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New Zealand Qualifications Authority

# **Scholarship 2024**

## **Health and Physical Education 93501**

# **TOP SCHOLAR**

## **Pressure produces diamonds: Utilising stress as a tool promoting positive growth for rangatahi in Aotearoa New Zealand**

“I’m not feeling the pressure, no. You cannot put pressure on me. No chance.”

– José Mourinho, football manager

Over his 24-year-career, Mourinho has been subject to harsh scrutiny from millions of passionate fans. There is no doubt he experiences pressure, despite what he claims. Stress is a harsh reality of our everyday lives. While Mourinho may shrug it off, for most rangatahi in Aotearoa, stress is unavoidable. Mourinho experiences a privileged form of stress, where all he needs to worry about is winning a football game. With his stress, Mourinho is incentivised to perform. Mourinho does not have to worry about parental relations, academics, fitting in, or even money, unlike many rangatahi. The 2022/23 New Zealand health survey found that over half of New Zealanders aged 15-24 experience anxiety or depression, with the effects of stress contributing to this statistic.<sup>1</sup> Rangatahi with “moderate to high distress” have almost doubled since 2016/17. The percentage of rangatahi unable to access support when needed has increased by 77%. Aotearoa is undoubtedly facing a mental health crisis among rangatahi.

While the Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy (henceforth the *Strategy*) acknowledges stress and its prevalence in rangatahi, there is a focus on stress as a negative element in the lives of rangatahi. The *Strategy* states that “children and young people caught up in stress... can have problems with mental health and addiction.”, reflecting this negative generalisation.<sup>2</sup> I would

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<sup>1</sup> New survey shows youth mental distress skyrocketing, (2024), Mental Health Foundation, <https://mentalhealth.org.nz/news/post/new-survey-shows-youth-mental-health-rates-skyrocketing>

<sup>2</sup> Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy, p.36, (2019), Ministry of Social Development

like to propose an alternative perspective to stress in rangatahi which instead views stress as a tool for positive growth. This is briefly discussed within the *Strategy*, which mentions that “excessive exposure to stress and difficulty can challenge an individual’s resilience” and how “reducing stress is just as important as promoting resilience and coping with stress”.<sup>3</sup> While it is positive that the *Strategy* recognises the importance of stressors towards building resilience, the *Strategy* fails to go into any further depth on this topic. It is important for the government to continue encouraging exposure to limited amounts of stress to build this resilience. However, it is equally important for the government to evaluate the risks which come with this exposure, which I will discuss throughout my report.

I will also explore the use of Te Whare Tapa Wha in the context of stress in rangatahi. Te Whare Tapa Wha views Hauora in a holistic manner, acknowledging how the dimensions of taha tinana, taha wairua, taha whānau, and taha hinengaro interact with each other.<sup>4</sup> When rangatahi fail to meet the needs of any dimension, their entire Hauora is impacted. While stressors may negatively impact our taha hinengaro, the consequences of stress can also damage taha whānau and taha tinana. This leads to the imbalance of the four dimensions, negatively affecting Hauora as a whole. I will use this model to explore the causes, impacts, and preventions of stress in rangatahi.

### **What is stress?**

There exists no universally agreed upon definition of stress. Hans Selye defines stress as “the nonspecific response of the body to any demand made upon it”.<sup>5</sup> This definition is too

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p.44

<sup>4</sup> Your Health Assessment, n.d., Te Whatu Ora, <https://www.hqsc.govt.nz/assets/Our-work/National-trauma-network/Publications-resources/Te-Whare-Tapa-Wha-resource.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Hans Selye (1907–1982): Founder of the stress theory, (2018), Tan, S.Y., Yip, A. <http://www.smj.org.sg/article/hans-selye-1907%E2%80%931982-founder-stress-theory>

general for the scope of this paper and differs from the ‘stress’ discussed in the *Strategy*, which focuses on stress as a psychological response. Selye believed that stress could be positive and negative, defining them as eustress and distress, respectively. For instance, distress could be caused by a stressor such as bereavement, which would negatively impact taha hinengaro. I believe the “toxic stress” discussed throughout the *Strategy* to be equivalent to “distress”. Whereas, eustress could be caused by a stressor such as pregame stress for an athlete, which motivates the individual to perform better.

I believe that this binary definition of stress is flawed and propose that we instead view stress as something more complex. For instance, a stressor could be negative, such as deadlines, which induce anxiety, but the response is positive, such as an increase in productivity.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, what makes a stressor or response positive can be subjective, and Selye’s model fails to acknowledge the additive impact of multiple stressors. The ideas of eustress and distress are nonetheless useful.

Figure 1: Yerkes-Dodson law<sup>7</sup>



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<sup>6</sup> Eustress and Distress: Neither Good Nor Bad, but Rather the Same?, (2020), Bienertova-Vasku, J., Lenart, P., Scheringer, M. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/bies.201900238>

<sup>7</sup> Adapted from: Retitling Stress: A Look at the Yerkes-Dodson Law (2021), Kariuki, C. <https://sites.dartmouth.edu/dujs/2021/02/07/retitling-stress-a-look-at-the-yerkes-dodson-law/>

The Yerkes-Dodson law (figure 1) proposes an alternative perspective to eustress, suggesting that the intensity of combined stress contributes to positive/negative outcomes<sup>8</sup>. The impact of stress alone now determines whether it is classified as eustress or distress, finding that stress is optimised for positive outcomes at a moderate stress level. Stress perhaps only turns into distress when experienced over a wide range of areas, under this model. The model fails to acknowledge how individuals could react differently to varying levels of stress. Additionally, performance and stress levels are observational and cannot be quantified, so are difficult to apply to all contexts. Some people could crumble under lower thresholds of stress than others. Nevertheless, the general idea of the law, that performance is optimised when stress levels are neither too low nor high is useful.

