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Whāingaroa/Raglan and Positive Youth Development

Community-Driven Youth Support in Whāingaroa:

A Case Study of the Whāingaroa Youth Work Collective

A thesis

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Abstract

This research explores the development and impact of community-driven youth support in Whāingaroa, a rural community in Aotearoa/New Zealand, through an in-depth examination of a local youth work collective. By employing a qualitative, participatory research methodology, the study investigates the complex dynamics of youth empowerment, community engagement, and cultural responsiveness within a unique local context.

The study traces the evolution of the Whāingaroa Youth Work Collective (WYWC) from its inception to its status as a structured community organization. Data collection spanned two years, encompassing six WYWC collective meetings and three focus groups with key collective members. Through ethnographic observations and collaborative research methods, the study illuminates the processes of youth development and community support emerging from grassroots, volunteer-driven initiatives. Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the data, which was categorized into two primary themes: (1) the collective's purpose and operational methodology, and (2) necessary future steps to address gaps in local youth support. These themes were analysed in relation to two research questions:

- *How can Whāingaroa/Raglan services support youth at a community-based level?*
- *What initiatives could be implemented to foster positive youth development in the future?*

The findings are presented in two main sections. The first examines the collective's strategy, operational framework and current initiatives demonstrating the effectiveness of locally-based youth support. The second explores the collective's aspirations for future initiatives, specifically focusing on two key proposals: establishing a full-time youth connector position and developing a community youth hub.

Key findings demonstrate the transformative potential of volunteer-driven, culturally responsive youth support strategies. The research highlights the importance of contextual understanding, community ownership, and holistic approaches to youth development. Particularly significant is the model's ability to navigate the bicultural landscape of Aotearoa, providing a nuanced approach that respects both indigenous and contemporary cultural frameworks.

Theoretically grounded in Positive Youth Development (PYD) frameworks and indigenous cultural perspectives, the research bridges Western psychological approaches with local cultural understanding. The study reveals how a community-centric model of youth support can effectively address the complex needs of rural youth, emphasizing cultural identity, collective empowerment, and local knowledge.

The study contributes to broader discussions on youth support, community development, and cultural resilience. It challenges traditional, standardized intervention models by showcasing the effectiveness of locally embedded, flexible support strategies. The research provides valuable insights for community organizations, policymakers, educational institutions, and social service providers seeking innovative approaches to youth engagement.

Further, the findings offer a replicable framework for understanding and supporting youth development in rural contexts, with broader implications for community support strategies that prioritize local knowledge, cultural responsiveness, and collective empowerment.

Ultimately, the research presents a compelling argument for understanding youth development as a collaborative, contextually embedded process. It demonstrates that meaningful community support emerges from within, driven by local aspirations, cultural understanding, and collective investment in young people's potential.

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	2
Acknowledgement	4
Introduction.....	8
Te Whakaruruhau Mahuri (TWM) – The Whāingaroa Youth Work Collective (WYWC)...	8
Literature Review.....	11
Outline	11
Positive youth development: addressing a mental health need	12
Youth Mental health in Aotearoa/New Zealand	12
Theories of Youth Wellbeing.....	14
Deficit models: Hall, Freud, Erikson and Horney	14
Strengths-based approach: Rogers, Seligman and existential psychology.....	17
The ecological model.....	20
Positive Youth Development Theories	23
Benson’s Development assets concept.....	25
Lerner “Five Cs” framework:	27
Social and Emotional Learning	29
PYD in Aotearoa/New Zealand	31
Summary.....	34
Method	36
Participants and recruitment.....	36
Data Collection.....	40
Data Analysis.....	44
Findings.....	49
WYWC a Bridge Between Youth and Community: A strategy to support youth at a community-based level	51
Changing the narrative.....	52
Connecting with and Understanding Raglan’s youth.....	68
Growing Together: WYWC & Whāingaroa's Community Network"	83
Summary of theme one:.....	93
From a collective to a formal entity: the WYWC's long term goals and aspirations.....	95
Creation of a Paid Position within the WYWC	97
The Development of a youth Hub:	113
Summary of theme two.....	123

Discussion	125
Methodology and Focus	125
Key findings	126
Contributions and Implications	131
Practical Applications.....	133
Theoretical and Practical Significance	135
Research limitations	136
Recommendations for future Research Directions.....	138
CONCLUSION:.....	140
References.....	142

List of Map and Tables:

Diagram 1: Summary of Key Findings.....	51
Table 1: Map of Community Stakeholders involved in the WYWC.....	84

Introduction

The Whāingaroa Youth Work Collective (WYWC)- Te Whakaruruhau Mahuri (TWM)

On the West coast of the North Island of Aotearoa/New Zealand, about 48 kilometres west of Hamilton, sits the lovely town of Whāingaroa. It boasts a distinctive fusion of natural beauty and cultural attractions and has a population of about 3,000 people. World-class surf breaks like Manu Bay attracts surfers from all over the world, making surfing one of its main draws for the community who live in the region. Whāingaroa/ Raglan also has a significant fishing community, both as a leisure activity and a modest enterprise. The town's artistic community enhances its personality, with galleries and regional craftspeople adding to its thriving culture. Raglan is renowned for its relaxed vibe, eco-friendly principles, and breathtaking scenery of towering cliffs and thick native vegetation (Ara, 2012).

Raglan has a rich Māori history, the Māori name for Raglan, Whāingaroa, translates to 'the extended journey' and symbolizes the enduring quest of the Tainui waka in search of its ultimate destination. Ultimately, the waka found its way to Kāwhia Harbour, situated farther to the south (University, 2016). The Tainui confederate, who trace their ancestry to the Tainui waka (ancestral canoe), have a significant presence in this region, which is considered part of their traditional territory. In the latter part of the 18th century, the iwi (nation) of Ngāti Māhanga populated the region near Whāingaroa (Ara, 2012).

Whāingaroa/Raglan's coastal resources, including abundant seafood from the Tasman Sea and Raglan Harbor, formed the basis of the Ngāti Māhanga way of life, with fishing and gathering being integral to their way of life. Over time, the area witnessed conflicts and land disputes between Māori and European settlers during colonization, leading to significant changes in land ownership and traditional practices (Tribunal, 2018). While there may have been negative impacts to local iwi, hapū and whānau, the Māori community in Whāingaroa/Raglan

has continued to emphasise their significant contributions to the area, and their self-determination. This has permeated through the local Raglan community which continues to honour and celebrate Māori cultural heritage through various events, ceremonies, and the preservation of historical sites and traditions.

In 2023, the Whaingaroa Youthwork Collective (WYWC), also known as Te Whakaruruhau Mahuri, was established with a primary focus on promoting positive youth development in Raglan. Led by Joe Rao of Raglan Area School and Gabrielle Parson of Raglan Naturally, this collective was formed to provide essential support to the local youth community.

WYWC's mission revolves around orchestrating various events and projects, identifying the unique needs of Raglan's young people, and actively engaging with them. The name "Te Whakaruruhau Mahuri" was thoughtfully gifted by a local Matua and is symbolic of the way Harakeke, or flax, grows, with older leaves sheltering the new ones emerging. The WYWC's holds regular meetings, with invitations extended to various key stakeholders from the community such as teachers, police officers, business owners and many more. This collective emerged in response to a notable increase in youth discontent and disengagement observed by Joe and other school staff following the COVID-19 pandemic. Its formation serves as a proactive approach to addressing the needs of Raglan's youth, aligning with the principles of positive youth development.

This project looks to support the work of WYWC and their Positive Youth Development work within the Whāingaroa/Raglan community, also ensuring to acknowledge Māori perspectives throughout. Specifically, it is borne out of a community-driven need for developing a strategic approach to youth support and development, given the growing issues for young people in the region.

My personal connection to Whāingaroa/Raglan began when I first arrived in Aotearoa/New Zealand, drawn to the region by its world-renowned surf breaks and distinctive lifestyle. The community's welcoming nature and collective spirit, as described earlier, immediately resonated with me, inspiring me to establish roots in this unique coastal town. Over the past seven years, my professional work supporting youth and families across the region has provided deep insights into the challenges young people face and the limitations of mainstream support systems in addressing their needs.

The establishment of the WYWC in 2023 naturally aligned with both my professional experience and personal commitment to the community. After learning about this collective of volunteers working to support local youth, I engaged with the initial steering group to understand their vision and objectives. Their collaborative approach, which embodies the same community-driven spirit that characterizes Whāingaroa/Raglan, prompted me to become actively involved in supporting their mission. Through extensive discussions with the collective, we identified the need for a comprehensive document that would serve three key purposes: first, to chronicle the Whāingaroa Youth Work Collective's (WYWC) journey and development; second, to ground their work in academic literature about positive youth development; and third, to provide the collective with accessible academic resources they can draw upon for future initiatives. This approach ensures that while the collective maintains its grassroots identity and honours the unique cultural context of Whāingaroa/Raglan, particularly its rich Māori heritage, it also benefits from evidence-based practices in youth development. The document aims to bridge theoretical frameworks with practical, community-based approaches, creating a resource that both validates local knowledge and enriches it with established research findings.

Literature Review

Outline

This literature review establishes the theoretical and contextual foundation for examining a community-based youth intervention in Whāingaroa/Raglan through the lens of Positive Youth Development (PYD). The review begins by exploring the global landscape of youth mental health challenges, highlighting how young people are often viewed through a deficit lens that emphasizes problems rather than potential. It then narrows its focus to examine these challenges within the specific context of Aotearoa/New Zealand, particularly addressing the unique circumstances faced by Māori and Pasifika communities within the historical context of colonization and contemporary social inequities.

The theoretical framework of the review traces the evolution of youth development theories, moving from traditional deficit-based models (including Hall, Freud, Erikson, and Horney's perspectives) to strength-based approaches (featuring Rogers, Seligman, and existential psychology). This progression leads to an in-depth examination of contemporary PYD frameworks, with particular attention to Bronfenbrenner's ecological model, Benson's developmental assets theory, and Lerner's "Five Cs" theory. The review concludes by contextualizing PYD within Aotearoa/New Zealand's unique bicultural context, examining both its potential benefits and limitations when applied to Indigenous communities, and emphasizing the critical importance of culturally responsive approaches in youth development work. This theoretical foundation directly informs the study of the Whāingaroa/Raglan community-based youth intervention, providing a framework for understanding how local initiatives can effectively support youth development while honouring cultural contexts and community strengths.

Positive youth development: addressing a mental health need

Mental health challenges among young people have become increasingly prevalent globally, with conditions like depression, anxiety, eating disorders, and self-harm significantly impacting youth wellbeing (Belfer, 2008; Bor et al., 2014; Collishaw, 2015). While these challenges are complex and influenced by multiple factors including genetics, environment, and social context, young people are often portrayed through a deficit lens that emphasizes their problems rather than their potential. This framing is particularly evident in how youth mental health is discussed in relation to crises like COVID-19 (Organization, 2022; Ravens-Sieberer et al., 2022).

The pandemic highlighted how youth are frequently positioned as 'problematic' or 'at risk' when facing adversity. Rather than recognizing their resilience and capacity to adapt, discourse often focused on their 'deteriorating' mental health, 'disruptive' behaviours, and 'inability' to cope with change (Dalton et al., 2020; Santomauro et al., 2021). This deficit-based framework can be particularly damaging as it neglects young people's strengths and capabilities, potentially reinforcing negative self-perceptions and societal stigma. When challenges like substance abuse, anxiety, or behavioural issues arise, they are often framed as inherent problems with youth rather than as understandable responses to complex environmental and social pressures, including family dynamics, traumatic experiences, financial stressors, discrimination, and lack of social support (Behere et al., 2017; Corrigan et al., 2004).

Youth Mental health in Aotearoa/New Zealand

Mental health among young people in Aotearoa/New Zealand remains a critical concern, with recent years showing a notable increase in mental health difficulties, particularly among Māori and Pasifika youth (Fleming et al., 2022; Menzies et al., 2020). In response, youth

workers and government policymakers have increasingly embraced the Positive Youth Development (PYD) approach for both teenagers (10-18 years old) and emerging adults (18-29 years old), recognizing young people's potential and developmental flexibility (Shek et al., 2019). This is evidenced by the Ministry of Youth Development (MYD), or Te Manatū Whakahiato Taiohi, which allocates approximately \$12.062 million annually to support youth development initiatives aimed at improving the wellbeing of young people aged 12-24 (Development, 2023).

However, while this shift towards PYD represents a significant departure from conventional deficit-based approaches, its implementation across Aotearoa has been uneven. Despite MYD's substantial funding and commitment to strength-based programming, the integration of PYD principles varies significantly across different regions and communities. This framework, which emphasizes developing young people's assets, skills, and capacities rather than focusing on deficiencies, has not been consistently adopted across all sectors working with youth (Anae et al., 2015; Arahanga-Doyle et al., 2019; Deane & Dutton, 2020). Many interventions and services continue to operate from a traditional deficit model, despite evidence supporting the effectiveness of strength-based approaches that build resilience and provide young people with a sense of purpose (Shek et al., 2019).

As we address the urgent health and wellbeing issues facing Aotearoa's youth, the need for a more consistent and comprehensive implementation of PYD becomes increasingly apparent. Understanding youth wellbeing through a holistic lens—encompassing physical, emotional, social, and psychological aspects—is crucial not only for individual development but also for the broader prosperity of communities and countries (Adom et al., 2016; Deane & Dutton, 2020; Hoyt et al., 2012; Olaleye, 2010). To fully appreciate both the potential and challenges of implementing PYD approaches in Aotearoa, it is essential to explore the historical landscape of youth development theories that inform current practice.

Theories of Youth Wellbeing

Youth wellbeing is a multidimensional concept which refers to young people's physical, emotional, social, and psychological health. Youth wellness affects not just an individual's potential but also the general health and prosperity of communities and countries (Deane & Dutton, 2020; Hoyt et al., 2012; Olaleye, 2010). The idea of youth wellbeing in this context extends beyond the absence of disease and difficulties. It imply a holistic approach that fosters resilience, self-esteem, and a sense of purpose, empowering youth to navigate life successfully(Benson et al., 2006; White et al., 2017; Williams et al., 2018).

