ethnicities are encouraged to participate in the celebration of all cultures, which supports cultural pluralism. This is critical because only when we are immersed in another’s culture can we really begin to

²⁰ Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy, p. 52.

²¹ Ibid., p. 19.

²² Ibid., p. 17.

connect with others on a more personal level. Engagement in different cultural activities fosters open-mindedness and empathy, the lack of either of which are the common roots of microaggressive racism.

As a matter of fact, the nationwide celebration of Western festivals such as Christmas and Easter but not festivals of other cultures demonstrates the deep-rooted hegemony that must be overcome to achieve greater social cohesion and equity. In my school, the celebration of culturally diverse festivals such as Matariki and Ugadi has proven successful in the sense that not only students from that particular culture is participating in the celebration, but an increasing number of youths from other cultures are becoming more and more active in learning and experiencing the cultures of others, which is vital in ensuring that every child feels “accepted”, “respected” and “celebrated”, as envisioned by the Strategy.²³

Because of this, while the Child and Youth Wellbeing Plan's proposition of “Project Salaam”²⁴ is certainly a step in the right direction, it is too narrow in scope and lacking in holistic scope. Instead of encouraging “Muslim secondary school students to participate in youth leadership development that focuses on conflict resolution underpinned by Islamic values of non-violence, compassion, kindness and forgiveness”, a more effective and inclusive plan would be to encourage students of all ethnicity to participate and learn about these vital underpinning Islamic values. In fact, a possible reinvigorate project could be a multicultural youth conference within schools, inter-schools, and nationwide where youths across all ethnicities and diversities come together to celebrate different cultures and learn about values of “non-violence” and “compassion” through different cultural lenses. Such initiatives

²³ Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy, p. 11, 17.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 53.

will help increase cultural understanding and tolerance and hence reduce the aforementioned social fragmentation and encourage more social integration.

1.2 Māori and Pasifika Social Integration

In order to construct a more socially cohesive society, we must start by focusing on the most disadvantaged, which in New Zealand's case is Māori and Pasifika due to their unique constitutional, historical, and moral positions within Aotearoa, as mentioned above. The idea that dominant and indigenous cultures are able to equally share their knowledge, customs, and principles in civil society, with the state acting as a neutral mediator, is a myth. In actual fact, the government of Aotearoa New Zealand has been weaponised to prevent the transmission and integration of indigenous culture and knowledge, as I will expand upon.

As a result of sustained advocacy efforts, the government itself has attempted to amend this but with insufficient progress. This may be largely due to the fact that the government maintains Western frameworks and solutions, and neglects Māori and Pasifika cultural lenses when attempting to dismantle barriers to social cohesion. For instance, while the Strategy points out that “the wellbeing of Pacific Peoples is largely characterised by family, faith and culture”, it still focuses its goals on

²⁵ Ward, Tony. n.d. “Hegemony and Education in New Zealand.” www.academia.edu.

“addressing social challenges” such as “poverty, low incomes, low quality or overcrowded housing”.²⁶ While these factors are critical, there needs to be an equal if not greater focus on the spiritual, familial and cultural aspects of Pasifika wellbeing.

Western hegemony in our society is rampant; hence it is crucial to incorporate several critical Māori and Pasifika cultural concepts that are often suppressed or overlooked when aiming to improve social cohesion amongst *tamariki* and *rangatahi*.

Tuakiritanga (culture / identity):

“*Ulu kite fatu e malu ei koe.*” - Shelter in the rock for your safety. / It is important to protect one’s culture as the foundation of identity.²⁷

Tuakiritanga encompasses the identity, language and culture of an individual. For Māori and Pasifika youth integration, one of the most effective pathways is through language cultivation. Fortunately, the Strategy recognises this, and *maihi karauna*²⁸ stands as a testament to positive changes within the area of the revitalisation of te reo Māori. Nevertheless, having delved into the *Maihi Karauna*, I found various areas this Strategy neglected to discuss. For instance, the revitalisation plan points out that *tamariki* Māori are more likely than not to drop out Māori medium schools due to biases, lack of resources, and geographical barriers,²⁹ but failed to propose any comprehensive solutions. To overcome these issues, *Te Taura Whiri i te Reo Māori* (Māori Language Commission) could collaborate with the Ministry of Education to deconstruct biases, provide additional funding, and set up more (smaller-scale) Māori medium schools within communities to increase the accessibility and quality of such initiatives. Intergenerational transmission needs to

²⁶ Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy, p. 14.