An alternative definition by Smith and Carlson is “an event, situation, or combination of situations in which demands are perceived by the child or adolescent as exceeding his or her capacity to comfortably respond” which I would argue is more in line with the colloquial definition of stress and what is discussed within the *Strategy*.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, this will be the definition for stress used through this report. This will be integrated with Selye’s eustress/distress theory and the Yerkes-Dodson law.

### **Stress and Erikson’s stages of development**

Western psychologists have historically explored the changes occurring during the development of rangatahi. It is these changes which make the causes of stress within rangatahi unique from other age groups. Erik Erikson theorised that every individual progresses through several stages of development, and each stage is designated a

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Stress, Coping, and Resilience in Children and Youth, (1997), Smith, C., & Carlson, B. E.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/30013020>

psychosocial crisis which the individual is expected to face and overcome. Two stages of relevance are the industry/inferiority crisis, occurring in 'middle childhood', and the identity/confusion crisis, occurring in adolescence. The industry/inferiority crisis occurs when a child is integrated and expected to become a valuable member of society.<sup>10</sup> Within this stage, Erikson believed that rangatahi begin to realise they are being judged and will compare themselves to peers, potentially leading to a sense of inferiority and stress. However, overcoming this crisis allows them to become an industrious member of society. The identity/confusion crisis occurs when rangatahi must construct their own identity, discover their role in life, and develop values.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, this realisation and development of identity is also a possible source of confusion and stress.

However, Erikson's model is flawed in how it assumes every individual to face these crises, in this particular order. It also fails to account for cultural differences within rangatahi, because Erikson's research was focused on European/North American society. For instance, the development of identity may be restrained in some cultures. Gendered expectations rooted in cultural values can restrict the exploration of identity for many especially in more conservative cultures. Some rangatahi could be restricted by expectations set upon them by parents because in some cultures, rangatahi are expected to conform to what their parents desire. This is observed in the importance of filial piety within Asian culture.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, this model can still be useful towards understanding stress in rangatahi, in Aotearoa.

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<sup>10</sup> Industry versus Inferiority , (2017), Issawi, S, Dauphin, B., [https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Barry-Dauphin/publication/317173878\\_Industry\\_Versus\\_Inferiority/links/59e6044a0f7e9b0e1ab266a6/Industry-Versus-Inferiority.pdf](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Barry-Dauphin/publication/317173878_Industry_Versus_Inferiority/links/59e6044a0f7e9b0e1ab266a6/Industry-Versus-Inferiority.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> Master of Science in Education Insight: Erikson's 8 Stages of Psychosocial Development, n.d., Cherry, K. <https://www.waldenu.edu/online-masters-programs/ms-in-education/resource/ms-in-education-insight-eriksons-8-stages-of-development>

<sup>12</sup> Expectations and Family Pressure, n.d., National Alliance on Mental Illness, <https://www.nami.org/Your-Journey/Identity-and-Cultural-Dimensions/Asian-American-and-Pacific-Islander/Expectations-and-Family-Pressure/>

Using the socio-ecological perspective of Erikson's stages of development, we recognise that during the industry/inferiority stage, rangatahi strive to assimilate into society and are faced with this conflict between assimilation and social isolation. I believe that the industry/inferiority and identity/confusion stages are linked, because this assimilation exposes rangatahi to different values and norms. This gives rangatahi opportunities to compare themselves with each other, allowing them to develop their own unique identity. Stressors exist within these crises as stress to succeed in overcoming them, and stress resulting from failure. From the 2022 NZ PISA assessment, 28% of students responded 'agree' or 'strongly agree' to "I feel awkward or out of place in my school".<sup>13</sup> If rangatahi fail to assimilate and/or develop an identity, they may feel inferior, confused, and stressed, experiencing "role confusion", as outlined in Erikson's model. Stress which stems from the failure to succeed during these stages may then be classified as distress, under Selye's model. However, this stress may not be entirely negative.

### **Positive growth through identity-related stress**

I believe the stress caused by the desire to assimilate/develop an identity can be positive.

The pressure to assimilate can be toxic yet serves as a necessary motivator to develop connections and identity. Without such stressors, perhaps rangatahi would be forever isolated and unexposed to different values, leading to a prejudiced view of others.

Influencing one's identity through observing the values of others creates a self-defined sense of identity because the individual independently chooses to reject or accept the influence of others, which is ultimately desirable. The *Strategy* claims that a positive sense of identity

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<sup>13</sup> PISA 2022 Results (Volume I and II) - Country Notes: New Zealand, (2023), Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, <https://www.oecd.org/publication/pisa-2022-results/country-notes/new-zealand-33941739/>

and social connections “protect(s) people from the effects of toxic stress and other adversity”.<sup>14</sup> These social connections also strengthen taha wairua and taha whānau, helping mitigate the future negative impact of stress on Hauora. Regardless of the intensity of toxic stress and its short-term consequences, successful development of self-defined identity leads to positive outcomes.