By addressing the needs and aspirations of young people, we may positively impact future generations and foster a more tolerant and compassionate society. (Shek et al., 2019; Williams et al., 2018; Anae et al., 2002). This section unpacks some of the most significant psychological theories that have informed the youth development literature, as well as evaluating their relevance for Aotearoa New Zealand.

Deficit models: Hall, Freud, Erikson and Horney

Concerted focus on youth development = in academia traces its origins to G. Stanley Hall's groundbreaking research on adolescence (Hall, 1905). Although not the first to attempt to explain and define the developmental difficulties associated with puberty, his work was widely recognised and continues to be drawn on today. The common phrase "storm and stress", associated with puberty as a life stage, originated from his emphasis on the unavoidable "storm and stress" that this stage of life would bring, when disruptive emotions, conflict, and volatility characterise adolescence(Hall, 1905). Hall compared this period of growth to a psychological and emotional storm, believing that teenagers experience immense upheavals in their thoughts, feelings, and behaviour (Arnett, 1999). This hypothesis holds that the physical changes associated with puberty, which he perceived as a period of crisis and disequilibrium, are primarily responsible for this period of upheaval and stress. He argued

that elevated emotional states and internal distress are brought on by the quick changes in the body, changes in hormones, and the growth of sexual urges. Mood swings, defiance of authority figures, and ultimately a desire for autonomy and uniqueness could result from this (Hall, 1905). For most of the 20th century, numerous scholars held to this idea, seeing adolescence as a difficult stage of life that requires management skills (Alsup, 2014; Berzonsky, 1982; Hogan, 2003).

In contrast, Freud's theories of adolescent and adult development focused on psychosexual development (Blum, 1949; Steinberg & Lerner, 2004). In accordance with Freud's theory, there are several phases of human development, including the oral, anal, phallic, latency, and genital stages. Each stage is distinguished by a focus on a specific erogenous zone and a conflict that needs to be addressed. According to this viewpoint, the psychosexual phases that start in early childhood continue until puberty. The genital stage, which is the fifth and last stage according to his theory, often begins during puberty and lasts until maturity. Throughout this phase, people experience a strong craving for close, mature relationships as well as a reawakening of their sexual drives. These earlier arguments and resolutions are believed to have an effect on a person's identity, self-worth, and capacity to form wholesome relationships during adolescence. Furthermore, Freud felt that unresolved conflicts from previous stages could cause emotional issues, neuroses, or even psychopathology in later life (Blum, 1949; Christie & Viner, 2005; Elkatawneh, 2013).

Though influential, Freud's views were critiqued for their imprecise portrayal of human development. In reaction to criticisms of Freud's theories, the Neo-Freudians arose; their goal was to downplay the importance of sexuality and place greater emphasis on the social environment's influence (Lerner & Steinberg, 2009). Renowned Neo-Freudian Erikson presented his psychosocial theory, emphasising the role of social connections at every phase

of personality development. In his theory psychosocial development spans across the entire lifespan (Capps, 2004; Maree, 2022).

Adolescence, in Erikson's view, is a crucial time when people overcome identity crises and develop their sense of self through relationships with others (Erikson, 1959). The stage of identity versus role confusion holds significant importance for the wellbeing of young individuals during this life period. For Erikson, this is a phase when youth grapple with questions of belonging and self-identity. Therefore, this phase provides opportunities for exploration and self-discovery becomes crucial in fostering a self of belonging, a sense of uniqueness and finally their overall wellbeing.(Hamman & Hendricks, 2005; Marcia, 1980). In this perspective, young people are encouraged to engage in activities that align with their interests and talents can greatly aid in the development of their sense of identity and purpose. By allowing them to explore different avenues, they can better understand who they are and what gives their life meaning. Such experiences play a fundamental role in shaping their self-concept and building a solid foundation for a fulfilling and healthy adulthood (Blasi, 1988; Marcia, 1980).

Karen Horney's work presented a compelling challenge to Freud's theory by adopting a cultural perspective to account for variations in male and female personalities. Her approach highlighted the significant influence of societal factors in shaping individuals' personalities, representing a departure from Freud's primary emphasis on biological determinants (Lopez, 1984; O'Connell, 1980). However, despite these advancements, both Freudians and some neo-Freudians have predominantly adopted deficit views regarding adolescence. These perspectives tend to view adolescents as problems to be managed or "deficits" that need correction (Lerner, 2005, 2018).

As a whole, these early theories of youth development were characterised by a focus on the negative experiences of adolescence, overlooking the strengths and positive attributes that can protect young people against mental health issues. In other words, the deficit perspective, separated the study of youth from the study of health and constructive or positive development (Overton, 2006). These theories emphasize young people's susceptibility and shortcomings, fostering the notion that mental and behavioural issues were unavoidable and ongoing unless they were avoided during specific developmental stages. These theories also frequently implied a division of causation between nature and nurture, the organism and its environment, and the individual and their surroundings (Lerner et al., 2019).

However, the contemporary view has moved beyond this deficit-oriented outlook. Instead, it focuses on empowering and supporting young individuals to flourish. This view is strongly influenced by the relational models of development that came to the forefront of developmental psychology by the latter half of the twentieth century (Dimitrova & Wiium, 2021; Kuhn et al., 1998).

Strengths-based approach: Rogers, Seligman and existential psychology

In contrast to conventional deficit-based approaches, Carl Rogers' theory of psychopathology—also known as person-centred therapy—took a humanistic approach emphasizing the positive relationship between individuals and their environment. Every person, according to Rogers, has an innate desire to achieve self-actualization, which he described as realising one's full potential and persistently pursuing personal development and fulfilment (Rogers, 2000). He maintained that psychopathological disorders develop when people are prevented from fulfilling this innate desire by a variety of conditions, including societal expectations, a lack of authentic self-expression, and unsupportive environments. Psychopathological symptoms, in Rogers' opinion, should be viewed as signals of a person's ongoing battle to satisfy basic psychological needs rather than as merely symptoms of a

disease. He named these fundamental requirements as the need for self-worth and self-esteem, as well as the need for others to treat one with nonjudgmental acceptance and respect. When these requirements are not sufficiently met, people may adopt unhealthy coping strategies or participate in actions that harm their psychological wellbeing (Rogers, 1966; Shek et al., 2019).

He believed that by fostering an environment of empathic understanding and unconditional positive regard, individuals might overcome their psychopathological difficulties and engage on a journey of self-discovery, leading to improved mental and emotional wellbeing (Rogers, 2000). In the therapeutic context, he emphasised the need of a supportive and sympathetic therapy connection in helping a person become more self-aware and accepting of who they are. In contrast to deficit-based theories, which only emphasise issues and pathology, Rogers' method emphasises the significance of fostering good traits and promoting human growth (Crisp, 2011; Rogers, 1966). Carl Rogers's theory of well-being holds particular relevance in the context of youth well-being. His person-centred approach underscores the importance of creating an environment where young individuals feel valued, respected, and understood. In the realm of youth well-being, this theory emphasizes the significance of providing a safe and empathetic space for adolescents to express their thoughts, emotions, and experiences. By doing so, it enables them to develop a positive self-concept, self-acceptance, and a sense of personal growth. Roger's theory fundamentally emphasises the idea that creating a compassionate and encouraging atmosphere is essential to promoting young people's wellbeing, giving them the tools they need to effectively traverse adolescence, and encouraging positive personal growth.

By emphasising human strengths and virtues, positive psychology pioneer Martin Seligman posed a challenge to the dominant deficit-based perspective (Waterman, 2013). Seligman's theory aimed to pinpoint and strengthen positive characteristics of human experience like

resilience and happiness(Seligman, 2002) . According to Seligman, psychology should put equal emphasis on fostering human flourishing and treating mental disease(Seligman, 2002). His research helped people realise how important it is for each person's wellbeing to cultivate happy feelings, involvement, fulfilling relationships, accomplishments, and a sense of purpose in life.

Existential psychology offers a distinctive viewpoint on human existence and the pursuit of meaning, as expressed by philosophers and psychologists like Viktor Frankl, Rollo May, and Irvin Yalom. According to this perspective, people can still find meaning and purpose in life despite hardship and life's difficulties (May, 1961). While emphasising the inherent capacity for growth and personal transformation via self-awareness and responsibility, existential psychology recognises the reality of human suffering. Moreover, it encourages individuals to embrace their inner conflicts and use them as opportunities for self-awareness and personal development(May & Yalom, 1989). They believed that finding purpose in life is crucial for psychological wellbeing and that and it influences the individuals capacity to choose their responses to life's challenges (DuBois & Frankl, 2005). In the therapeutic process they highlighted the importance of addressing existential concerns, such as the fear of death, the search for meaning, and the pursuit of personal authenticity. (Batthyany & Russo-Netzer, 2014; Frankl et al., 2010; May & Yalom, 1989).

These theories contrast with deficit-based models, which emphasise primarily on identifying and resolving issues or dysfunctions. Instead, they place a greater emphasis on the good that comes from being human, emphasising our capacity for development, self-actualization, and resilience in the face of adversity. These ideas open up fresh perspectives for comprehending and advancing the wellbeing of persons by changing the emphasis from deficiencies to strengths. They promote a more comprehensive approach to psychology, taking into account

both the difficulties and opportunities for growth in the context of people's interactions with their environment.

The ecological model

The ecological model, a well-known psychological framework, is particularly important for the development of PYD frameworks. This paradigm, according to Urie Bronfenbrenner, offers a thorough lens through which consider the multiple factors that affect young people's development and wellbeing (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). His theory emphasizes that understanding an individual's development requires considering not only their personal characteristics but also the broader contexts in which they live and grow. In stressing the vital importance of context in adolescent development, it highlights the dynamic interaction between numerous systems and surroundings contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). This approach recognized that an individual's development is not solely influenced by a single context but by a network of interconnected environments. Bronfenbrenner's ecological perspective proposed a hierarchy of contexts, each nested within the next, in which an individual is situated (Härkönen, 2001; Kilanowski, 2017). These are the:

- **Microsystem:** The contexts that adolescents engage with most frequently at this level include their families, schools, peer groups, and local communities. Young individuals are significantly impacted by the microsystem, which shapes their social interactions, behaviours, and attitudes.
- **Mesosystem:** The interactions between various microsystems are captured by the mesosystem. This covers the ways in which teenage experiences are influenced by how family, school, and community interact with one another. Positive development requires effective communication and cooperation between these systems.

- Exosystem: The exosystem encompasses circumstances that have an indirect impact on adolescents, such as a parent's place of employment or social support systems, and goes beyond the immediate environs of adolescents. These environments have a big impact on opportunities and wellbeing.
- Macrosystem: The macrosystem refers to broader cultural, sociological, economic, and political elements that affect how adolescents navigate their life in terms of values, norms, and expectations. This level includes systematic inequality, social standards, and cultural identity.
- Chronosystem: The temporal dimension of youth development acknowledges that adolescents' growth paths are influenced not only by their individual life transitions but also by the broader historical moments and social changes they experience.

The "fusion" of nature and nurture is emphasised by the ecological perspective, which concentrates on the developmental systems of human development. This perspective suggests that human development is not solely determined by either genetics or environment. Instead, it recognizes that both factors are interwoven and mutually influential. For instance, Bronfenbrenner emphasised the significance of developmental contexts where several systems exist in the environment and are interconnected one within the other influencing each other over time. Teenagers live in a variety of environments, including schools, peer groups, social networks, neighbourhoods, and communities. According to the ecological perspective's idea of temporal embeddedness, a person's dynamic relationship with their environment has the capacity to develop and shift over the course of their lifetime. This suggests that as people engage with different surroundings and systems over time, developmental processes are continuously altering rather than being fixed (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1994).

Two central concepts underpin this optimistic perspective on human development. First, there's "developmental regulation," which involves how individuals actively engage with

their surroundings, adapt to challenges, learn new skills, and adjust to changing circumstances. This dynamic process allows individuals to continually shape their development through interaction and response to their environment (Lerner et al., 2019; Shek et al., 2019). The second key concept is "relative plasticity," which emphasizes the flexibility of developmental paths. It recognizes that individuals aren't bound by predetermined outcomes; rather, their development results from a combination of their innate characteristics and the environments they navigate. This concept acknowledges that different environments have varying effects based on an individual's unique attributes (Baltes et al., 1998; Lerner, 2018).

Together, these concepts contribute to the idea of thriving across the lifespan. Thriving signifies a state where an individual's personal traits align positively with the societal context. Adaptive developmental regulation, where individuals actively engage with their environments and adjust their behaviours, plays a critical role in enhancing personal development and contributing positively to society. This interaction between the individual and their surroundings promotes growth, well-being, and positive change (Lerner et al., 2019). The ecological theory emphasizes that understanding an individual's development requires considering not only their personal characteristics but also the broader contexts in which they live and grow. Applying the ecological model to positive youth development entails identifying and utilising these ecological levels' advantages. The approach has a significant impact on the healthy development of young people. By doing so, the emphasis is shifted from a deficit-based strategy to one that cultivates strengths and potential. By taking into account how different ecological systems shape young people, interventions can be designed to offer the support and resources required at various stage (Damon & Gregory, 2003; Eccles & Roeser, 2009).

Positive Youth Development Theories

In this section, I explore the dynamic field of Positive Youth Development (PYD), which represents a burgeoning domain within applied developmental science. It begins with a brief introduction of PYD, covering some of the core frameworks of PYD include the concept of development assets, the “five Cs” framework, and social emotional learning. It then turns to how PYD has been applied in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

PYD places a focus on developing surroundings that are loving and supportive to promote resilience, self-esteem, and healthy growth. Furthermore, it promotes the development of settings where teenagers are encouraged to flourish, forge solid bonds with others, forge strong senses of self, and make positive contributions to their communities (Arahanga-Doyle et al., 2019; Catalano et al., 2004). PYD finds its foundation in established theoretical principles of developmental psychology, while simultaneously drawing vitality from more contemporary emphases on nurturing the untapped potential of young individuals rather than dwelling on their perceived shortcomings. It also places a strong focus on understanding and shaping the roles played by developmental contexts, notably the community, and empowers youth themselves as architects of their own growth. PYD, which emerged in the 1990s, stands in stark contrast to the prevailing deficit model of adolescent development that dominated the 20th century (Benson et al., 2006; Benson et al., 2011; Burkhard et al., 2019). Whereas the deficit model regarded youth as 'issues to be managed and Ecological theories focus on the impact of environmental factors and systems on youth development, the PYD paradigm takes a strengths-based approach, regarding adolescents as 'assets to be cultivated (Benson et al., 2007; Burkhard et al., 2019; Shek et al., 2019).

