

The Health and Wellbeing of Rangatahi Māori in Secondary Schools in New Zealand

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The Health and Wellbeing of rangatahi Māori attending secondary schools in New Zealand

The national youth health survey of secondary schools and Wharekura, Youth'07, identified a range of health and wellbeing issues for rangatahi Māori. Rangatahi were significantly more likely to report depressive symptoms, suicide attempts, cigarette, alcohol and marijuana use, inconsistent contraceptive use, and to be overweight or obese compared to their NZ European peers. They were also significantly more likely to come from socio-economically deprived neighbourhoods, more likely to witness violence in their homes, schools and communities, and more likely to feel unsafe in their neighbourhood (Clark, Robinson, Crengle et al, 2008). In addition, 16% of Māori students reported experiencing discrimination in one of three areas; in health settings, by the police and bullying because they were Māori (Crengle, 2010).

These findings are most concerning so what can be done to improve the health and wellbeing of our rangatahi?

What are the factors that can improve health outcomes for all young people including rangatahi?

International literature has pointed to protective factors that are associated with more positive outcomes for young people. Some of these protective factors are about the characteristics of the individual (such as temperament, sense of humour, intellect), but a public health perspective acknowledges that broader eco-systems affect behaviours and outcomes for individuals. These eco-systems concern the environments and relationships in which young people develop such as families, schools and neighbourhoods. Unlike individual characteristics which are often a fixed part of who we are, environments can be modified and improved to be more supportive and nurturing of all young people.

What are the factors that can improve health outcomes for rangatahi?

For rangatahi family is important: 87% reported in our survey that mum and/or dad cared about them very much and 75% reported living within a two-parent household. But the survey results also provided us with insights into some of the more unique protective factors that are specific to rangatahi as the indigenous young people of Aotearoa New Zealand. To understand these it is important to focus on rangatahi as individuals while acknowledging that they are nested in a much broader system of whānau, hapu, iwi. These vital family and tribal connections are fundamental elements for the health and wellbeing of rangatahi. Through whakapapa, Te reo Māori and knowledge of Tikanga Māori, rangatahi become confident in who they are, where they have come from, where they belong and most importantly - their aspirations for the future (Keelan, 2001; Ware, 2010). Our survey results were positive and confirmed that most rangatahi (97%) are proud to be Māori and over three quarters (77%) knew their iwi affiliations. Many (39%) understood Te reo Māori fairly well or better, and 34% of rangatahi spoke Te reo Māori fairly well or better.

What about the school environment?

If we continue to argue for the crucial role that key environments play in the healthy development of young people, then it's worth considering what rangatahi reported about the school environment. School is an important environment because young people spend a significant proportion of their time there. We expect schools to provide young people with the opportunities that will enable them to develop the knowledge and skills they need to grow as healthy adults. In the 2007 survey 89% of rangatahi reported that it was important for them to be at school every day and most (90%) felt that adults at school cared about them with 83% reporting that teachers went out of their way to help them. However, only 49% of rangatahi reported that they usually got along or had good relationships with their teachers and even less (39%) reported that teachers treated students fairly most of the time (Clark et al, 2008). So what is it that schools can do to create supportive environments that will enable rangatahi to develop and build on the strengths and protective factors that our survey showed are uniquely theirs – culture, language and pride in being Māori?

Researchers from the University of Waikato found when they asked rangatahi about their experiences in mainstream secondary schools that not all classrooms are conducive for rangatahi to learn and achieve. Many rangatahi said that they have to deal with racism and discrimination on a regular basis to the detriment of their learning and their wellbeing. However, these resilient and insightful young people made it clear that when teachers show cultural respect and worked with them as Māori in ways that share power and meet their learning needs, the outcomes were positive for everyone (Bishop and Berryman, 2006).

Bishop and Berryman's (2006) research and their innovative Te Kotahitanga professional development programme for teachers, is a good example of a programme which seeks to fundamentally change the environment for rangatahi – it goes beyond just being a stand-alone programme and strikes at the heart of school culture by challenging the attitudes and values that teachers bring with them to their classrooms. Te Kotahitanga seeks to change the predominant teacher attitudes from blaming rangatahi and their whānau for poor academic achievement, to acknowledging their need as teachers to develop positive and respectful relationships with these young people and their whānau.

In order for rangatahi Māori to achieve their goals, they must have opportunities to succeed. On the other hand we need to be cautious not to blame or expect that young people have the resources to do this by themselves. A culture of blaming young people for their short-comings is counter-productive as not only do we risk creating a subculture of marginalised, unskilled and resentful youth but as a society we miss out on the vibrant, creative talents, energy and leadership potential that these young people have to offer.

To provide rangatahi with the means and opportunities to achieve their dreams and to enable them to become healthy, successful, contributing members of society requires a social and political will. We need to acknowledge that rangatahi are a vital part of our future in this country and they need resources, policies, organisations and programmes to ensure that they do not continue down the current pathway of health disparities that many of the Youth'07 survey results suggest.

For more information about Māori youth health go to the publications section of our website www.youth2000.ac.nz

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