Furthermore, the experience of stress during the failure to assimilate/develop an identity serves as an opportunity to build future resilience against stress. The extent to which this stress is distress is perhaps determined by the extent and severity of the combined experience of stress on rangatahi, reflected in the Yerkes-Dodson law. If rangatahi must cope with multiple stressors alongside these crises, this stress should then be discouraged. Therefore, stress stemming from the industry/inferiority and identity/confusion conflicts is difficult to classify as either eustress/distress.

Rather than accept the presence of this toxic stress which can occur during the development of rangatahi, we should strive to minimise the toxicity of this stress. When considering Erikson’s stages of development, rangatahi experiment with various roles/beliefs to develop an identity. Possibly, stress from this experimentation could be utilised by changing how rangatahi view their desire to assimilate. Rather than being viewed as an objective, as expressed by Erikson’s model, rangatahi should be encouraged to explore these various roles/beliefs and ignore the supposed failure of ‘confusion’ within the identity/confusion conflict. Rangatahi should not view the inability to develop a positive sense of identity/social connections as a ‘failure’ but rather, a stage of exploration. This could reduce the toxic effects of this stressor because the pressure to assimilate no longer carries the perceived

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<sup>14</sup> Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy, p.51, (2019), Ministry of Social Development



possibility of failure. Hence, pressure to assimilate could be utilised as a positive stressor within rangatahi to prevent later effects of toxic stress/adversity.

However, merely encouraging rangatahi to think in such a manner would be unreasonable.

The *Strategy* suggests that “dismantling... discrimination at structural, community, and personal levels” allows for identity to be celebrated in positive ways.<sup>15</sup> It also mentions how rangatahi need safe spaces and time to explore their identity. Returning to Erikson’s theory of identity/confusion, the individual who experiences role confusion and toxic stress adopts a less-flexible identity, limiting themselves, rooted in this discrimination.<sup>16</sup> Rangatahi must accept both themselves and others to mitigate the stress coming from this crisis. The attitudes and values held by rangatahi ultimately influence the perception of identity growth as a stage of exploration and the creation of safe spaces. From a young age, rangatahi must be exposed to different values and attitudes to change their perception of identity, establishing non-discriminatory environments which foster positive identity exploration.

I would also like to introduce the concept of the differentiation of the self, the ability to realise oneself as a separate, independently functioning individual, perhaps the end goal of identity.<sup>17</sup> Rangatahi who achieve differentiation of the self can separate their beliefs without attacking others’ thoughts and have the most flexibility and adaptability in coping with life stresses.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy, p.52, (2019), Ministry of Social Development

<sup>16</sup> Theories of Adolescence, (1962), Muuss, R.E.H., Velder, E., Porton, H.

<https://childdevpsychology.yolasite.com/resources/theory%20of%20identity%20erikson.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> Family Therapy in Clinical Practice, (1978), Bowen, M.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p.370.

Figure 2: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs<sup>19</sup>



This links closely to self-actualisation within Maslow's hierarchy of needs (figure 2) where individuals come to accept the identity of themselves and others. However, we must consider the prerequisites towards attaining self-actualisation. The hierarchy assumes that rangatahi must first fulfil needs lower in the hierarchy such as security which may not be accessible to everyone. For instance, financial security may not be attainable for all rangatahi, creating inequitable outcomes in attaining self-actualisation. It is erroneous to claim that rangatahi unable to meet financial security needs are incapable of accepting the identity of others and themselves. Maslow's model is therefore flawed in explaining the process of attaining self-actualisation in rangatahi. Nevertheless, the attainment of differentiation of the self and self-actualisation show why stress from the industry/inferiority and identity/confusion conflicts are necessary towards alleviating later stress.

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<sup>19</sup> Adapted from Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, (2024), McLeod, S.  
<https://www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html>

## **Stress, inequity, and the role of whānau**

According to the *Strategy*, stress disproportionately affects rangatahi in lower-income households. It mentions how “some children and young people live in families with toxic stress and complex needs, such as the combined impacts of long-term unemployment, low income, unaddressed physical and mental health needs...”.<sup>20</sup> The “toxic stress” mentioned is overwhelmingly negative because it creates an unnecessary burden on both rangatahi and their parents. Perhaps, the stressors (low income, unaddressed physical and mental health needs) are only inherently toxic because they have a direct, negative effect on the taha hinengaro and taha tinana of rangatahi. The response of stress itself which stems from these stressors is not necessarily negative but oftentimes will be because of the severity and combined impact of said stressors. Regardless of whether they cause stress, the stressors will have a direct, negative impact on Hauora, so they should not be encouraged.