Positive youth development functions as both a realm of academic inquiry and a domain of practical application (Arahanga-Doyle et al., 2019; Benson et al., 2007; Burkhard et al., 2019; Catalano et al., 2004). Rather than being bound together by formal affiliations or

qualifications, it is a collective endeavour characterized by a common set of values and objectives. Within this framework, positive youth development encompasses a burgeoning array of initiatives, organizations, foundations, government grant schemes, policy efforts, scholars, and professionals dedicated to advancing the wellbeing, competence, and triumph of young individuals.

In recent assessments of positive youth development, some of the more notable characteristics of this field have emerged including:

- Comprehensive perspective: connecting various ecological contexts (such as relationships, programs, families, schools, neighbourhoods, communities) to the creation of experiences and opportunities that promote positive development outcomes.
- Promotion of youth wellbeing: in particular focuses on access to positive experiences, resources, and opportunities, benefiting both individuals and society.
- Developmental approach: focusing on growth, and increasingly acknowledging that young people can actively contribute to their positive development.
- Symbiotic strategy: integrating ideas and practices from various fields, including resiliency, prevention, public health, community organizing, and developmental psychology (Benson et al., 2007; Bowers et al., 2010; Lerner et al., 2019).

PYD exhibits comprehensiveness in its breadth, establishing connections across diverse ecological contexts, which encompass relationships, programs, families, schools, neighbourhoods, and communities. These linkages are aimed at fostering the creation of experiences, support systems, and opportunities, all recognized for their potential to improve positive developmental outcomes (Benson & Pittman, 2012).

Benson's Development assets concept

The Benson Theory of Positive Youth Growth, created by Peter L. Benson, is a well-known concept that prioritises supporting young people's positive development and is greatly influenced by the ecological theory (Shek et al., 2019). In the subject of youth development, Benson is a pioneer. He is renowned for his in-depth study of what he called "Developmental Assets" (Benson, 2006). This idea emphasises the significance of abilities or talents that children can develop, foster, and use to lead happy and fulfilling lives (Benson, 2006; Benson & Scales, 2009; Benson et al., 2006).

The central idea of the Benson Theory of Positive Youth Development revolves around the concept of Developmental Assets, which are categorized into two main groups:

1. External Assets: These assets are provided by the environment such as: family, school, community, and other support systems:

- Support: To feel valued and connected, young people need the support of their families, strong role models, and a caring community.
- Empowerment: empowering young people by giving them important responsibilities and involving them in decision-making would help them feel competent, capable, and appreciated.
- Boundaries and Expectations: Young people can acquire a sense of security and understanding by having clear norms and expectations that are consistent and caring.
- Constructive Use of Time: Giving young people the chance to participate in pleasant and rewarding activities, such hobbies, athletics, and the arts, adds to their healthy development.

2. Internal Assets: These assets reflect the inner-developmental traits and abilities that young people possess.

- **Commitment to Learning:** youth's understanding of the value of lifelong learning and their confidence in their own skills, which connects A growth mindset and a desire for ongoing self-improvement.
- **Positive Values:** strong guiding concepts that assist youth in making wise decisions in their lives.
- **Social Competencies:** interpersonal skills, effective communication, and the ability to establish and maintain positive relationships are critical for personal and social healthy development.
- **Positive Identity:** a sense of self-worth, a positive self-concept, and a clear sense of their future identity and purpose is essential for their overall wellbeing this is often connect to a sense of control over their environment.

The foundation of the developmental assets framework is the assumption that young people are more likely to prosper and abstain from harmful behaviours if they have a greater number of these assets (Benson et al., 2011). It implies that we can increase young people's resilience, drive, and capacity to make a meaningful contribution to their communities by cultivating these assets in their lives (Benson et al., 2011; Shek et al., 2019).

The developmental assets framework outlines essential elements of support and experience that research links to positive outcomes in young people - from academic success and reduced risk-taking to enhanced leadership abilities, prosocial behaviour, and emotional resilience (Scales et al., 2006). For this reason, Benson's Theory of Positive Youth Development is widely used in educational, community, and youth development programs as a practical guide for promoting positive growth in young individuals (Benson, 2006; Benson & Scales, 2009). By focusing on building these assets and creating supportive environments, educators, parents, and communities can contribute to the healthy development and success of young people as they journey from childhood to adulthood.

Lerner “Five Cs” framework:

The 'Five Cs' theory developed by Richard M. Lerner serves as one of the foundational frameworks within Positive Youth Development (PYD), offering practitioners and researchers a comprehensive lens through which to understand and nurture young people's holistic development (Geldhof et al., 2015). Lerner's theory places emphasis on recognizing and nurturing the strengths and assets of young people, moving away from focusing solely on their challenges or deficiencies (Lerner et al., 2019). The foundation of Lerner's philosophy is a strengths-based approach based on the ecological framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). This theory emphasizes the value of recognizing and fostering the innate talents and skills that young people have. This perspective shifts the focus from fixating on their challenges or shortcomings to recognizing their potential. By fostering their strengths, this approach cultivates a sense of competence and a positive self-identity, empowering them to overcome obstacles and thrive (Lerner et al., 2005).

Central to Lerner's framework are the "Five Cs" – Competence, Confidence, Connection, Character, and Caring/Compassion. Positive youth development is built on these components. Competence includes the development of skills, enabling young people to create aptitudes that transfer to other spheres of life. Different levels of competency are described by this framework. Critical thinking, logical reasoning, and effective decision-making are all part of cognitive competence. Interpersonal skills, particularly the ability to resolve conflicts, are part of social competence. Exam results, attendance history, and school performance all serve as indicators of academic competency. Work ethic and the capacity to consider a variety of career choices are indicators of vocational competence. Being confident is having faith in one's skills and worth. It entails having a strong sense of self-worth, a positive self-concept, and the capacity to respond to difficulties with resilience. Confidence is also tied to a positive

self-concept. Young individuals who are confident are better able to deal with challenges, try new things, and have great interactions with others.

Connection emphasizes the importance of healthy relationships. Young people cultivate a sense of belonging and support by developing relationships with family, friends, mentors, and the community (Deane & Dutton, 2020; Youngblade et al., 2007). It is crucial to have good relationships with your family, friends, and mentors. These connections give vital support, foster a sense of belonging, and offer direction throughout periods of growth. The theory recognises the importance of developmental circumstances like family, school, and community in influencing outcomes that are well-rounded. Another crucial component is character development, which emphasises moral development and a strong feeling of integrity. Building character gives people the values that inform their choices and deeds. Finally, compassion and caring influences Empathy and altruism. Young people make a better contribution to society by instilling a sense of responsibility for others and the community. This component emphasises a larger sense of social responsibility and the connection of people and communities (Bowers et al., 2010; Eccles & Roeser, 2009; Lerner, 2005; Shek et al., 2019).

The theory suggests that positive development takes place when the inherent strengths of young individuals, exemplified by their substantial capacity for structured growth or adaptability during adolescence, are intentionally aligned with beneficial resources within their social environment. The relevance of developmental assets, both internal (such as personal strengths) and external (such as supportive connections), in affecting young people's welfare is made clear by Lerner's theory (Geldhof et al., 2015). Through proactive engagement, young people are urged to participate in pursuits that are in keeping with their interests and skills in this framework. This participation fosters the development of skills, mastery, and a sense of purpose. Youth growth is characterized by challenges, and the idea

highlights the significance of resilience. Giving young people coping strategies, the capacity to learn from failures, and adaptive abilities helps them to successfully traverse change and hardship (Eccles & Roeser, 2009; Fanslow et al., 2021).

In sum, Lerner's theory embodies a comprehensive framework that encourages the nurturing of strengths, fostering positive relationships, and providing supportive environments. By emphasizing the Five Cs, promoting developmental assets, and cultivating resilience, the theory offers a holistic approach to positive youth development that empowers young individuals to navigate the complexities of life with competence, character, and compassion (Borowski, 2019; Bowers et al., 2010; Geldhof et al., 2015).

Social and Emotional Learning

Back in 1994, the Fetzer Institute convened a gathering of individuals comprising researchers, educators, and child advocates, all deeply committed to enhancing children's positive development through various educational initiatives (Elias et al., 1997). This meeting stemmed from shared concerns regarding the ineffectiveness of school programs and a lack of synergy among them. As a result of this collaboration, they introduced the concept of 'Social and Emotional Learning' (SEL) as a comprehensive framework designed to cater to the needs of young individuals while facilitating better alignment and coordination among school programs (Borowski, 2019).

It acknowledges that success in life requires more than just academic achievement; people also need to have a certain set of skills linked to regulating their emotions, forming good relationships, and making wise decisions (Tolan et al., 2016).

The foundation of the Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) framework is a combination of theories that address numerous facets of social and emotional growth in humans. It incorporates concepts from theories of social cognition, processing of emotions, and

emotional intelligence. SEL is an applied strategy that makes use of these theories to develop young people's positive traits, create circumstances that are encouraging, and encourage positive relationships between kids and their environment. In short SEL is the educational process to acquire emotional and social competence within an environment (Elias, 1997; Lawlor, 2016). Some of the key essential attributes that young person has acquire and apply to be social competent and that are foster the by the SEL approach are:

1. *Self-awareness*: This aspect involves the ability to objectively recognize and understand one's own thoughts, feelings, beliefs, strengths, and weaknesses. It includes sub-skills such as "identifying emotions," "accurate self-perception," "recognizing strengths," "self-confidence," and "self-efficacy."
2. *Self-management*: is the ability to effectively control one's thoughts, feelings, and actions in a variety of contexts. It also includes the drive to work towards one's own objectives. Self-management subskills include "self-motivation," "self-discipline," "impulse control," "stress management," "goal setting," and "organisational skills."
3. *Relationship skills*: Developing and maintaining positive and constructive relationships with others is central to this aspect. Sub-skills encompass "communication," "social engagement," "relationship building," and "teamwork."
4. *Responsible decision-making*: entails the ability to make sound choices concerning one's behaviour and interactions with others, aligning with moral standards, safety principles, and societal norms.
5. *Social Awareness* is the capacity to empathise and comprehend others, even those from diverse cultures and backgrounds. This includes the skills necessary to recognise family, school, and community resources and supports, to be empathetic towards others, and to comprehend broader historical and societal norms for behaviour in a range of contexts (Borowski, 2019; Payton et al., 2000).

SEL interventions centre on the development of social and emotional skills in young individuals through two primary approaches: directly enhancing their competencies or indirectly enhancing their learning environments, which in turn support the growth of social-emotional competencies (Elias et al., 1997). These nurtured competencies, frequently exemplified by skills such as recognizing emotions, practicing self-control, and employing coping strategies, extend to aspects like self-perception (including self-worth and self-concept), attitudes towards others (such as prosocial beliefs), and attitudes related to the school environment (including perceptions of teachers, school bonding, and a sense of belonging). These cultivated competencies serve as catalysts for fostering positive social relationships, improving academic and behavioural outcomes, and enhancing overall productive performance (Rivas-Drake et al., 2021; Shek et al., 2019; Stefanovic et al., 2021).

PYD in Aotearoa/New Zealand

Both on a local and global scale, there is an increasing focus on positive development paradigms as a means of simultaneously enhancing human development and mitigating the ongoing and burdensome social and financial consequences linked to mental illness and its related issues (Arae et al., 2002). In Aotearoa/New Zealand, Positive Youth Development (PYD) plays a fundamental role in shaping the strategies and methods employed by the Ministry of Youth Development, as outlined in their 2009 guidelines. Additionally, the principles of PYD are integrated into the Youth Development Strategy Aotearoa, serving as the theoretical foundation for working with young people in Aotearoa (Deane et al., 2019; Mercier et al., 2019). Based on this strategic framework, the Ministry collaborates with a diverse range of stakeholders, including government entities, businesses, and youth-focused organizations. Their collective aim is to facilitate positive wellbeing outcomes for young individuals. This collaborative effort encompasses not only the financial support of youth

development programs but also an active commitment to involving young people in the decision-making processes that directly affect their lives.

The Youth Development Strategy Aotearoa (YDSA) developed in 2002 is a government strategy in Aotearoa/ New Zealand aimed at guiding policies and initiatives related to youth development (Development, 2002). The YDSA is designed to provide a comprehensive and coordinated framework for promoting the wellbeing and positive development of young people in Aotearoa/New Zealand and it is based on six key principles: understanding the “bigger picture” of being a youth in this country, young people being connected, strength-based approach, building quality relationships, youth participation and interventions based on effective research.

The Youth Development Strategy Aotearoa (YDSA) uses a Positive Youth Development framework to guide youth-focused initiatives and policies. Together, they provide a holistic and culturally sensitive framework for youth development that empowers young people, fosters resilience, and ensures that policies and programs cater to the diverse needs and aspirations of Aotearoa/ New Zealand youth population (Development, 2002). However, over the course of the last two decades, Aotearoa/New Zealand have witnessed numerous shifts in the political landscape that have had an impact on both young people and those dedicated to their wellbeing in Aotearoa/New Zealand. These changes have encompassed shifts that, up until this point, have rendered the Youth Development Strategy Aotearoa (YDSA) less visible within the policy realm (Beals, 2015; Deane et al., 2019).