²⁷ Sivertsen, Juliette. 2021. “Mana of the Pacific: How Pacific Nations Have Drawn on Traditional Values to Get through the Pandemic.” Stuff. November 20, 2021.

²⁸ Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy, p. 19.

²⁹ Te Puni Kōkiri Ministry of Māori Development, The Crown’s strategy for Māori language revitalisation, p. 31.

be a priority from an early stage and to take a step further, Māori youth should be encouraged even in English medium schools to share stories of their *whakapapa* and culture in te reo, which would build their confidence as well as social cohesion.

Furthermore, the Strategy's omission of Pacific languages promotion with the only actions to support Pacific languages and culture being vague mentions of "developing an action plan for Pacific Aotearoa Lalanga Fou" and "funding for projects to support Pacific realm languages" is unacceptable³⁰. Currently, only 71 out of more than 2000 schools in NZ offer a Pacific language as a separate subject.³¹ Pasifika youths need to feel an equal magnitude of confidence, pride and self-efficacy in their own language and culture; therefore, a similar route could be taken for the promotion of Pacific languages as the revitalisation of te reo Māori.

Rangatiratanga (self-determination / leadership):

The Strategy's lack of focus on *Rangatiratanga* / *Matai* (self-determination / leadership) is concerning. While the Strategy does propose a Youth Plan that focuses on youth leadership, calling for young people's voices to be "heard, captured, and acted on" by the government, a prerequisite to this is that young people themselves first identify their own voice and self-determination.³² Therefore, we must amplify the presence of Māori and Pasifika leaders and role models within the community to empower youth and set up mentorship programmes to help Māori and Pasifika youth find their voices. Only through the realisation of *mana* – the authority we inherit at birth and accrue over our lifetime – can the rest follow, and only through the recognition of *whai wāhitanga* (participation) can Māori and Pasifika youth feel empowered and the key principles of *whanaungatanga*, *manaakitanga*, and *mātauranga* be fulfilled as a continual commitment to Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

³⁰ Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy, p. 53.

³¹ Education Counts, 'Pacific language in schooling'.

³² Ministry of Youth Development, Youth Plan, p. 13.

2. Youth Poverty and Social Cohesion

While the Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy understandably focuses on material poverty as an indicator of standard of living³³, I will emphasise the “fluidity of the term ‘poverty’”³⁴ beyond material hardship, and focus on the interdependent relationship between social and cultural deprivations of youth and financial hardship.

For instance, art and creativity initiatives in areas including music, dance and painting not only boost youth social capital³⁵ through networking and teamwork, but also enhance their cultural capital through possible cultural exploration and expression. I am personally involved in multiple school and community orchestras and choirs, and have derived immense fulfilment and connection from these. Improved social and cultural capital may contribute towards young people’s creativity in future career endeavours such as entrepreneurship and creative industries through the development of transferable skills such as problem-solving, communication, and critical thinking, and hence strengthen the social cohesion of our communities. Young people need to be immersed in an environment with multifaceted arts and creative programmes, yet 47% of New Zealanders do not feel as though arts and creativity are sufficiently valued within their communities, with many claiming the cause to be lack of affordability and geographical accessibility³⁶.

The “Creative in Schools” project proposed by the Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy³⁷ is commendable for recognising the critical role creativity and arts play in youth’s wellbeing, but it fails to identify the relationship between creativity and

³³ Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy, p. 11.

³⁴ “The Role of Arts & Culture in Lifting Communities out of Poverty, a Review of Evidence by Ccse_uws - Issuu.” n.d. Issuu.com.

³⁵ Jeannotte, M. Sharon. “Just Showing Up: Social and Cultural Capital in Everyday Life.” In *Accounting for Culture: Thinking Through Cultural Citizenship*, edited by M. Sharon Jeannotte, Caroline Andrew, Monica Gattinger, and Will Straw, 124–45. University of Ottawa Press, 2005.

³⁶ Langley, Edward, and Katelynn Fuller. *New Zealanders and the arts: Attitudes ... - creative New Zealand*, 2020.

³⁷ Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy, p. 18.

privilege. I contend that the effectiveness of the initiative is greatly compromised by various barriers to participation. For instance, “schools, kura, and creative(s)” are encouraged to “work together to plan a project and then submit a joint application”, which would require them to conduct a “police vetting check” themselves.³⁸ This is likely to discourage schools from taking advantage of this opportunity.