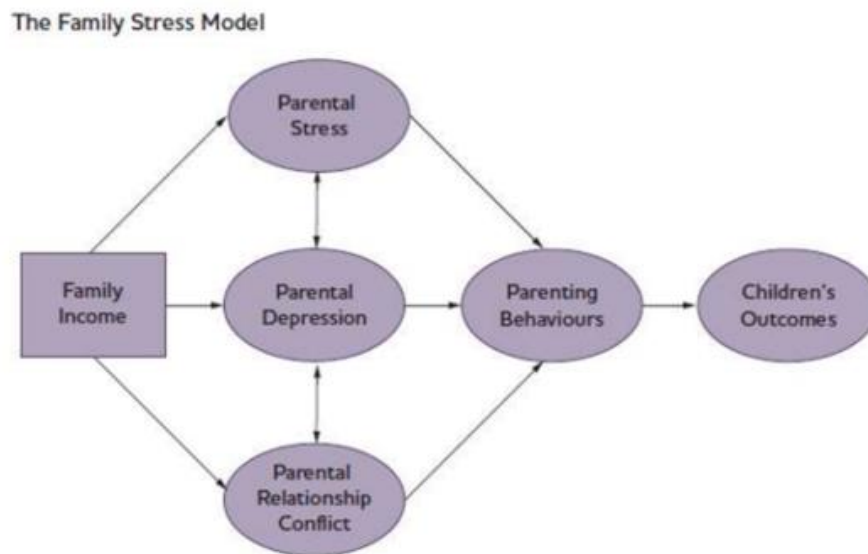
Social inequity is a glaring issue when considering how toxic stress disproportionately affects those in low-income households. Evidently, the stress faced by the parents of these whānau in poverty is something which affects their children. When whānau in poverty are faced with the previously outlined stressors, they become overwhelmed with stress to alleviate these issues. The stress inflicted on the parent hinders their ability to care for their rangatahi, negatively impacting the Hauora of both rangatahi and their whānau. The Ministry of Social development explains this using the Family Stress Model (figure 3).<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> *Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy*, p.35, (2019), Ministry of Social Development

<sup>21</sup> Rapid Evidence Review: The impact of poverty on life course outcomes for children, and the likely effect of increasing the adequacy of welfare benefit, (2018), Ministry of Social Development, <https://www.msd.govt.nz/documents/about-msd-and-our-work/publications-resources/information-releases/weag-report-release/rapid-evidence-review-the-impact-of-poverty-on-life-course-outcomes-for-children-and-the-likely-effect-of-increasing-the-adequacy-of-welfare-benef.pdf>

Figure 3: Family Stress Model



The Family Stress Model shows how parental stress stemming from economic pressure creates conflict between the parents, and psychological stress, negatively influencing their parenting behaviours, leading to stress in their children. The negative impact on taha hinengaro on parents (parental stress and depression) can affect taha whānau (parental relationship conflict, behaviours), leading to negative outcomes in Hauora for the entire whānau. However, we must acknowledge how parental behaviour will not be the sole cause of stress stemming from poverty. The Family Stress Model does not show how economic pressure directly prevents parents from investing in the child, such as through sports and extra tuition which may otherwise alleviate stress. Furthermore, the model focuses on poverty as a stressor affecting younger rangatahi but does not consider the impact on older rangatahi. Research shows in 2022, over 15,000 teenagers in Aotearoa were working 20-50

hours a week to help pay for family basics.<sup>22</sup> When rangatahi are pressured by both school and work, they are put under immense psychological stress. Therefore, rangatahi in poverty are faced with more negative stressors than their wealthier counterparts, leading to greater distress.

The Family Stress Model displays the hereditary nature of stress, contributing to the poverty cycle. As parents are put under economic pressure, stress in their children leads to poorer outcomes in education/employment and further economic pressure, creating stress in their grandchildren. Attitudes of whānau can also be impacted by financial stressors, as their priorities may be focused towards improving their economic condition, leading to neglect of their Hauora. This makes them more susceptible to psychological stress, only furthering inequities in the Hauora of rangatahi. Hence, stress in the entire whānau is just as important as stress faced by rangatahi as individuals when considering the impact of stress in rangatahi in low-income families.

### **The Early Years System Initiative**

The *Strategy* outlines the Supporting the Early Years System Initiative which uses “...comprehensive population data and the lived experiences of local parents and indigenous knowledge to inform policy, funding decisions... and ultimately deliver services that create resilience and reduce stress”.<sup>23</sup> Rangatahi in poverty can face stress because of stress inflicted on their parents from economic pressures. Direct support from initiatives such as this are critical towards mitigating this stress. This system has been implemented in South

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<sup>22</sup> *Overloaded and Overlooked: Investigating How Poverty Drives School Students Into Paid Work*, (2024), Yu Shi, H.  
<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/60189fe639b6d67b861cf5c4/t/65e81ae1e7bc6a1f9c9d1996/1709710053842/OVERLOOKED+AND+OVERLOADED.pdf>

<sup>23</sup> *Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy*, p.37, (2019), Ministry of Social Development

Auckland by the Southern Initiative, which found levels of stress were significantly higher in South Auckland compared to the rest of Aotearoa. From their research, the “cumulative and prolonged weight of multiple stressors is toxic” and this “crowds out and suppresses resilience”.<sup>24</sup> Linking back to the Yerkes-Dodson theory on eustress/distress, it is then perhaps the chronic, cumulative effect of stressors which leads to toxic, undesired stress.