This decline in visibility can be primarily attributed to the significant shifts that have transpired over the past two decades in Aotearoa/ New Zealand political landscape, transitioning from a welfare-oriented society to a neoliberal framework driven by market-driven priorities (Carlyon, 2013; Kelsey, 2015). These shifts have carried profound

implications for both the nation's young demographic and those deeply committed to advancing their wellbeing. These changes have encompassed a wide spectrum of societal and political transformations, which, until recently, have tended to marginalize the role and recognition of the Youth Development Strategy Aotearoa (YDSA) and the practical application of this (Beals, 2015).

Within the unique context of Aotearoa/New Zealand, adopting a PYD approach serves a dual purpose. Firstly, it helps to understand and rectify the life outcomes for many Māori adolescents and those hailing from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Secondly, it expands our perspective on what constitutes positive developmental outcomes for young people from different cultural backgrounds (Deane et al., 2019). Equally, there are important critiques of applying Western-based models in a bicultural nation with such ethnic diversity (Beals, 2015). Western models, often developed in different cultural contexts, may not fully account for the specific cultural, historical, and social nuances of New Zealand's/ Aotearoa unique identity. Critics argue that using Western wellbeing models without considering Indigenous Māori perspectives and the experiences of diverse ethnic communities can result in policies and practices that are inadequate or even harmful. This is especially true in relation to how PYD considers culture.

Research underscores a significant correlation between a robust cultural identity and positive mental health outcomes among Māori youth in Aotearoa/New Zealand (Williams et al., 2018, 2019). A strong cultural identity means that young individuals have a deep connection to their cultural heritage, including their language, traditions, values, and community. This connection provides a source of resilience, belonging, and cultural pride. It acts as a protective factor that enhances their overall wellbeing and mental health. When young people feel rooted in their culture and heritage, they are better equipped to cope with life's challenges and navigate the complexities of adolescence and young adulthood, contributing to positive

mental health. However, PYD approach, often aligns with many Māori approaches and values due to their shared holistic and strengths-based philosophies (Anae et al., 2002; Arahanga-Doyle et al., 2019; Low & Jose, 2010).

Nonetheless, PYD and Māori approaches have important distinctions. While most of the PYD framework places a central emphasis on individualized constructs like confidence in shaping identity, Indigenous approaches may prioritize concepts like connection and belonging as the key to identity formation. This nuanced perspective highlights the need for a culturally responsive and adaptable approach to PYD in Aotearoa/New Zealand, considering the unique cultural and historical context that shapes the experiences and needs of its youth (Arahanga-Doyle et al., 2019; Macfarlane et al., 2008). As such, while PYD initiatives hold promise for support young people in Aotearoa/New Zealand, they must be carefully woven with Indigenous approaches to avoid reinforcing Western frameworks as the norm.

PYD, grounded in an ecological perspective, recognizes the intricate interplay of multiple factors that shape youth development, encompassing aspects like cultural identity and community backing. By highlighting strengths and advocating for comprehensive wellbeing, PYD is well aligned with the unique requirements and ambitions of Indigenous youth in Aotearoa/New Zealand. For PYD to succeed in this country it's essential to recognize that fostering positive youth development in an inclusive and culturally responsive manner is a sensitive and intricate endeavour (Fleming et al., 2022). It demands an ongoing commitment to respecting cultural identities, involving young people in decision-making, and adapting programs to honour the rich tapestry of cultures present in the country.

Summary

In summary, the conventional psychological knowledge of youth development, which has historically favoured Western interpretations of adolescence, wellbeing, and growth, often

stems from deficit-oriented perspectives when addressing norm-deviant youth. In the context of Aotearoa/New Zealand, this conventional approach falls short in serving the young people, particularly the indigenous communities, as evidenced by the persistently poor health outcomes among indigenous populations.

The government and various organizations in Aotearoa/New Zealand are working to improve mental health services, reduce stigma, and promote early intervention to ensure that young individuals receive the support they need to cope with mental health difficulties. However, continued efforts are necessary to address the complex factors contributing to youth mental health issues and to create a comprehensive support system that promotes mental wellbeing among New Zealand's youth.

Method

This thesis aims to explore different pathways on how agencies and volunteers can work together to foster Positive Youth Development interventions for local teenagers in Whāingaroa/Raglan. Through an in-depth examination of the experiences and perspectives of agency stakeholders, this research seeks to contribute to the development of effective strategies for promoting PYD in this community.

This project employed a qualitative methodology with ethnography integrated into the study's framework. To gather information on the community activities, I specifically performed participant-observation of seven Whāingaroa Youth work collective meetings and semi-structured interviews with founding members of the collective. The qualitative information gathered from observations and interviews were coded and explained using thematic analysis. This will then be used to answer the research question:

1. *How Whāingaroa/Raglan services can support youth at a community-based level?*
2. *What could be implemented in the community to foster positive youth development in the future?*

This research was granted ethics approval by the University of Waikato Ethics Committee on July 17th 2023, reference number: FS2023-33:

Participants and recruitment

The primary objective of my research centred on capturing the perspectives and experiences of Raglan residents regarding the necessary steps to engage and support the youth in a positive manner. My interest in this area stemmed from observing the tightly knit community of Whāingaroa/Raglan, where individuals collaborate to enhance the town in various facets. I have been an active part of this process since I moved to the community.

In 2018, Mike Rarere, the manager of Raglan Community House, and I collaborated to develop a theoretical framework for a youth intervention centred on utilizing hip-hop to support the young population in Whāingaroa/Raglan. This organization is dedicated to addressing the diverse needs of the community by providing services that foster health, growth, and connections. Additionally, if needed, it serves as the occasional local meeting place for the collective. Notably, Raglan Community House stands as the primary social service provider in the area.

Since our initial encounter, Mike and I have engaged in substantial discussions reflecting our shared passion for youth development. I believed that establishing a framework to effectively support the youth in Raglan could serve as a model for other communities across Aotearoa/New Zealand. Upon my decision to do the master's thesis, I knew I wanted to focus on positive youth development in Whāingaroa/Raglan. As a preliminary step in this process, I met with Mike Rarere to discuss how this research could be conducted.

In March 2023, I approached Mike with my proposal to conduct research on Positive Youth Development in Whāingaroa/Raglan, aiming to share my findings with the Raglan community board and ultimately enhance the youth environment in this close-knit community. During our conversation, Mike highlighted the presence of a volunteer collective in Raglan/Whāingaroa that regularly meet to brainstorm initiatives for the youth of the town. This sparked an intriguing idea—to document the evolution of this collective as a potential facet of my research.

From this meeting, two main groups were identified as important to this research: the broader Whāingaroa Youth Work Collective (WYWC) members and the two Whāingaroa Youth Collective founding members Joe Rao of Raglan Area School and Gabrielle Parson of Raglan Naturally. Initially, my plan involved conducting interviews with key stakeholders within the

community to gather their insights on supporting youth. I intended to speak with individuals actively involved in the daily lives of young people, along with those engaged in community interventions and social services. Shortly after our initial discussion, Mike facilitated a meeting between Gabrielle Parson, Joe Rao, and myself to explore my potential involvement in documenting and researching the collective's development. Joe, a dedicated teacher at Raglan Area School, has been at the forefront of youth support in the community, working directly with young people and understanding their needs. Gabrielle brings a decade of community engagement experience through her work with the Raglan Community Board and currently leads a local organization focused on community-led development. Her expertise was instrumental in establishing and coordinating the Whāingaroa Youth Work Collective (WYWC), bringing together various stakeholders to support local youth initiatives. Joe and Gabrielle exhibited immediate enthusiasm about the prospect of having me study the collective's journey. They extended an invitation for me to attend one of their meetings on April 20th, allowing me to observe their collective in action. This observation was crucial for me to gauge my interest in documenting their journey and to gain a deeper understanding of the subject matter. Following this meeting, where I initially didn't partake in a researcher role, the meeting I observed, I was deeply inspired by the passion exhibited by all involved individuals. Consequently, I made the decision to focus my research specifically on the journey of the WYWC. As discussed earlier, The Whāingaroa Youth Collective arose as a response to the challenges observed among young individuals in both school and the broader community following the COVID-19 pandemic. Joe and Gabrielle took the initiative to establish and lead this collective with the guidance and support of Mike Rarere, who, as the manager of Raglan Community House, brings forth extensive expertise garnered over more than a decade of community work. Notably, Mike plays a pivotal role as a co-researcher for

this thesis, offering his knowledge and experience to ensure the success and safety of the project.

The WYWC convenes irregularly on an ad-hoc basis, aiming to gather approximately once every two months whenever possible. Gabrielle takes charge of organizing these meetings, extending invitations to various community members. Among the invitees are individuals directly engaged with the youth, such as teachers and young people themselves, alongside other stakeholders who might include business owners, influential community figures, or passionate volunteers dedicated to empowering the younger generation.

All individuals involved in this research actively engage as members of the WYWC and regularly attend its meetings. In the seven meetings held between April 2023 and September 2024, at the outset of each gathering, I would outline my role and purpose in the research, providing an information sheet to all attendees. Subsequently, I distributed consent forms for participants to complete before the meeting commences. Should they agree to allow me to record their contributions during discussions, they not only remain participants of the collective but also become contributors to my research.

Given the dynamic nature of the collective, new members frequently join these meetings. As a result, I consistently repeat this process to ensure that I obtain consent from all participants before I begin gathering any information.

Another key participant of my research are the Whāingaroa Youth Work Collective key members: composed by of Joe, Gabrielle, Mike and the rest of the steering group which coordinated the activities of the WYWC starting from the 2024. The steering group is a small group of members from the collective that not just attend the meeting but has support with specific functions such as: funding applications chair YWC meetings, support facilitation of community meetings and keep records (meeting notes, financial etc).

Data Collection

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the ways in which Whāingaroa/Raglan local agencies might work together to support Positive Youth Development (PYD) among teens. Through a thorough examination of the viewpoints and experiences of those involved with these agencies, this study hopes to make a significant contribution to the development of successful plans for PYD in this particular area.

This project took a qualitative and ethnographic approach to data collection. This is because qualitative research is better suited to creating a more comprehensive picture of the experience and journey of the Whāingaroa Youth Work Collective. Qualitative data explores the breadth, context, and subtleties of human experiences, in contrast to quantitative data, which is mainly concerned with numerical measurements and statistical analysis (Darlington & Scott, 2020; Horton et al., 2004). Because qualitative research approaches are effective at providing a thorough grasp of the complexities of social issues, they are often used in community intervention projects. They enable an investigation into the perspectives and experiences that members of communities' stakeholders and individuals possess (Bloor, 2011; Rossman & Rallis, 2011).

Using a qualitative method, I was able to investigate the 'why' and 'how' of the WYWC collective's endeavours, revealing the underlying motivations, difficulties, and achievements. Qualitative data collecting techniques, such as participant observation and interviews, allow for the collection of detailed, descriptive narratives that provide light on the perspectives, interactions, and lived experiences of the parties involved (Bloor, 2011; Darlington & Scott, 2020; Denzin, 2018).

Furthermore, qualitative data is an excellent tool for comprehending the intricacy and context-specificity of community interactions. It makes it possible to look at the social,

cultural, and environmental aspects of the collective's operations in a comprehensive way (Harrell & Bradley, 2009). Understanding the complex relationships, power dynamics, and collective decision-making processes is essential to illuminating the complex nature of youth development programmes.

Lastly, participants are given the freedom to truly share their experiences and stories thanks to qualitative data, which is better suited to centring participant voices. It offers a forum for documenting a range of viewpoints, recognising the subjectivity of experiences, and emphasising the singularity of every person's journey within the group.

Overall, qualitative data is more appropriate than quantitative data in capturing the diverse range of experiences, nuanced context, and intricate details of the Whāingaroa Youth Work Collective's journey. It provides a thorough and in-depth knowledge that is not possible with quantitative data alone.

The foundation of this qualitative methodology is ethnography, a process that involves immersing oneself in a society to comprehend its intricate social structures, cultural norms, and the lived experiences of its participants. This approach goes beyond mere observation; it entails active engagement with the community, fostering relationships, and earning trust.

Ethnographic methods encompass two essential components. Firstly, researchers observe a community in their natural setting to understand behaviours and cultural practices. Secondly, they must grasp how events are perceived and interpreted within the community, enabling them to contextualize observed behaviours within the community's cultural and linguistic context (Wilson, 1977). This anthropological technique aims to understand the essence of the community's culture and sheds light on the reasons influencing decision-making procedures (Dutta, 2016; Nurani, 2008; Rossman & Rallis, 2011). The methodology is especially relevant in post-colonial contexts like Aotearoa New Zealand, where it enables the

exploration and documentation of multiple narratives and perspectives, particularly those that have been historically marginalized or overlooked.

Incorporating participant observation into this study is highly valuable for understanding the complex community dynamics that exist within the Whāingaroa Youth Work Collective.

Through active participation as an observer, one can obtain a firsthand understanding of the initiatives and interactions that take place in real-time by immersing oneself in the natural context of the collective gathering (Aktinson & Hammersley, 1998; Emerson et al., 2001).

Being present at these events allows the researcher to see how members engage socially and how power is distributed, as well as how decisions are made. Participant observation provides an opportunity to record nonverbal clues, implicit conventions, and unsaid nuances that might be difficult to extract from other types of study (Aktinson & Hammersley, 1998; Musante & DeWalt, 2010). It facilitates a more comprehensive comprehension of the situation, building rapport and trust with the participants in the process, and eventually boosting the legitimacy and authenticity of the information gathered. Gaining stakeholders' trust is essential in this context. because it serves as the foundation for genuine participation and facilitates a greater comprehension of the dynamics and ideals of the community.

In the context of Aotearoa/ New Zealand, ethnographic research has proven particularly valuable in understanding the complex interplay between cultural identity, community development, and social change (Bishop & Glynn, 2003; Smith, 2021). This approach aligns with indigenous research methodologies that emphasize the importance of relationships, reciprocity, and respect in the research process (Smith, 2015). Such alignment is crucial when working within bicultural contexts and with communities that have experienced historical marginalization through traditional research paradigms (Barnes et al., 2017). Researchers Pita King and Rebekah Graham's studies in the Waikato context serve as an excellent illustration of how to apply this technique to comprehend the influence of cultural context, in their work

on documenting the experiences of urban Māori in Highbury, Palmerston North, and Hamilton respectively (Graham et al., 2016; King, 2019).