This unreasonable procedural complexity highlights the government’s lack of emphasis on the relationship between poverty and other sociocultural factors; hence, the strategy needs a more integrated approach to achieve more equitable youth development. While I certainly acknowledge that it is naive to think art can alleviate communities out of poverty, the social capital and cultural capital gained through creativity and art participation may result in a boost in economic capital as described above, again demonstrating the interconnectedness of sociocultural factors and social cohesion. We should enlist the Ministry for Culture and Heritage and Creative and the Ministry of Education to understand the reciprocal relationships between material poverty and cultural deprivation and initiate a whole-of-government response. Furthermore, additional funding should be provided toward inclusive and easily accessible creative projects within schools, alongside sports and academics.

3. Multidimensional Belonging

Social cohesion is characterised by belonging among every member of the community. Aside from the aforementioned minority groups, there is another rapidly expanding one that is often neglected – those with multiracial identities.

Disconcertingly, the Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy³⁹ does not once mention the belonging and wellbeing of multiracial youth despite the unique challenges they face.

³⁸ “Creatives in Schools / Teaching and Learning / Home - Arts Online.” n.d. Artsonline.tki.org.nz. Accessed October 20, 2023.

³⁹ Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy.

When I interviewed a peer who is of mixed Pākehā and Chinese descent, she described her experience growing up as “hard” because she often felt “too white to fit in with the Asians but too Asian to feel completely white”, and her interactions with people were often plagued by “stereotypes”; she even recalled hateful experiences being told to “go back to her country” just because of the shape of her eyes. This constant feeling of being a fraud to oneself and one’s own cultures not only harms *taha hinengaro* (mental wellbeing) and *taha wairua* (spiritual wellbeing), but also *taha tinana* (physical wellbeing) from increased social alienation and anxiety.⁴⁰

Since the strategy fails to address this multifaceted issue, I will propose my own solution. Clearly, initiatives within schools and local communities are needed to shape mindsets around cultural diversity, provide support for multiracial youth regarding specific obstacles they face, and organise activities to celebrate cultural diversity. For instance, the NCEA curriculum could offer a more diverse range of languages and history to help these youths gain a better understanding of their various roots and heritage and attention needs to be drawn to the fact that identity is multidimensional instead of binary, which deserves to become a main topic in health education, especially at lower year levels. Furthermore, while I am aware that the Strategy’s primary focus is on youth, parents can be part of the solution. The Ministry of Health as well as community groups could offer parents of multiracial youth support in helping their children form and balance different cultural identities at the most critical age.

Similarly, social cohesion requires acceptance of all genders and sexualities. Many times, my close friends in the rainbow community have been upset by microaggressive comments from teachers and peers. While the Strategy does

⁴⁰ Brennan, Dan. 2020. “Signs of Low Self-Esteem.” WebMD. November 23, 2020.

successfully identify, in its principles and outcomes, the necessity of “embrac[ing] diversity and engag[ing] with all children and young people” and the harsh truth that many service systems in Aotearoa do not “adequately support or embrace” them, the problem is far too urgent to be sufficed with the sole gesture of “increasing funding for current national and community-led approaches”⁴¹. Instead, a multilayered series of solutions is essential to tackle this issue from a micro to macro level such as education around such topics from an early age all the way to regular educators/student conferences to ensure respect for LGBTQIA+ in schools.

Social Media: Integration OR Division?

“The more social media we have, the more we think we’re connecting, yet we are really disconnecting from each other.” – JR⁴²

As one of the most revolutionary and paradigm-shifting inventions of the 21st century, social media has taken root in people’s lives, especially those of young people. Despite a third of New Zealand teens spending four or more hours online in an average day⁴³, the Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy largely neglects the importance of social media by only briefly mentioning it⁴⁴. Therefore, I will now explore the impacts of social media in close relation to social cohesion.

My survey participants ranged from young people aged 10 to 20, and when asked about the role of social media in their lives, more than 80% said that “social media helps me connect with my friends and *whānau*”. They listed out the benefits of social media such as “video-calling loved ones”, “sharing interests with like-minded

⁴¹ Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy, p. 15, 52, 64.

⁴² “JR - the More Social Media We Have, the More We Think... - Brainyquote.” Brainy Quote. Accessed October 19, 2023.

⁴³ New Zealand teens’ digital profile: A factsheet - netsafe, 2018.

⁴⁴ Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy, p. 52.

people” and “socialising with friends”, with many pointing out the cruciality of social media during the recent COVID-19 pandemic. However, given that social media reportedly caused young people's depression rate to spike by more than 50%⁴⁵, we must question the extent to which these supposed “connections” are authentic and whether they actually strengthen or weaken our social cohesion.