The initiative also finds that “prolonged or cumulative stress affecting the development of executive functioning in children” can lead to a “lifetime of poor outcomes”. Evidently, reducing toxic stress in whānau to reduce stress in rangatahi at an early age is critical. The system achieves this by empowering the parent through education, such as planning, communication, and self-regulation through active (practical) skills building. The initiative outlines the establishment of “peer-to-peer” relationships between parents providing a “respite from toxic stress” within a safe and respectful environment. Currently, play groups such as Plunket lack consideration towards the role of culture. The initiative found “positive response of Pasifika mothers was higher when associating with others from their own culture and maintaining their own traditions/practices”. Their research found that a whānau-centric approach (figure 4) was key to alleviating stress in struggling families, in South Auckland. This led to a series of practice shifts (figure 5) critical to the success of the programme. The *Strategy* mentions how “many existing services, including health... are designed in ways that can create structural bias that may not adequately support or embrace all children and young people”. The system attempts to overcome this structural bias through this whānau-centric approach. It is important to address such biases because

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<sup>24</sup> *Early Years Challenge*, (2017), The Southern Initiative, <https://knowledgeauckland.org.nz/media/1859/early-years-challenge-report-tsi-oct-2017.pdf>

marginalised communities tend to be more susceptible to poverty due to a lack of suitable support.<sup>25</sup>

Figure 4: Whānau-centric principles<sup>26</sup>



Figure 5: Summary of practice shifts<sup>27</sup>

The Whānau-centric principles of the initiative (figure 4) are inherently linked, with the co-participation stemming from Tino Rangatiratanga ensuring a balance of mana between organisers and participants, which establishes Whanaungatanga. At the core of the principles is therefore Tino Rangatiratanga, empowering the parent to “design with” rather than “design for”. The initiative ran workshops where stressed parents could assist each other, helping reduce levels of toxic stress. By “designing with”, cultural differences are accounted for, leading to better outcomes for a wider range of whānau. The collaborative nature of these solutions therefore effectively reduces toxic stress within the parents and consequently, their children.

To mitigate toxic stress in rangatahi, we must first consider stress faced by their parents and how it affects their children. The Early Years System makes this consideration and has

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<sup>25</sup> Marginalised Minorities in Development Programming, (2015), UNDP, <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Minorities/UNDPMarginalisedMinorities.pdf>

<sup>26</sup> *Early Years Challenge*, (2017), The Southern Initiative, <https://knowledgeauckland.org.nz/media/1859/early-years-challenge-report-tsi-oct-2017.pdf>

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

therefore succeeded in mitigating toxic stress in rangatahi. Similar systems could be implemented throughout Aotearoa to reduce the impact of toxic stress on low-income families. Systems would be unique from region to region because of the whānau-centric approach, leading to a system designed with the community rather than for the community accounting for cultural differences, leading to a long-term reduction of toxic stress. However, the initiative has only been running for seven years in a specific region of Aotearoa.

Attempting to utilise the same whānau-centric approach may not be as effective in other locations because there could be a greater cultural disconnect or lack of willing participation, making the 'designed with' methodology less effective.

Nevertheless, the system could be a promising solution for reducing toxic stress in rangatahi in NZ, especially when considering the underlying inequity regarding toxic stress in Aotearoa.

The *Strategy* writes that “addressing racism and discrimination and extending whānau-centred approaches” is planned, displaying their intention to expand the scope of similar programmes.<sup>28</sup> This is promising to see as it is a step on the right track for the government.

Māori are more likely to report higher levels of psychological stress and an unmet need for mental health services.<sup>29</sup> This is rooted in systemic issues such as the western-centric approach on health in Aotearoa and lack of consideration for tikanga Māori in healthcare.<sup>30</sup>

Historically, there have also been discriminatory health policies against Māori such as the Tohunga Suppression Act which outlawed traditional Māori medical practices.<sup>31</sup> Many Māori

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<sup>28</sup> *Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy*, p.20, (2019), Ministry of Social Development

<sup>29</sup> New Zealand Health Survey 2022/23, (2024), Ministry of Health. [https://minhealthnz.shinyapps.io/nz-health-survey-2022-23-mental-health-data-explorer/\\_w\\_82928f1a/#!/explore-topics](https://minhealthnz.shinyapps.io/nz-health-survey-2022-23-mental-health-data-explorer/_w_82928f1a/#!/explore-topics)

<sup>30</sup> *When a Māori person goes to hospital, they don't leave their Māori identity at the door*, (2024), Muru-Lanning, M. (<https://thespinoff.co.nz/atea/18-06-2024/when-a-maori-person-goes-to-hospital-they-dont-leave-their-maori-identity-at-the-door>)

<sup>31</sup> Rongoā – medicinal use of plants - The impact of colonisation, (2007), Jones, R. <https://teara.govt.nz/en/rongoa-medicinal-use-of-plants/page-5>



therefore feel reluctance towards accessing healthcare in Aotearoa. Māori youth disproportionately experience intergenerational trauma, discrimination, and other compounding stressors. In *He Korowai Oranga*, the Ministry of Health outlines how rangatiratanga is a 'key thread' of Māori Health Strategy. Involving hapu and iwi within decision-making in the health sector enables Māori to exercise control over their wellbeing.<sup>32</sup> This links to the principles of "designing with" over "designing for" in the Early Years System. Systemic issues within healthcare are better addressed when "designing with" because this provides acknowledgement of cultural differences which may otherwise be overlooked. Such changes provide a means to achieve equity in health outcomes, including stress, for marginalised rangatahi.