The application of ethnographic methods in this study mirrors this understanding, allowing for a nuanced exploration of how the Whāingaroa Youth Work Collective operates within its specific cultural and community context. This approach enabled the research to capture not only the formal structures and processes of youth support but also the informal networks, cultural practices, and community dynamics that shape these initiatives.

As is the case with the ethnographic method, fieldwork is instrumental to understanding the philosophy and methods of the Whāingaroa Youth Work Collective. Being fully immersed in the collective's natural environment provides direct experiences that provide a deep grasp of the social dynamics, ethos, and cultural dynamics of the community (Aktinson & Hammersley, 1998). This foundational stage involves seven sessions of participatory observation to the collective meetings, offering a comprehensive perspective of the collective's functioning and the contextual elements influencing it. In addition, three semi-structured interviews with WYWC steering group members provide deeper insight into the purpose and function of the WYWC. These interviews provide as an additional means of delving deeper into subjects that were discovered through active observation, contributing to a richer understanding of the collective's dynamics.

Semi-structured interviews in a focus groups provided flexibility to explore different points of view of relevant stakeholders, while maintaining consistency in the themes covered.

Because they place a strong emphasis on in-depth investigation and context-rich understanding, these interviews are extremely compatible with ethnographic and qualitative approaches, and provide additional nuance (Harrell & Bradley, 2009; Horton et al., 2004; Husband, 2020). The semi-structured style facilitates a guided yet informal dialogue, allowing

participants to freely share their thoughts about a specific topic. By using this method, the I was able to focus on particular topics of interest, look for in-depth justifications, and identify underlying motives or worries that might influence the collective's behaviour. Furthermore, these discussions enable members to share their knowledge in a more structured format, and potentially enhancing their input and perspectives in the group's pursuits (Magaldi & Berler, 2020). Each interview was recorded and then transcribed verbatim for analysis.

The combination of fieldwork and interviews, strategically chosen to align with the ethnographic methodology, forms a comprehensive research approach that captures both the broader context and the intricate details of the Whāingaroa Youth Work Collective (Nurani, 2008; Dutta, 2016; Darlington, 2020).

The key to using this strategy effectively is to be flexible when creating the interview guides and while conducting the interviews itself (Husband, 2020). This methodology affords the capacity to independently evaluate the veracity of answers and probe more deeply into the underlying motives. It also enabled the researcher to resolve apparent discrepancies and delve deeper into some responses, enabling a more thorough investigation of those comments (Horton et al., 2004).

The combination of these approaches produces a thorough grasp of the dynamics, difficulties, and achievements of the community interventions that the group has supported/facilitated.

The goal of this qualitative data collection approach is to create a comprehensive and nuanced picture of the cooperative initiatives, tactics, and experiences that help or impede the Whāingaroa/Raglan community's efforts to promote positive youth development.

Data Analysis

The qualitative information gathered from observations and interviews will be coded and given meaning through the application of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Thematic analysis can help to shed light on the complexity and diversity of the phenomenon being studied through exploring pattern (what are often terms themes) across a dataset, whether that is different news articles, texts, or in my case, focus groups and participant observation notes (Braun & Clarke, 2014; Lochmiller, 2021). Specifically, this approach is a methodical analysis of qualitative data to identify themes and important elements that surface from participants' shared experiences. By using this technique, researchers can extract key learnings, find significant relationships, and get a thorough grasp of the themes that underlie the stories or information gathered from cooperative projects. For this reason this methodology is popular research technique for examining textual or visual data, including meeting minutes, notes, or transcripts (Braun & Clarke, 2014). In contrast to many qualitative approaches, theme analysis is not restricted to a particular theoretical or epistemological position. As such, it is a very adaptable approach that presents a substantial benefit in light of the wide spectrum of research in educational settings (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

For my approach to thematic analysis, I am using a constructivist epistemology (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Riger & Sigurvinsdottir, 2016). This epistemology stresses the subjective aspect of human experiences and the role that individuals play in actively creating their own realities; from this perspective reality is socially constructed and differs between people and cultures (Adom et al., 2016). The constructivist paradigm has a significant impact on thematic analysis in a number of important ways. First of all, subjectivity is acknowledged and welcomed by theme analysis, which understands that people interpret their experiences according to their own settings and points of view (Lochmiller, 2021).

The constructivist perspective is also in line with the flexible and iterative nature of thematic analysis. When conducting a theme analysis, researchers are able to modify their strategy in response to new information that comes to light during the process (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This adaptability is in line with the constructivist view, which holds that knowledge is co-

constructed by interactions between people and their social settings rather than being fixed (Adom et al., 2016).

The significance of interpretation is emphasised by this approach to thematic analysis, which focuses on comprehending the meanings people assign to their experiences. This emphasis is consistent with constructivism's central ideas, which emphasise the significance of interpretation in forming one's worldview (Naeem et al., 2023). The constructivist paradigm in theme analysis emphasises the diversity of human viewpoints and the context-dependent aspect of meaning-making, in contrast to positivism, which looks for universal rules or patterns Riger (Riger & Sigurvinsdottir). This approach emphasises the richness and depth of individual experiences, and for this reason the preference is for qualitative understanding over quantitative measurement.

Typically, thematic analysis entails the following 6 crucial steps (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Naeem et al., 2023):

- *Getting to Know the Data:* The data, which could include notes, transcripts, or other relevant papers, is carefully examined by academics. This phase involves reading the data multiple times to thoroughly understand its substance. Your entire body of data, or data corpus, which consists of all of the interviews and any other data you may be using, should be fully understood before proceeding. Making notes and documenting first impressions is beneficial at this stage. In my case I transcribed all the data to make it clearer and read it multiple times.
- *Creating Initial Codes:* By seeing intriguing traits, patterns, or ideas in the data, researchers methodically code the information. Usually, these first codes are succinct labels or sentences that sum up the information. Coding distils a large amount of data into digestible bits. The coding process transforms extensive data into manageable

segments. For example, in analysing the statement "*It's important to involve the older youth who are not in school in the WYWC activities and meetings,*" I applied the initial code: "WYWC to connect with older youth.". Or "is important to spread the voice of the collective in town ", was coded in: "WYWC publicity"

- *Search for Themes:* Codes are grouped together according to connections or commonalities, which may result in the formation of themes. In this step, the coded data are arranged into meaningful clusters that stand for more general ideas or concepts. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), the distinguishing feature of themes is their relevance rather than any strict criteria. When working with a tiny dataset—like those from a quick focus group session—it can be difficult to distinguish between the coding stage and the initial theme identification. For example, the code "WYWC to connect with older youth" aligned with other codes about youth engagement strategies. Similarly, codes about community outreach formed another group. These code clusters shared an overarching theme of "WYWC's outreach and connection efforts" - encompassing both youth and community engagement initiatives.
- *Reviewing the Themes:* After themes have been identified, the researcher should check and improve them to make sure the data is appropriately represented. In this step, each topic is examined considering the coded data to determine its coherence, uniqueness, and significance. Moreover, the researcher should evaluate if the information supported the theme. The next stage is to consider how well the themes fit with the overall structure of the data collection. For example, I initially identified "Community Connections" as a broad theme encompassing both youth and adult engagement. However, upon reviewing the coded extracts (such as "We need to reach older youth who've left school" and "Local businesses could offer work experience"), I refined this into two more precise themes: "Connecting with Youth" and "Connecting with

Community Resource Networks". This refinement better reflected the data's distinct patterns and strengthened the overall analysis.

- *Define the themes:* The researcher gives each subject a distinct name and definition after going over them all. This entails defining each theme's primary idea and crafting succinct summaries that effectively convey their importance within the data.
- *Writing the Report:* A written report that summarises the findings and analyses the themes discovered and their significance is produced. Researchers use quotes or examples from the data to support their in-depth explanations of each theme in order to emphasise key themes.

Through rigorous application of TA, two main themes were generated, each representing a crucial aspect of community-based youth support in Whāingaroa/Raglan and future aspiration of the community. Moreover, each theme addresses one research question.

- *WYWC as a Bridge Between Youth and Community: Changing the narrative*
- *From a collective to a formal entity: the WYWC's long term goals and aspirations*

Findings

This chapter presents the findings from participant observations to seven Whāingaroa Youth Wellbeing Collective (WYWC) meetings, analysed through thematic analysis (TA) and informed by consultations with academic and on-site research supervisors. The analysis addresses the research question:

How can Whāingaroa/Raglan services support youth at a community-based level?

What could be implemented in the community to foster positive youth development in the future?

Through rigorous application of TA, two main themes emerged, each representing a crucial aspect of community-based youth support in Whāingaroa/Raglan and future aspiration of the community. Moreover, each theme addresses one research question.

- WYWC as a Bridge Between Youth and Community: Changing the narrative addresses the first question
- From a collective to a formal entity: the WYWC's long term goals and aspirations addresses the second question

These themes illustrate how the Whāingaroa/Raglan Youth Collective (WYWC) actively supports local youth and at the same time they explore what has been identified that could be additionally implemented in the community.

This chapter begins by outlining the core mission of the WYWC and how it effectively aligns with its goal of fostering youth well-being. This discussion is grounded in a comprehensive literature review that provides a theoretical framework for understanding the collective's approach.

Central to this theme is an exploration of the operational pillars and Kaupapa(purpose) of the WYWC, which form the foundation of its strategy. The collective's approach centres on transforming community narratives about local youth, shifting from deficit-based perspectives to strength-based understanding. This transformation process represents a deliberate strategy to foster positive youth development through community engagement and cultural responsiveness.

Subsequent sections delve deeper into how the WYWC translates its mission into practice, examining initiatives that provide critical external assets and resources to help youth thrive. This includes organizing youth-focused activities, facilitating outreach for social services, fostering engagement through community initiatives, and offering educational and employment opportunities. These efforts are analysed through the lens of Positive Youth Development (PYD) principles, demonstrating how the collective effectively nurtures the social, emotional, and professional growth of local youth.

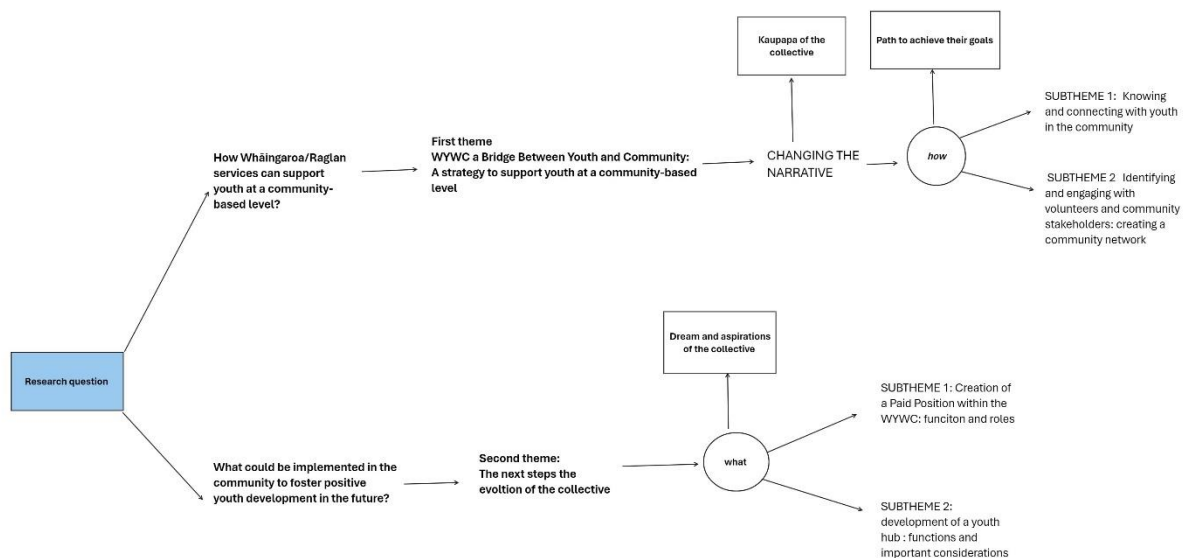
This holistic examination illustrates how the WYWC's initiatives create a supportive ecosystem that empowers young people, ensuring they feel connected, valued, and equipped to contribute to their community.

In the later section, I then focus on the second theme, exploring the aspirations and dreams of the WYWC, emphasizing their vision for potential developments that could positively impact youth. This discussion will be closely aligned with the collective's long-term projects, strategic goals, and key considerations for future initiatives. Additionally, I will analyse why these proposed interventions have the potential to generate significant positive outcomes for local youth. This analysis will be supported by a comprehensive literature review, linking the WYWC's planned actions to established research and frameworks that demonstrate the effectiveness of such approaches. By connecting the collective's aspirations to evidence-

Figure 1: Summary of key findings

based practices, this theme will highlight how the WYWC’s future initiatives are both thoughtfully planned and capable of driving meaningful change in the community. This analysis addresses the research question and offers insights into the practical implementation of community-based youth support. It underscores the importance of structured organizations like the WYWC in ensuring consistent and high-quality outcomes and highlights the role of community engagement and tailored programming in fostering youth development.

Table 1 Figure 1: Summary of Key findings



WYWC a Bridge Between Youth and Community: A strategy to support youth at a community-based level

At the beginning of each WYWC collective meeting, diverse individuals from various parts of town gather in a semi-organized manner. Most attendees know each other as old colleagues, friends, or familiar faces in town, united by their shared intention to support

youth. The facilitator, Joe, always opens with a karakia and then explains the Kaupapa (purpose) of the WYWC, its origin, and intentions.

During this introduction, Joe often elaborates on how the WYWC came together with the goal of changing the narrative for Raglan's youth. The collective aims to see local youth thriving and actively involved in the community - a stark contrast to the isolation experienced in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. The WYWC was born as a response to this challenge, striving to alter the narrative of local youth by becoming a bridge that connects them to their community and fosters wellbeing.