Can a world of digital images and icons on a 6-inch cell phone replicate the complex and nuanced society we live in? Absolutely not. As Goffman's *Presentation of Self*⁴⁶ points out, people, especially youth, are constantly undertaking “impression management” to present aspects of themselves in a certain way to avoid embarrassment. As young people are at the most critical stage of developing their multidimensional identities, curated personas on social media could create unrealistic expectations and perpetuate stereotypes, resulting in social fragmentation. In fact, even if social media does strengthen connections and relationships, it is at the cost of sacrificing reflective, in-person conversations for supposed online connection; hence the “glue” that holds these connections together would have little strength.

Furthermore, while some may view connecting with like-minded people to be beneficial, we must also consider the damage it will impose on diversity; constant interaction with those similar to us could lead to a lack of celebration of differences. In extreme cases, bullying and discrimination may also arise from people perceiving their shared traits to be superior to others – a detriment to social cohesion.

Unfortunately, the Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy fails to delve deeply enough into social media, despite stating that “young people need support to

⁴⁵ Champion, Chayil. “Is Social Media Causing Psychological Harm to Youth and Young Adults?” UCLA Health System, 2023.

⁴⁶ Goffman, Erving. *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Woodstock, N.Y.: Overlook Press, 1973.

navigate the new challenges of real and online relationships and online bullying⁴⁷.

Clearly, social media has proven itself to be a 'double-edged sword': one that is more destructive than constructive in my view. Social media has negative implications for all four dimensions of *hauora*, taking away time for in-person socialising, physical exercise, and self-reflection. However, since social media is unlikely to disappear and will only grow in prevalence, the most appropriate course of action right now would be to maximise the positives and minimise the negatives.

Possible paths of action include, first of all, education. 13% of New Zealand youth admit to not knowing about online safety.⁴⁸ Personally, I recall learning about online safety in Year 9 and 10 but it gradually faded out as I moved up through high school. This is concerning as young people of all ages are susceptible to the dangers of social media, so education on this topic should be consistent throughout the school years. What is more concerning is that Health is not offered as a subject in many schools, especially at higher year levels, leading many students to not be exposed at all to critical information. The wellbeing of youth holds utmost importance and should not be placed parallel to other optional topics; hence I propose that the Ministry of Education distribute sufficient resources to ensure that more schools have access to the health curriculum and create complementary programmes about social media for all students to increase exposure, engagement, and flexibility.

According to Anthony Giddens' structuration theory⁴⁹, people both shape and are shaped by the society in which they live; hence social media - a human construct, both reflects and shapes society. Once again, social cohesion proves its importance as a more cohesive society will likely construct more diverse and inclusive social media platforms, which will in turn amplify the benefits of social

⁴⁷ Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy, p. 51 - 52.

⁴⁸ New Zealand teens' digital profile: A factsheet - netsafe, 2018.

⁴⁹ Gibbs, Beverley. "Structuration Theory." Encyclopædia Britannica, 2017.

media and positively feed back into social cohesion. Therefore, all of the aforementioned solutions to reinforce social cohesion will also be effective here to maximise the utility of social media use among youths.

Synthesis: The Model of Action

The various solutions and strategies proposed throughout my report may be synthesised as above. Recalling the aforementioned self-reinforcing dynamic cycle between sociocultural factors and social cohesion, these different solutions and initiatives are essentially injections into the positive feedback loop. Social cohesion thereby acts as the glue that holds the *Te Whare Tapa Whā*⁵⁰ together so that “New Zealand [becomes] the best place in the world for children and young people.”⁵¹

Societal Advocacy

In general, a higher level of awareness and understanding of the concept of social cohesion and its closely interdependent relationship with various sociocultural factors

⁵⁰ “Te Whare Tapa Whā.” n.d. Mentalhealth.org.nz.

⁵¹ Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy.

must be fostered on a national level. Cultural diversity education must begin from an early age through voicing awareness within schools, participating in engaging and enlightening cultural activities and everyday immersion. For instance, *Te Hurihanganui*⁵² could support educators in creating a more culturally diverse and inclusive learning environment for students. Cultural activities would require government funding, especially for schools and communities in less privileged areas. For example, an expansion on Project Salaam in the form of multicultural youth conferences could be implemented, making it accessible to students of diverse ethnicities to learn about the universal values of peace, coexistence, and harmony through different cultural lenses.