### **Healthism, stress, and inequity**

The perspective of healthism considers the individual as morally responsible for their own wellbeing.<sup>33</sup> This implies that an individual suffering from toxic stress has an obligation to mitigate their toxic stress themselves, and their stress is a consequence of their own actions. Oftentimes, as discussed throughout this report, stressors are outside the control of the individual. The *Strategy* finds toxic stress is especially prevalent in rangatahi in lower-income families.<sup>34</sup> The view of healthism blames these rangatahi, possibly acting as a stressor in itself. If rangatahi become overloaded with stress because they work a part-time job to support their struggling whānau, it may be unjust to hold them responsible. Such attitudes

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<sup>32</sup> The Guide to He Korowai Oranga Māori Health Strategy, (2014), Ministry of Health, <https://www.health.govt.nz/system/files/2014-06/guide-to-he-korowai-oranga-maori-health-strategy-jun14-v2.pdf>

<sup>33</sup> HEALTHISM AND THE MEDICALIZATION OF EVERYDAY LIFE, (1980), Crawford, R. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45130677>

<sup>34</sup> *Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy*, p.35, (2019), Ministry of Social Development

could also be dangerous because rangatahi are still developing and pressure to independently cope may act as a compounding stressor.

However, it is also important to acknowledge situations where rangatahi may be responsible for their stress. If rangatahi voluntarily expose themselves to additional stressors such as by waiting until a deadline to submit an assignment, perhaps, their stress should be viewed as a product of their own actions. Additionally, this stressor could be interpreted as a form of eustress because it spurs the individual to complete the assignment. If the individual is held accountable for their stress, this could also assist them with avoiding similar stressful situations in the future. Furthermore, if rangatahi are expected to mitigate their stress themselves, this could help them build independence and lifelong resilience against toxic stress.

The Ottawa Charter finds if rangatahi are to be responsible for their wellbeing, they must satisfactorily meet the determinants of health.<sup>35</sup> Primary determinants of health include “protection from environmental factors leading to health issues and risk”, “adequate housing”, “a sense of belonging and being valued”, “a liveable income” and several other factors.<sup>36</sup> Evidently, a “liveable income” is a prerequisite of several other determinants of health, only highlighting the inequity in stress-related outcomes. Programmes such as the Early Years System Initiative discussed previously may be effective tools towards meeting these determinants of health for all families.

Therefore, healthism may not be a desirable perspective when considering the impact of stress on rangatahi. Instead, we should first consider the environmental factors which act as

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<sup>35</sup> Models of Health, (2024), Te Whatu Ora, <https://www.tewhatauora.govt.nz/for-health-professionals/health-workforce-development/public-health-workforce-development/models-of-health>

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

stressors and acknowledge how it is both unfeasible and unfair to leave some rangatahi to cope with stress alone. However, it is also important to use stress as a learning experience to build lifelong resilience, as suggested in the *Strategy*. We must also recognise how stress levels cannot be quantified, so it can be difficult to determine when intervention is required if rangatahi were to independently cope with their own stress. Rangatahi should therefore not be held responsible for their own stress, however, they should learn to recognise that they have some degree of control over their stress. Rangatahi themselves are the best people to recognise their own limits of stress. Support systems from friends and whānau can ensure that rangatahi are not left alone when responding to stress.

### **Academic stress in rangatahi**

Academic stress is perhaps a universal experience for all rangatahi going through school. For me, I experience academic stress as I type these very words. The *Strategy* briefly mentions how “school can be stressful” although it does not mention this in an academic context.<sup>37</sup> Research finds that in 2017, 66% of students in OECD countries reported feeling stressed about poor grades.<sup>38</sup> Such stress can be detrimental towards the academic performance of rangatahi, especially when acting in conjunction with other stressors. Yet, the same stress could also pressure rangatahi to study more, having the inverse effect on academic performance. Research in first-year university students (which may still be applicable to secondary-school-aged rangatahi) found that on average, anxiety levels dropped just before

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<sup>37</sup> *Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy*, p.48, (2019), Ministry of Social Development

<sup>38</sup> The impact of stress on students in secondary school and higher education, (2019), Pascoe, M.C, Hetrick, S.E., Parker, A.G., [https://researchspace.auckland.ac.nz/bitstream/handle/2292/46840/Pascoe%202019\\_The%20impact%20of%20stress%20on%20students.pdf](https://researchspace.auckland.ac.nz/bitstream/handle/2292/46840/Pascoe%202019_The%20impact%20of%20stress%20on%20students.pdf)

exams, which they associate with the feeling of preparedness.<sup>39</sup> Stress can motivate us to work harder. However, the same paper also finds students with greater financial support had better psychological wellbeing. This indicates that school-related stress most negatively impacts the school results of those already experiencing other forms of stress.

The values of rangatahi and whānau are important towards understanding what becomes prioritised when faced with academic stress. If parents value grades highly, this can cause rangatahi to experience stress over conforming to their parents' expectations.<sup>40</sup> Rangatahi can subsequently prioritise academic achievement over their taha hinengaro. Consequently, they could feel increasingly isolated from their parents, which is detrimental to their taha whānau. Anae et al. find that importance is attached to education for many children of immigrants because their parents make sacrifices to afford education.<sup>41</sup> Expectations are placed on the child to succeed academically to ensure the parents' sacrifices do not go to waste. The values of parents are therefore particularly relevant for rangatahi with immigrant parents. Furthermore, because these rangatahi will have cultural differences from their peers, they may also experience greater pressure to assimilate. The combined effect of such stressors makes this issue particularly concerning.