Through the establishment of the Whāingaroa Youth Wellbeing Collective, the Whāingaroa/Raglan community has created a robust framework for supporting youth at a community-based level. By connecting youth with essential social services, raising awareness, changing community perceptions, and more, the collective ensures that young people have the support they need to thrive. Furthermore, by acting as a bridge between youth and the broader community, WYWC fosters a sense of belonging and encourages positive interactions, contributing to the overall wellbeing and development of local youth.

In this section, I will explain why the WYWC is an excellent platform for Whāingaroa/Raglan services to support youth at a community-based level. It represents a positive approach to connecting youth with the community and changing their narrative. I will explore how this approach is supported by Positive Youth Development (PYD) literature. Furthermore, I will detail the pillars of WYWC's strategy to "change the narrative" of local youth. These will form the subthemes of this chapter.

Changing the narrative

As mentioned before, the WYWC was established in response to the Whāingaroa/Raglan community's recognition of the multiple challenges faced by local youth in the aftermath of

the COVID-19 pandemic. It is widely acknowledged that when young people face significant life challenges, they are more likely to exhibit maladaptive and antisocial behaviours (Compas et al., 2001; Jessor, 1992). These negative behaviours, which often emerge as coping mechanisms to deal with stressors (Bhargava & Trivedi, 2018), were observed within the community. Following the lifting of pandemic restrictions, several concerning trends were noted within in the Whāingaroa/Raglan Community such as: decreased school attendance rates, deterioration of the relationship in between students and teachers, increased participation in youth fight clubs, heightened drug use among youth, and a general disconnection of youth from the community.

These issues were noticed by community members and contributed to a negative perception of local youth which was reflected in the narratives created about them. This was often discussed by the WYWC members during their meetings, as reflected by these quotes: "*The notice board is always complaining about local youth*" and "*Groups of local youth are hanging around the streets, and if you don't know them, they can appear to be misbehaving, but they are often just teenagers.*"

Narratives are powerful tools that shape how individuals and groups are perceived (Loseke, 2007). When community members consistently observe negative behaviours or outcomes associated with youth, these observations solidify into a collective narrative that portrays young people as problematic or disengaged. In Whāingaroa Raglan, several narratives have emerged, emphasizing a range of concerns identified by community members. These include a shift in student-teacher dynamics during and after COVID-19 lockdowns, characterized by a significant decline in respect; a growing disconnects within schools, marked by challenges in students' attention spans and an increase in addictions to vaping and social media. As one community member noted, "*Social media is playing a really big part in the situation for*

young people. When we were growing up, we had social media, but no one used it to the extent it is used today" (Karamea, 2023b).

Moreover, some of these problems were starting to be noticed even before COVID-19 and contributed to this issue: *"It's these young kids that are walking around in red, tying their red bandanas over their faces. Trouble is happening around them"* (Karamea, 2017).

Additionally, concerns were raised about the emergence of *"fight clubs"* and an inclination towards physical violence among some youth groups. One observer remarked, *"When the fight clubs were running in school, youth were so excited; it was the only thing they could talk about."* School staff especially noticed a widespread disinterest in available sports and activities. However, WYWC members often commented on the fact that the town is not designed for teenagers, and they don't have a space where they can be themselves. One of the youngest members of the WYWC stated: *"I remember wanting to just do dance all the time and there was nothing for teenagers. There weren't enough opportunities for teenagers to just let themselves be wild and have fun in a safe environment. I feel like as a teenager you are going to push the limits anyway, but how can you do it in a safe way while still learning and growing"*. The accumulation of these factors has fostered a negative narrative about local youth, which, once established, can have far-reaching consequences. This narrative not only reinforces harmful stereotypes but also significantly reduces opportunities for young people to be viewed and treated positively within their community (Lyons & Kashima, 2003; McCabe & Anhalt, 2022).

When young people are consistently portrayed in a negative light, such as being seen as disengaged, problematic, or involved in risky behaviours, it can lead to internalization of these negative perceptions (Damon & Gregory, 2003; McCabe & Anhalt, 2022). This internalization can potentially influence decreased self-esteem, diminished aspirations, and a

lack of motivation to engage in positive activities or pursue personal goals. Furthermore, negative stereotypes and stigmatization can create a self-fulfilling prophecy where youth begin to conform to the low expectations set for them by society (Steel et al., 2014; Wheeler & Petty, 2001). Therefore, changing the narrative to highlight positive attributes and contributions of youth is crucial for their healthy development and integration into the community (Deane & Dutton, 2020; Dimitrova & Wiium, 2021; Lerner et al., 2019).

These initiatives aim to present a different picture of local teenagers, one that supports their ability to thrive and showcases their potential (Lerner et al., 2005).

Among the activities organized and supported by the WYWC are diverse events that engage youth in positive, community-oriented experiences. These include the Youth Week Amazing Race, where participating teams completed a series of challenges around Raglan township, with the quickest team finishing in just 39 minutes. Other notable activities include Clay Hand-Building workshops and the Wahine Moe Youth Cruise, which combined a harbour trip with a beach walk, providing opportunities for skill development, environmental appreciation, and social interaction.

Changing the negative narrative about youth is a complex endeavour that requires multiple layers of intervention. The collective since their genesis identified as one of the first strategies to change the narrative was to collaborate with the Raglan Chronicle, the local newspaper, to create a space to spread stories of successful youth in town and showcase the activities organised by the WYWC since its inception. This approach aligns with the goal of highlighting positive contributions and providing meaningful engagement opportunities (Camino & Zeldin, 2002). Since 5 May 2023, more than 14 articles have been published in the local newspaper, effectively disseminating positive youth narratives and WYWC initiatives to the broader community. This ongoing media partnership demonstrates

the WYWC's commitment to reshaping public perception of local youth through consistent, positive representation. This multilayer approach underscores the potential benefits of more integrated, community-based approaches like those employed by the WYWC, which aim to provide holistic support within a single, coherent framework (Bruns et al., 2010). The WYWC acknowledges the importance and relevance of specialized services in supporting youth in times of need. However, their strategy focuses on leveraging the resources available within the community to create an alternative pathway to support youth (Benson et al., 2011; Kretzmann, 1995). As described in one meeting: *“We as the adults are like the trees that create shelter for young saplings – our rangatahi- to grow”*

This approach is also influenced by the fact that different members of the collective have worked in the mainstream support system and are aware of its gaps, especially considering the increasing difficulties in accessing mental health services in Aotearoa/ New Zealand (Gibson et al., 2017; Menzies et al., 2020). As the threshold for accessing services in New Zealand becomes higher, many youth are falling through the gaps in the system (Clark et al., 2013; Cunningham et al., 2018). These quotes from some of the group members summarize the group overall frustrations around this topic: *“This is difficult time for support services, it is getting harder and harder for everyone”* *“We don't want to focus too much on minutes or agendas, our only agenda is to support youth on a locally based level”*.

This approach indirectly aligns with emerging research, that highlights the importance of social connections and community resilience in mental health support (Smith et al., 2021; Jones & Brown, 2022). By cultivating strong local networks and prioritizing meaningful relationships, the WYWC aims to foster an environment that represent a protective factor for youth.

Research highlights connecting youth to their local community is related to increased well-being because it provides a stable support network that persists even when formal services are no longer available (Ramstedt et al., 2013; Sheehan et al., 2022; Varga & Zaff, 2018).

Community connections are a constant in a young person's life, offering enduring relationships and support systems. This approach is particularly relevant in rural towns where, despite a strong sense of community, there are often fewer available resources compared to urban areas (Datta, 2007; Simcock, 2016). Rural communities typically lack the extensive array of services found in cities, making it essential to leverage the strengths of the community itself (Jaye et al., 2022).

Researches argues that our innate desire for social interaction is essential to maintaining our mental and emotional well-being and that these connections are a major component of the bonds we form and uphold throughout our lives (Afroz & Tiwari, 2021; Over, 2016; Sanders et al., 2015; Werner-Seidler et al., 2017). Communities are embodied in social connection, these can provide more significant and long-lasting support that goes beyond the boundaries of official services by fostering circumstances where young people can build meaningful relationships (Camino & Zeldin, 2002; Dragioti et al., 2015; Kazantzis et al., 2010; Simcock, 2016).

Social connections are resources that youth can access not only for emotional support but also as opportunities for personal growth, learning, and empowerment *“It is important to spread the voice about the collective to ensure that if youth want to access help we can direct them towards the right person and we a lot incredible people in this community”*.

Positive social relationships help build resilience, improve mental health outcomes, and contribute to a sense of belonging and purpose (Werner & Smith, 2001; Masten, 2014). The WYWC's focus on fostering these connections within the community is a deliberate strategy

to create a supportive environment where young people can thrive. By embedding their efforts within the local context, the WYWC not only addresses the immediate needs of youth but also works to transform the broader social environment in a way that promotes connections and overall well-being. This path also aligns with the ecological models of health that emphasize the significance of social determinants (McLeroy et al., 1988; Stokols, 1996). In this framework, the WYWC is not just offering an alternative to traditional services but is actively working to reshape the environment to better support youth well-being, creating changes within the micro-, meso- exo- and macrosystems of Raglan. The emphasis on social connection as a foundation for health highlights the importance of relationships, community, and a holistic approach to well-being that goes beyond the limitations of formalized, intervention-based services (Camino & Zeldin, 2002).

The importance of positive social connections in youth cannot be understated. It is through connecting with others that we gain a self-actualized understanding of ourselves and our relationship to society (Lerner et al., 2006; Varga & Zaff, 2018). This is especially crucial for children and young people, as their developmental neuroplasticity means that the relationships they form during these formative years—with peers, family, and their broader community—significantly influence their life course and hauora outcomes (Lieberman et al., 2020). Social connections during youth provide a foundation for developing social skills, emotional regulation, and a sense of identity (Checkoway, 2012). As explained above, positive interactions and supportive relationships help young people build resilience, cope with stress, and develop a sense of belonging and purpose; the WYWC acknowledged that, and they are directly working to create that space within the community. This is highlighted in this quote from one of the members of the collective. *“We can’t allow that youth are not represented in this community we need to advocate for them to have a space for during local events”*. This remark was part of a discussion within the collective regarding the lack of

allocated space for youth art during a local Raglan Art weekend. The group unanimously agreed that ensuring youth representation in future events is a top priority, emphasizing their dedication to creating inclusive and supportive environments for young people. Moreover, this conversation evolved into a discussion about creating a platform to match young artists with adult mentors from the community, given the abundance of local talent. One member of the collective remarked, “*We have so many artists in this town; how cool would it be if some of them became mentors for young, up-and-coming artists?*” This idea highlights the collective's commitment to fostering intergenerational support and providing young people with opportunities to learn from and connect with experienced artists in the community. This initiative not only aims to nurture the artistic skills of young people but also to strengthen the community's cultural fabric by encouraging collaboration and mentorship (Checkoway, 2012; Larkin et al., 2005).

These decisions and strategic vision, if implemented, will likely have positive outcomes for Raglan youth. Young people who have strong community links have a sense of identity and belonging, which is key to their social and emotional growth (Varga & Zaff, 2018). Youth who are involved in their community are better able to create social capital, form positive connections with adults and peers, and acquire critical life skills (Bowers et al., 2015; Deane & Dutton, 2020; Marmot & Wilkinson, 2001; Sheehan et al., 2022). These relationships also provide beneficial support systems that can assist young people in overcoming obstacles and developing resilience. Participating in the community encourages young people to make constructive contributions to society by fostering civic engagement and a sense of responsibility. In general, youth's well-being is improved by being a member of a supportive community, which helps them to flourish and realise their full potential (Benson, 2006; Catalano et al., 2004).

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Even though the correlation in between community support/connection and youth wellbeing is extensively researched this does not always translate to action within a society (Denny et al., 2013; Menzies et al., 2020). Often youth in communities face a lack of support beyond the school environment, with few options available outside of organized sports or private activities. This problem is often bigger with in smaller rural communities (Jaye et al., 2022). WYWC is fortunate that have local organizations such as Raglan Naturally that provide funds and the Raglan house that provides guidance that mitigates this challenges that are often faced in rural communities. The facilitators of the collective often express their deep gratitude for the resources and support they receive. As one member noted, *"We are so lucky to be supported by Raglan Naturally, and of course, Mike, your guidance and support during this process have been crucial."* Their ongoing efforts to connect with local businesses and secure additional funding have been key to the WYWC's success. Utilizing the local newspaper has played a pivotal role in these efforts, helping to raise awareness and garner support from the wider community. The collective's ability to leverage local resources and maintain strong community ties has been instrumental in advancing their mission to support youth well-being.

The WYWC's mission is to help youth become an integral part of the community rather than being marginalized or viewed negatively (Lerner et al., 2005; Zeldin et al., 2013). This is highlighted by sentences from the collective members such as: *“We need to show the community how cool our local youth are”* By providing accessible, community-based programs, the collective creates spaces where the community can come together to celebrate youth and their contributions. For instance, the WYWC organizes various events such as youth sessions at the Raglan Area School (RAS), Youth Week, Matariki celebrations, the Amazing Race, and the Whāingaroa Talent Factory (Checkoway, 2011).

Fostering social connections helps mitigate the negative effects of socioeconomic challenges and pandemic-induced isolation, promoting a more resilient and well-connected youth population within the community (Prime et al., 2020; Orben et al., 2020). This strategy not only promotes immediate well-being but also builds a foundation for long-term positive outcomes by empowering youth to become active, contributing members of their community (Jaye et al., 2022; Sheehan et al., 2022). By focusing on asset-based approaches and indirectly aligning to positive youth development principles, the WYWC is working to change the narrative around youth in Whāingaroa/Raglan, moving from a deficit-based perspective to one that recognizes and nurtures the potential of young people as valuable community resources (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993; Lerner et al., 2005).

This change is being noted by the community, as reported in the Raglan Chronicle: *“The collective initially met to counteract negative media representations around youth that were being depicted on the news at the time and are keen to celebrate youth successes and create space for young people to feel supported in Whāingaroa”* (Karama, 2023a).