A large-scale shift in mindset is essential to promote the sharing and transmission of indigenous knowledge, customs, and principles to compensate for historical prejudices and negligence. I therefore call for an inter-ministry effort to make institutional changes toward this goal. For example, the Ministry of Education could work alongside the Minister for Māori Development and the Ministry for Pacific Peoples to strengthen the revitalisation of te reo Māori and the promotion of Pasifika languages, as well as the celebration of their cultures. This could be achieved by increasing the number of schools offering Pasifika languages as a separate subject and the Media Sector of the Ministry for Culture and Heritage, with the aid of the New Zealand Youth Mentoring Network, amplifying the visibility of Māori and Pasifika role models within communities to empower Māori and Pasifika youth.

Community Mediation

Social cohesion is centred around communities and their levels of mutual trust, respect, and connection. Hence, grassroots community projects effectively raise

⁵² Ministry of Education. 2021. "Te Hurihanganui." Education in New Zealand. 2021.

community cohesion and resilience. One suggestion would be community groups enabling parents to seek information or support. The close-knit nature of such groups would allow community members to share their personal experiences, which is more effective than institutional advice. In fact, these groups could target the specific needs of the community instead of adhering to wider needs in New Zealand, making them more flexible and productive. For instance, parents in areas with strong te reo Māori education may choose to hold groups to seek help with supporting their children to learn te reo Māori. Specifically tailored support should be given to parents of multiracial youth to help them navigate unique obstacles.

Similarly, parents should be given support on how to navigate their child's social media use. A similar approach to the above could be adopted or, to go a step further, regular workshops, and presentations hosted by experienced experts could be implemented to help parents foster a safe, productive and functional digital environment for their children that enhances, rather than depletes, social cohesion.

Communities also play the crucial role of providing youth with extracurricular opportunities. For instance, government funding could also be provided to expand Sistema Aotearoa⁵³, a programme that “fosters confidence, teamwork, pride and aspiration in the children and their wider community”. For several years, I have personally performed with my school orchestras at Sistema programmes in Ōtara and have been amazed at the way it offers all children opportunities regardless of their background. The programme helps to build “a sense of community, self-respect, and mutual support in children” and should be extended to various communities within Aotearoa New Zealand. While non-governmental strategies are instrumental, government funding could accelerate various projects that acknowledge the potential

⁵³ “About Us.” n.d. Sistema Aotearoa. Accessed October 22, 2023.

contribution of social cohesion to poverty alleviation, and increase the affordability and accessibility of youth programmes in disadvantaged communities.

Individual Empowerment

Ultimately, our aim is to give every child in Aotearoa a sense of belonging, connection, and confidence, improving wellbeing while also strengthening community resilience and social cohesion. To achieve this, young people need to understand, from an early age, the value of their own cultural identities and those of others. Regular and consistent emphasis on the multidimensional nature of identity is particularly pertinent. Rather than being confined to the Health domain, education and immersion may come in different forms. For instance, I've benefited immensely from regular 'teen talks' from different outside presenters and 'worldview' classes and activities regarding online safety, cultural diversity, and inclusive understandings of sexuality and gender. These would require greater government funding to reach schools of diverse demographics and those that are less well-resourced.

Schools must provide more opportunities for students to experience different cultures, customs, and values on a daily basis to foster a greater sense of acceptance within themselves and toward others. Young people have the tendency to shy away from sharing and celebrating personal experiences and identities, thus teachers play an integral role in inducing in them confidence and self-acceptance. For instance, story sharing in native languages, especially indigenous languages should be established to lower year levels; more structured conversation and discussion could be offered to senior students.

Final Considerations

Social cohesion is the glue that holds societies together, and at such an uncertain time, it is imperative that young people cultivate a strong sense of social solidarity and trust. Only through the empowerment of every community and its members on both macro and micro levels can social cohesion be strengthened and the aforementioned positive feedback loop with sociocultural factors be propelled. Throughout my report, I have highlighted the multiplicity and complexity of child and youth wellbeing that transcends far beyond material and physical health, but rather, requires a multidimensional fostering of sociocultural belonging. The Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy is a testament to New Zealanders' consistent dedication and effort toward a healthier and brighter future; however, much work is yet to be done to achieve our shared vision.

***He waka eke noa.*⁵⁴ We are all in this together.**

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⁵⁴ "He Waka Eke Noa: We Are All in This Together / We Got This, Fam!" n.d. Kupu.maori.nz.

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