Research finds that at the University of Otago, Pasifika students experience greater academic stress because of the low proportion of Pasifika students and staff at Otago, and cultural

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<sup>39</sup> Stress, Anxiety, and Psychological Wellbeing in First Year University Students: Changes Over Time, (2022), Slykerman, R.F, Mitchell, E.A., [https://www.psychology.org.nz/application/files/5716/4021/0952/Slykerman\\_39-45.pdf](https://www.psychology.org.nz/application/files/5716/4021/0952/Slykerman_39-45.pdf)

<sup>40</sup> Family and Academic Stress and Their Impact on Students' Depression Level and Academic Performance, (2022), Deng, Y., Cherian, J., Khan, N. U. N., Kumari, K., Sial, M. S., Comite, U., Gavurova, B., Popp, J., <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9243415/>

<sup>41</sup> PACIFIC PEOPLES AND TERTIARY EDUCATION: ISSUES OF PARTICIPATION, (2002), Anae, M., Anderson, H., Benseman, J., Coxon, E., [https://csmp.manukau.ac.nz/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0016/41434/NZ-Pasifika-Participation.pdf](https://csmp.manukau.ac.nz/_data/assets/pdf_file/0016/41434/NZ-Pasifika-Participation.pdf)

differences.<sup>42</sup> Pacific cultures are “heavily relational and communal”, yet the structure of most modern educational settings in Aotearoa do not support such values, making academic achievement difficult for many Pasifika, contributing to academic stress. The report also emphasises the importance of social support towards alleviating academic stress, which would be applicable to all cultures. This links back to the idea of social assimilation and belonging as when taha whānau is strong, the negative impacts of academic stress on taha hinengaro can be mitigated.

Therefore, academic stress can be beneficial to some and should not be outright discouraged for all rangatahi. It should be recognised that there is nothing inherently harmful about feeling stressed over academics, but this stress is still capable of negatively impacting Hauora and academic performance.

### **Should stress be prevented or utilised?**

The *Strategy* claims, “Excessive exposure to stress and difficulty can challenge an individual’s resilience” and “Reducing stress is just as important as promoting resilience and coping with stress”.<sup>43</sup> It is great to see that the *Strategy* recognises that stress can be utilised. However, the *Strategy* does not explain how rangatahi can be exposed to stress without harming the Hauora of rangatahi. Linking back to the Yerkes-Dodson law, the impact of stress relies both on the range and amount of stress experienced. If stress is limited, rangatahi can build resilience against stress. The combined pressure of multiple stressors can instead be detrimental towards Hauora. The *Strategy* claims “Stress across a range of areas is likely to

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<sup>42</sup> Social factors are associated with academic stress in Pasifika students at the University of Otago, Fakapulua, I.F, Samalia, L., Wibowo, E. (2023), <https://wje.org.nz/index.php/WJE/article/view/1040/785>

<sup>43</sup> *Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy*, p.44, (2019), Ministry of Social Development

have cumulative and longer-term negative impacts on children, adding stress.”, which may implicitly reinforce the above claim.<sup>44</sup>

When considering the stressors which impact rangatahi in Aotearoa today, rangatahi exposed to the widest range of stress are those in poverty. We should therefore strive to limit the impact of unnecessary toxic stressors such as whānau-related stress discussed previously. Rangatahi must first have the resources to cope with negative stress to avoid detriment to their Hauora, making stress more often a privilege for the privileged.

Encouraging rangatahi to experience stress is a risk, yet this is a necessary risk to build resilience against future stress. When rangatahi are exposed to chronic stress, their body responds by accumulating allostatic load, or “wear and tear”, negatively impacting Hauora.<sup>45</sup>

The release of stress hormones such as cortisol can impact taha tinana by increasing blood pressure, leading to increased risk of cardiovascular disease. taha hinengaro can be impacted by increased risk to depression and anxiety. Imbalance in these dimensions can negatively impact other dimensions, leading to overall poorer health outcomes. Stress can be chronic because of repeated exposure to stressors, which can be exacerbated by exposure to a range of stressors. More stressors can also make subsequent stressors more difficult to deal with as response cannot be directed towards a single stressor. Therefore, it is less privileged rangatahi who are more vulnerable to this chronic stress and allostatic overload, negatively impacted their Hauora. Accordingly, there should be a focus on alleviating stress in these rangatahi.

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid, p.68

<sup>45</sup> Allostatic Load and Its Impact on Health: A Systematic Review, (2020), Guidi, L. Lucente, N., Sonino, N., Fava, G.A., <https://karger.com/pps/article/90/1/11/294736/Allostatic-Load-and-Its-Impact-on-Health-A>

The negative effects of toxic stress can be relieved through support systems such as counselling.<sup>46</sup> Research shows in Aotearoa, rangatahi facing stress are more likely to seek informal help through friends and whānau, which may not be as effective.<sup>47</sup> Possible solutions to improve informal support include training rangatahi to provide better support to friends, through active listening, asking good questions, and various other methods. It is also critical for rangatahi to be taught how to recognise when their friends need help. Through secondary school, I have seen more initiatives encouraging rangatahi to check up on one another. Maintaining the taha hinengaro of ourselves and others have been a focus during my form periods. In recent years, groups such as Voices of Hope have assisted with normalising discussions around taha hinengaro in schools all around Aotearoa.<sup>48</sup> This ensures rangatahi can recognise when their peers are stressed, allowing them to intervene before there is any significant negative impact on their Hauora.