By utilizing local volunteers and fostering community engagement, initiatives like the WYWC can fill gaps in support and provide additional resources for youth. This not only

maximizes the available support but also reinforces community bonds, ensuring that young people learn how to navigate the supportive environment available to them (Stukas et al., 2006). By being connected to a community network like the WYWC, young people can make new friends and develop connections with influential community members.

These relationships can provide invaluable guidance and support, helping young people transition smoothly into adulthood (Benson et al., 2006; Grant et al., 2020). By fostering these connections, the WYWC aids young people in building a network of support that offers direction, opportunities, and resources essential for both their personal and professional development.

One of the initiatives organized by the WYWC, in collaboration with Whāingaroa School, involved coordinating visits for groups of students to key local health resources such as Raglan Naturally, Raglan Medicals, and The Raglan House. These visits not only introduced students to important community resources but also helped them establish connections within their local environment, further supporting their development and well-being. As one of the members said; *“It is important that our adolescent are connected to the available services so they can access it if needed moreover talking with the different people could inspire their career choice”*

Additionally, WYWC's initiatives increase youth local awareness and consciousness and offer tailored assistance align with PYD's focus on inclusiveness and involvement (Deane & Dutton, 2020; Dimitrova & Wiium, 2021). The collective fosters a feeling of self-worth and belonging among young people by including them in worthwhile activities and making sure their opinions are heard. As a result, there is a decreased chance that young people would engage in harmful activities, which encourages their constructive growth into valuable community members (Ramstedt et al., 2013). For example, collective members noted that last

summer, youth expressed dissatisfaction because there was no space available on the weekends where they could listen to music and relax. In response, some members of the collective organized summer sessions specifically for youth, which were met with great enthusiasm and were very well-received. These sessions provided a dedicated space for young people to enjoy music, socialize, and unwind, addressing a clear need within the community and reinforcing the WYWC's commitment to supporting youth well-being.

Studies have indicated that youth who participate in meaningful activities that provide them with a platform to express their thoughts and opinions are more likely to form a strong sense of identity and have a good self-concept (Gootman & Eccles, 2002). Fostering settings that help young people feel important and supported can greatly reduce the prevalence of dangerous behaviours and raise the possibility of favourable results like scholastic achievement, emotional stability, and civic participation (Scales et al., 2006)

By fostering an inclusive environment where all young people, regardless of their background, can receive support, engage in positive activities, and contribute to their community's growth, the WYWC's initiatives embody these core values. The collective's community-based approach bridges the gap between local youth and the broader community, ensuring that no one is left behind (Christens, 2012). One of the collective members captured this sentiment well: *“Here, there are a lot of people who come and go, youth from all over the world. It’s easy for local youth to be unnoticed and fall through the cracks. It’s important that we create an environment where they can feel included.”* This highlights the collective’s commitment to creating spaces where all youth feel valued and integrated into the community, preventing them from being overlooked or marginalized. By establishing mechanisms of support for youth, the strategy helps them thrive, while simultaneously transforming community perceptions and narratives surrounding young people. This approach ensures that youth are seen as valuable contributors to the community, fostering a

more inclusive and supportive environment. As youth thrive and engage positively with their community, they help to shift societal attitudes and narratives, promoting a culture of mutual respect and collaboration (Checkoway, 2012; Datta, 2007; Simcock, 2016).

Another key component that supports the collective's goal of changing the narrative is the diverse array of volunteers and community stakeholders involved. The variety of programs and activities available to adolescents is enriched by the different talents, experiences, and perspectives that these volunteers bring (Zeldin et al., 2013). For example, some members of the collective are experts or actively involved in sports, martial arts, music, youth work, medicine, business, and education. This diversity in human skillset and experiences enables the collective to create a wide range of opportunities designed to support youth, each tailored to the unique cultures, skills, and outreach of various community members (Lerner et al., 2005). By leveraging the strengths and expertise of its diverse members, the WYWC is able to offer programs that resonate with a broad spectrum of young people, ensuring that they can find activities and support that align with their interests and needs. This approach not only enhances the collective's effectiveness but also ensures that youth from all backgrounds feel represented and included in the community (Lerner et al., 2005). The main services involved in the WYWCA's volunteer-led projects frequently mirror community values and customs, young people in the area find them more engaging and meaningful (Bowers et al., 2015; Larson et al., 2005). Moreover, this diversity in volunteering can itself contribute to changing the internal youth narrative. When young people observe a diverse range of community members dedicating time and effort to youth-focused initiatives, it reinforces the message that they are valued and integral members of the community (Lerner et al., 2006; Sheehan et al., 2022). The visibility of this widespread adult support can significantly influence how youth perceive themselves and how the broader community views its younger population (Zeldin et al., 2013).

In sum, the WYWC leverages various platforms, including the local newspaper, social media channels, and other community outreach tools, to maximize their reach and impact on youth. By doing so, they not only address specific challenges more effectively but also foster a sense of unity and shared purpose among community members. This collaborative approach strengthens the overall support system for youth, ensuring that they feel connected and supported within their community (Zeldin et al., 2017).

Changing the narrative about youth is a process that requires time and coordinated efforts, often taking a while to gain momentum (Rappaport, 1995; Watts & Serrano-García, 2003). This reality underscores the importance of program sustainability in initiatives like the Whāingaroa Youth Wellbeing Collective (WYWC). While specialized organizations might provide quicker and more structured answers to immediate problems, a collective of volunteers, such as the WYWC, may need time to find group synergy and develop effective action strategies (Hager & Brudney, 2011). However, once established, this approach becomes a network of support deeply engrained in the community, offering long-term sustainability precisely because it's not dependent on external companies or organizations (Kretzmann, 1995; Scheirer & Dearing, 2011). The sustainability of community-based organizations such as the WYWC is intrinsically linked to their ability to mobilize and utilize local assets effectively. This includes not just financial resources, but also human capital, social networks, and cultural knowledge (Kretzmann, 1995). By tapping into these local strengths, organizations can develop programs and initiatives that are truly reflective of community values and aspirations and that can have a longer life. This localized approach often results in higher levels of community engagement and ownership, which are key factors in the long-term success of development initiatives (Green & Haines, 2015).

By harnessing the diversity within the community, the WYWC cultivates a comprehensive and nuanced approach to youth development that mirrors the complexity and richness of

Whāingaroa/Raglan itself. This approach not only aligns with the goal of reshaping the narrative surrounding youth but also contributes to building a more resilient and inclusive community support system (Benson, 2006; Green & Haines, 2015).

The WYWC's project plan, drafted in 2023, captures the dual nature of the collective's mission with objectives such as: "*To provide a space/place for the community to bring concerns and take action on youth initiatives,*" and "*To create opportunities for the wider community to contribute and provide opportunities for our youth.*" These goals emphasize the collective's commitment to both nurturing youth and engaging the broader community in this process, fostering a supportive environment where young people can thrive.

Moreover, self-reliance in community organizations fosters innovation and adaptability.

When not constrained by external funding requirements or donor priorities, these organizations have the flexibility to experiment with novel solutions tailored to their unique local contexts (Christens, 2012; Datta, 2007). This autonomy allows for rapid response to changing community needs and emerging challenges, creating a more dynamic and resilient organizational structure (Eversole, 2014; Scheirer & Dearing, 2011) . For this reason, this approach has the necessary features to enable a community change and create a better outcome for their participants that can last over time. It's important to note that the journey towards self-reliance is often gradual and may initially involve challenges and some level of external support (Phillips & Pittman, 2008). In the case of the WYWC local organizations such as Raglan community house and Raglan Naturally have been instrumental in the development of this strategy. Moreover, the collective effort to find more fundings and to create with a steering group to support the grow of the collective represent some of the stages and challenges of the WYWC path. However, the goal is to progressively reduce this dependency over time maintaining the same goals. This is achieved through capacity-building

efforts, developing diverse income streams (such as social enterprises or membership models), and cultivating strong local partnerships (Zeldin et al., 2013). The WYWC actively encourages its youngest members to take on leadership roles within the collective and spearhead various initiatives. Older members of the WYWC provide support and guidance as needed, fostering a collaborative environment where young people can develop their skills and confidence. This intergenerational approach is a key aspect of the WYWC's strategy, as reflected in their 2023 project plan, which includes the goal: "*To grow the next generation of youth workers and mentors.*"

By empowering young members to lead, the WYWC not only cultivates future leaders but also ensures that youth perspectives are central to the collective's work. This approach helps to create a more dynamic and responsive community support system that is better equipped to address the needs and aspirations of young people. In the previous part I explained the WYWC approach of changing the narrative and supporting the development of youth and why this approach is successful in achieving their set's goal. In the next part I will explore the two pillars of WYWC's approach through the subthemes:

- *Knowing and connecting with youth in the community*
- *Identifying and engaging with volunteers and community stakeholders: creating a community network*

These two pillars of the WYWC—youth involvement in leadership and the creation of a strong community network—are instrumental in shaping the strategies used to empower youth and transform community perceptions of young people (Zeldin et al., 2013; Camino, 2000). The collective places a strong emphasis on listening to youth voices and involving community stakeholders, as reflected in quotes from their meetings:

“It is important to understand what the youth want.”

“We don’t want to be the adult’s telling youth what to do – we want to hear from youth what they want to see.”

While the WYWC clearly aims to support youth wellbeing, these pillars ensure that the strategies used to change the narrative and empower youth are based on the opinions of young people themselves, community input, and locally available resources. This approach aligns with asset-based community development principles, leveraging internal strengths and capabilities to drive positive change (Checkoway, 2011, 2012; Gootman & Eccles, 2002; Green & Haines, 2015; Kretzmann, 1995; Mathie & Cunningham, 2003) By centring youth voices and fostering intergenerational community collaboration, the WYWC creates a participatory framework that enhances the relevance and effectiveness of its initiatives, potentially leading to more sustainable outcomes in youth empowerment and community perception (Bowers et al., 2015; Larson et al., 2005; Morrow-Howell et al., 2009).

Connecting with and Understanding Raglan’s youth

“Part of our philosophy is to act once we know what youth wants” WYWC member.

As a fundamental pillar of its mission, the Whāingaroa Youth Wellbeing Collective (WYWC) strives to bridge the gap between the community and its youth. This process begins with a deep commitment to connecting with and understanding the local youth they aim to support. One youth member of the collective captured this sentiment well, stating, *“Adults don’t often ask how to help they just want to help, and that can be a problem for us.”*

The collective has implemented several strategies to achieve this crucial goal, recognizing that effective youth engagement is the cornerstone of their work.

One of the primary methods employed by the WYWC is the organization of dedicated spaces where local youth can meet with representatives from the collective. These forums serve as

vital platforms for open dialogue, allowing young people to articulate their goals, identify resources they feel are lacking in the community, and share their visions for future generations (Checkoway, 2011; Zeldin et al., 2013). This approach aligns with participatory action research principles, where those most affected by issues are actively involved in finding solutions (Baum et al., 2006; Cornish et al., 2023).

These youth forums are strategically designed to be accessible, inclusive, and youth-friendly, ensuring that young people from diverse backgrounds feel comfortable expressing their views. The WYWC strategically selects representatives to attend these meetings. They are either experienced youth workers or the youngest members of the collective. The former bring trained expertise in facilitating youth engagement, while the latter are chosen for their ability to relate to and understand youth due to their closer age proximity. This approach maximizes the outcomes of the meetings, creating an environment where youth feel heard and valued (Bowers et al., 2015; Iwasaki et al., 2014; Larson et al., 2005). During these meetings, young people are encouraged to voice their opinions about what they would like to see in their community and to explore a wide range of issues affecting their lives. These discussions cover topics such as mental health, recreational needs, education, and work opportunities. This comprehensive approach provides a holistic understanding of youth experiences in Raglan (Checkoway, 2012; Youniss & Yates, 1997).

Local youth have expressed that there are often limited activities available for them to enjoy their environment, particularly outdoor activities. This is reflected by this sentence from one of the collective members " *In Raglan there is a lot of young people however there is not many places where teenager can hang out in town or things for them to do* " In response, the WYWC collective discussed the need to create a series of initiatives that align with the desires of the youth and utilize existing resources. This dialogue not only helped the

collective understand the specific needs and dreams of local youth but also inspired actionable projects.

One notable initiative was a youth cruise aboard the *Wahine Moe*, a local harbour tour vessel. This event, organized by the collective, provided young people with an opportunity to experience their community from a unique perspective while fostering social connections. Furthermore, this experience allowed youth to explore the local harbour, providing them with a unique outdoor experience that reflected their interest in engaging with the natural environment. This initiative is a prime example of how the WYWC listens to and acts on the aspirations of young people, creating meaningful opportunities that resonate with their interests and needs (Checkoway, 2012; Youniss & Yates, 1997).

The direct interaction between youth and WYWC representatives provides invaluable insights for the collective. It offers first-hand knowledge of the challenges faced by young people, their aspirations, and their ideas for community improvement. This information is crucial for developing targeted, relevant programs and initiatives that truly meet the needs of Raglan's youth population (Camino & Zeldin, 2002; Kretzmann, 1995). Moreover, these forums play a significant role in empowering youth by giving them a voice in shaping their community's future. By actively soliciting and valuing youth input, the WYWC demonstrates a commitment to youth-adult partnerships and shared decision-making (Zeldin et al., 2013). This approach not only enhances young people's sense of agency and community belonging but also develops their leadership skills and civic engagement (Checkoway, 2011, 2012). The insights gathered from these forums are systematically documented and discussed during the WYWC formal meetings. This data informs the collective's strategic planning, resource allocation, and program development.

By creating these dedicated spaces for youth voice, the WYWC is actively working to change the narrative around youth in Raglan. Instead of being seen as passive recipients of services, young people are positioned as valuable community assets with important perspectives to contribute (Damon & Gregory, 2003; Green & Haines, 2015). This shift in perception can lead to more inclusive community decision-making processes and a more positive, empowering environment for youth development (Deane et al., 2019; Dimitrova & Wiium, 2021; Sheehan et al., 2022).