The *Strategy* does not discuss the tendency of rangatahi to access informal support to alleviate stress, nor does it propose the development of informal support, despite its prevalence today. Developing informal support could be a promising tool towards mitigating the effects of toxic stress. However, the *Strategy* does describe initiatives to increase accessibility to mental health support. It also outlines how “young people want better... mental health and addiction services designed and tailored to their needs, culture, and gender”, and how an effort is being made to increase choice in these services.<sup>49</sup> This could help increase willingness in rangatahi towards seeking formal support. The efforts towards

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<sup>46</sup> Stressed teenagers reluctant to seek formal help – new NZ research, (2021), Sotardi, V. <https://www.canterbury.ac.nz/news-and-events/news/https---www-canterbury-ac-nz-news-2021-stressed-teenagers-reluct>

<sup>47</sup> *Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy*, p68, (2019), Ministry of Social Development

<sup>48</sup> About Us, n.d., Voices of Hope, <https://thevoicesofhope.org/pages/about-us-2024>

<sup>49</sup> *Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy*, p.44 and p.66, (2019), Ministry of Social Development

tailoring services are also especially important when considering the racial disparities within stress-related outcomes in Aotearoa. While it may be ideal to focus on prevention of toxic stress as a root cause, when this cannot be achieved, such initiatives are critical towards mitigating the negative effects of stress in rangatahi.

### **Summary of findings**

Rangatahi in Aotearoa experience stress in different ways throughout their lifetime, much of which is unavoidable. Stress can have both positive and negative impacts on the Hauora of rangatahi. Some stressors can encourage positive behaviour and foster future resilience against toxic stress but can also be detrimental to the Hauora of the individual, such as identity-related stress or academic stress. Stressors like those stemming from family income may have a direct negative impact on the Hauora of rangatahi, but stress from this experience can also build resilience. Therefore, it is inaccurate to classify this stress as toxic stress in all situations because the stress itself is not necessarily damaging to Hauora. Stress only becomes damaging to Hauora when rangatahi become overwhelmed with a range of stressors for prolonged periods and are impacted by allostatic overload.

The relationship between rangatahi and their environment is important towards understanding the impacts and causes of stress in rangatahi. UNICEF's socio-ecological model of health shows how individual behaviour and health are influenced by factors relating to family/peers, community, culture/society, and government.<sup>50</sup> Each of these factors play a role in influencing the stressors which affect rangatahi today, reflected in how they surround the individual in figure 6 below.

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<sup>50</sup> Brief on the social ecological model, n.d., UNICEF  
<https://www.unicef.org/media/135011/file/Global%20multisectoral%20operational%20framework.pdf>



Figure 6: Socio-ecological model of health



Within each level of an individual's environment, there exist risk factors, which "(increase) the risk of developing an adverse mental health outcome" and protective factors, which "reduce risk factors, or independently act to increase positive outcomes".<sup>51</sup> For instance, at the family/peer level, household-level economic stress acts as a risk factor, while peer social support acts as a protective factor. With more risk factors and less protective factors, we may expect rangatahi to be more often negatively impacted by stress because of the range of stressors experienced and inability to cope with this stress.

As discussed throughout this report, stress contributes towards health inequities in Aotearoa. It is frequently rangatahi in poverty who experience multiple stressors and are consequently negatively impacted by stress. They may experience more risk factors and have fewer protective factors at multiple levels, making them more vulnerable to stress. It is

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

therefore rangatahi in privileged positions who more often benefit from experiencing stress, while rangatahi in less privileged positions are more often harmed by stress.

Prioritising rangatahi most vulnerable to toxic stress, such as those in less privileged positions, may be the most effective way to reducing the negative impact of stress on rangatahi in Aotearoa. The *Strategy* already encourages a “particular focus on those who are not doing well over a number of wellbeing outcomes”.<sup>52</sup> Initiatives such as the Early Years System and its whānau-centric approach mentioned in the *Strategy* exist as frameworks for possible approaches towards this issue, acting as protective factors at the family and community levels.<sup>53</sup> Strengthening taha whānau as a protective factor can mitigate the negative impact of stress on Hauora. The extension of similar initiatives may help reduce stress in whānau and consequently, rangatahi.

Informal support could also act as a protective factor at the peer level for all rangatahi. This could be strengthened by normalising discussions regarding taha hinengaro around rangatahi and improving the quality of said discussions, effectively increasing access to and the quality of support systems. Rangatahi could also learn to recognise their own stress limits and encouraged to realise that they have some degree of control over their stress to reinforce independent growth. Through such actions can the negative impacts of stress be mitigated in the long-term.

However, it is also beneficial for rangatahi to experience stress, as in some instances it can help develop long-term resilience. The *Strategy* already succeeds in recognising the possible benefits of stress, but fails to do so in detail, which I have elaborated throughout this report.

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<sup>52</sup> *Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy*, p.65, (2019), Ministry of Social Development

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, p.37 and p.68

For instance, identity-related stress can impel rangatahi to develop a self-defined identity, building taha whanau, taha wairua, resilience to stress, and self-actualisation. Yet, this stress can also act as a risk factor, fostering identity confusion. The experience of stress itself can also be used to strengthen resilience, but encouraging stress and independent coping in rangatahi inevitably carries a risk. Chronic, excessive exposure to stress will almost certainly result in detriment to Hauora. Stress is most beneficial when experienced in limited amounts and this limit can vary for different rangatahi.

I believe that stress can be utilised for all rangatahi to foster positive growth and better health outcomes. However, inequity remains an obstacle in ensuring that all rangatahi can benefit from stress. Nevertheless, the approach taken by the government in the *Strategy* is a step in the right direction and shows there is optimism for how stress will be treated in rangatahi in the future. When utilised correctly, pressure can produce diamonds.