In order to create a welcoming and comfortable environment where young people feel more at ease and willing to share their ideas and experiences, the WYWC has implemented several strategies for their youth engagement meetings. Recognizing the importance of a relaxed atmosphere, members of the collective who interact with youth bring food and drinks to these gatherings, which are intentionally held outside of school settings. This strategy is in line with studies on adolescent engagement strategies, which indicate that non-formal settings can encourage more open and truthful conversation (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2022; Durlak et al., 2010; Zeldin et al., 2013). Moreover, the collective fosters a sense of hospitality and care by offering food and refreshments, which helps foster rapport and trust with young participants (Mitra, 2004)

Importantly, this approach aligns with and respects tikanga Māori (Māori customs and traditions). The practice of sharing food is a crucial part of manaakitanga in te ao Māori (the Māori world), and therefore a fundamental aspect of Māori culture (Neill et al., 2015). Manaakitanga encompasses the act of showing respect, generosity, and care for others (Durie, 2003; Mead, 2016). By incorporating food-sharing into their youth engagement practices, WYWC is not only creating a comfortable environment but also demonstrating cultural responsiveness and respect for Māori values. This practice helps to foster a sense of

belonging and community, which is particularly important in engaging Māori youth and aligning with the principles of kaupapa Māori (Māori-centered) approaches to youth development (Arahanga-Doyle et al., 2019; Deane et al., 2019; Glassey et al., 2023; Wilson et al., 2021).

The choice of location for these meetings is also significant. The collective establishes a neutral space free from the expectations, cultural bias and power dynamics of educational institutions by holding meetings outside of schools (Bhargava & Trivedi, 2018; Matheny et al., 1993; Smith, 2000). This can help young people feel more empowered to express their true thoughts and feelings, rather than what they think adults want to hear (Camino & Zeldin, 2002). Furthermore, these unstructured environments facilitate more adaptable and youth-focused conversations. Conversations can flow more freely when there are no official school environment limits present, which may provide deeper insights into the needs and viewpoints of young people (Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2009). One member of the collective highlighted this in an early meeting, saying, *“It’s crucial that we find spaces where youth feel comfortable, and we need to provide good food—they love food!”* By carefully considering these elements - the provision of food and drinks, the strategic involvement of collective members, and the choice of informal settings - the WYWC demonstrates a thoughtful and tailored approach to youth engagement. This strategy collectively contribute to creating an environment that encourages authentic youth participation and fosters meaningful dialogue between young people and the collective.

Taking this engagement a step further, WYWC has invested in research to gain a more comprehensive understanding of youth needs and aspirations in Raglan/Whāingaroa. The collective funded a member to conduct a study that included community interviews, direct conversations with local teenagers, and distribution of questionnaires to homeschooled

students, Raglan Area School students, and youth commuting from Whāingaroa/Raglan to Kirikiriroa/Hamilton for high school. As several members noted during the presentation of the findings, *“The research results have been wonderful and incredibly helpful for us to understand our local youth.”*

The survey results show that while a significant majority of youth (80.9%) enjoy living in Whāingaroa, many feel a lack of connection to the area’s whakapapa and history. Moreover, they are motivated to participate in cultural and environmental activities that would improve their sense of connection. The survey results indicate that while a significant majority of youth (80.9%) enjoy living in Whāingaroa, many feel disconnected from the area’s whakapapa and history. However, they are eager to engage in cultural and environmental activities that could strengthen their sense of connection. In terms of recreation, most youth are attracted to sports and outdoor activities, with a strong interest in creative outlets. Despite this enthusiasm, they identified several barriers to participation, including high costs, limited transportation options, and social anxiety.

Youth also reported challenges in maintaining a healthy lifestyle, citing limited knowledge about health and wellbeing and a lack of spaces designed for them to socialize and engage with others. Additionally, they suggested that the community could better support them by offering more job opportunities. Notably, 53.3% of respondents expressed a desire for employment, particularly in casual or part-time roles. During a subsequent WYWC discussion about this point, members highlighted, *“It’s clear that youth really want to work, but they need support to access employment.”* The research also showed that youth have a significant interest in youth-centric events and workshops. Among the key life skills they identified for learning outside of school were driving, financial literacy, job application techniques, and cooking. Finally, a portion of the youth identified wanting to be part of the

WYWC and be included in some of the decision-making process. Youth identified social media as the most effective way to reach local youth, emphasizing the importance of the WYWC having a strong presence on these platforms. This would allow the collective to share calendars, events, and activities directly with the youth, ensuring better engagement and participation.

This approach demonstrates WYWC's commitment to evidence-based practice and recognition of the importance of systematic feedback from youth (Baum et al., 2006; Durlak et al., 2010; Dutta, 2016; Jaye et al., 2022). This research strategy provides a structured yet flexible way for adolescents to express their thoughts, aligning with best practices in youth participatory action research (YPAR) (Foster-Fishman et al., 2010; Ozer, 2017). By employing multiple data collection methods, WYWC ensures a more holistic understanding of youth perspectives, capturing insights from diverse groups within the community (Wang, 2006). This comprehensive approach not only informs WYWC's programming but also empowers youth by valuing their input in community decision-making processes (Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2003). This approach highlights the WYWC's dedication to evidence-based practice and their recognition of the importance of systematic feedback from youth (Baum et al., 2006; Durlak et al., 2010; Dutta, 2016; Jaye et al., 2022). By incorporating multiple data collection methods, the WYWC ensures a more holistic understanding of youth perspectives, capturing diverse insights from across the community (Wang, 2006). This strategy aligns with best practices in youth participatory action research (YPAR), providing a structured yet flexible platform for adolescents to express their thoughts (Foster-Fishman et al., 2010; Ozer, 2017). The research, which concluded in June 2024, led to several significant initiatives, including the establishment of new WYWC activities, discussions about the need for a youth hub, and planning for future workshops. This comprehensive approach not only informs WYWC's programming but also empowers youth

by valuing their input in community decision-making processes (Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2003).

As mentioned before this strategy of connecting and involving youth in a community is connected with, Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) this is a collaborative research methodology that actively involves young people in the research process to address issues affecting their communities (Cook et al., 2020; Rivera et al., 2022). This approach empowers youth as co-researchers, enabling them to identify problems, collect and analyse data, and develop solutions (Ozer, 2017). YPAR fosters a sense of agency and advocacy among young participants, promoting their active engagement in social change and community development. It combines elements of education, research, and activism, encouraging young people to use their insights and experiences to effect meaningful change (Anyon et al., 2018; Caraballo et al., 2017; Rivera et al., 2022). Moreover, these initiatives align closely with what is described as crucial feedback mechanisms for meaningful youth engagement (Gootman & Eccles, 2002; Sheehan et al., 2022; Youniss & Yates, 1997; Zeldin et al., 2013). This approach emphasizes the importance of creating channels where youth can freely voice their opinions and concerns. WYWC's strategy, which incorporates both face-to-face forums and survey research, provides multiple avenues for youth expression and includes young people in community decision-making processes. The collective recognizes the importance of this process for the entire community, as one member noted, *"It was really interesting and productive to bring youth into the community's decision-making processes—they offer valuable perspectives."* This sentiment was particularly relevant in the context of a community project focused on restoring the local water tower and revitalizing the surrounding artwork.

Finally, this strategy of directly asking the youth about their needs and consequently, creating opportunities for youth to participate in decision-making processes is overlap with several key aspects of PYD, particularly the development of competence, confidence, and connection (Benson, 2006; Benson et al., 2006; Larson et al., 2005). The collective's emphasis on youth voice and agency resonates with PYD's focus on viewing young people as resources to be developed rather than problems to be solved (Lerner, 2018). By involving youth in identifying community needs and shaping solutions, WYWC is fostering the development of initiative and leadership skills, key components of positive youth outcomes (Larson, 2000). This approach not only enhances the effectiveness of WYWC's programs but also contributes to the broader goal of youth empowerment and community development.

The collective's multi-faceted approach to youth engagement – combining direct interaction, structured research, and ongoing dialogue – creates a robust feedback loop and an opportunity for youth to become active players of their community (Zeldin et al., 2013). By considering relevant hearing youth needs, WYWC can make sure that its programmes remain pertinent, sensitive, and in line with the goals and requirements of the young people it serves. Moreover, these efforts by WYWC embody the principles outlined by Checkoway, who stresses the importance of integrating youth perspectives into community decision-making processes (Checkoway, 2011, 2012). By actively seeking out and valuing youth input, WYWC is fostering a sense of ownership and belonging among young people in Raglan/Whāingaroa (Checkoway, 2012; Larson et al., 2005; Sheehan et al., 2022).

Connecting youth with the Community

Hand in hand with community engagement, the WYWC is deeply committed to maintaining open dialogue between youth and community stakeholders—a crucial aspect of effective youth advocacy and support (Checkoway, 2012; Lerner et al., 2006; Lerner et al., 2019; Zeldin et al., 2013). The WYWC creates structured opportunities for young people to interact with local officials, business leaders, and community organizations. For example, they organized school-facilitated visits for Year 13 students to the local medical centre, where they were educated about the services and professionals available to them. Additionally, the collective supported transforming a music venue, "The Yard," into a youth-friendly space where young people could meet and organize events. These events included meetings with youth working in hospitality to discuss alcohol regulations, hosting speakers to talk about wellbeing and addictions, music jam sessions, and second-hand clothing markets. The goal is to ensure that youth voices are not just heard but actively exposed to community services and dynamics (Checkoway, 2012; Foster-Fishman et al., 2010; Zeldin et al., 2013).

These direct and structured interactions empower youth and strengthen community bonds by fostering understanding and collaboration across different sectors and generations. Youth gain valuable skills in communication, advocacy, and civic engagement, preparing them for future leadership roles, as supported by research (Checkoway, 2012; Jennings et al., 2006; Youniss & Yates, 1997).

One of the common sentiments expressed during WYWC meetings reflects this vision: *"One of WYWC goals to grow the next generation of youth workers and mentors."* By focusing on identifying and engaging community resources and maintaining open dialogues with leaders, the WYWC creates a supportive ecosystem for youth development, aligning with asset-based community development principles (Kretzmann, 1995; Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). This

approach not only enhances the effectiveness of youth programs but also contributes to building a more youth-responsive and inclusive community.

As previously mentioned, the collective strongly supports the importance of involving youth in the decision-making process for community projects. This includes initiatives such as the restoration of the water tower and the refurbishment of the art on the library wall. This represents a strategy to connect youth with the broader community environment and resources. Taking one step forward, the WYWC leverages the need for workers to connect youth to their community. One of the main stakeholders involved in this project and an active part of the collective is Extreme Zero, the waste management and recycling centre that operates in this community. Extreme Waste provided an opportunity to a number of youths who were disengaged from community and school and were starting to create issues in the community. This initiative was originally arranged through a collaboration between the school and Extreme Waste, with input from members of the collective who work in both spaces. The Extreme Waste staff expressed that most of the original cohort of youth involved in this initiative are still working, and they have had minimal incidents with them over time, noting that they are hard-working. Moreover, they reported that over time, some of these youths have opened up to the Extreme Waste crew and started to create positive relationships with some of the staff.

This quote captured from the Extreme Waste representative who forms part of the collective reflects this: *"In the beginning, it was really hard to talk with them; they were really shy and did not engage much. Now it's a different story – they are talking more. Just the other day, one of them came up to my office to have a tea and a chat during his break."*

Overall, the management team at Extreme Waste identified this project as a positive experience. This successful project was celebrated multiple times during some of the

collective's sessions. Moreover, the representative from Extreme Waste has expressed that they want to work with the school and the collective to create more initiatives connected to this, such as:

1. Arranging for more youth workers during school holidays, particularly Christmas
2. Creating an opportunity for a group of youth from school to visit Extreme Waste and talk with the youth who work there to learn about their journey and grow
3. Directing this initiative to the group of "challenging" youth at school

This quote is connected to the initiative and illustrates some of the values guiding it: *"School is not for everyone, and for some of those youth who might drop out of the school system, it can be great to get some work experience and learn what it means to work hard."*

This statement reflects a pragmatic approach to youth engagement and development. It acknowledges that traditional educational paths may not suit all individuals and highlights the value of alternative learning experiences, such as work-based programs (Brewer, 2013; Loughlin & Barling, 2001). The initiative recognizes that practical work experience can provide valuable life skills, a sense of responsibility, and personal growth opportunities for youth who may struggle in conventional academic settings.

The WYWC also discussed a future initiative to connect youth with employees seeking apprentices. This strategy, previously attempted with mixed success, would target youth looking to move beyond waste management roles. The proposed approach involves a stepped process: first, the school would identify youth who could benefit from involvement with Extreme Waste. There, they would develop good work ethics crucial for sustaining long-term apprenticeships. Once they've demonstrated their ability to function in an adult work environment, they could then be connected to apprenticeship opportunities.

This strategy was informed by past experiences where trades offered chances to challenging youth who weren't thriving in school. However, some of these experiences were negative due to youth unpreparedness, making some businesses reluctant to repeat the experience. A collective member emphasized the importance of ensuring youth readiness for apprenticeships and supporting participating businesses: *"It's important that the youth are ready to do an apprenticeship and that we as a collective support the businesses that would take on this endeavour. It's important to uplift the mana [integrity, authority] of the workers who give an opportunity to youth."*

The approach addresses several key points: preparing youth for the workforce through a gradual process, ensuring their readiness for apprenticeship responsibilities, supporting businesses offering youth opportunities, and recognizing the efforts of workers who mentor youth. Discussed over several collective meetings, this strategy will be a future focus for the group. It aims to create a more sustainable and successful pathway for youth into apprenticeships, benefiting both young people and the businesses involved.

This initiative is crucial to the collective, especially given concerns raised by members who also work at the local school. As one member expressed, *"We're really concerned about what happens when our seniors leave school. We want them to know how they can stay connected to the community and begin their journey beyond school."*

As such, another initiative organized by the collective in this context is the creation of a student job search program. As one member explained, *"Youth want to work, but they need support with their CVs and with applying for jobs,"* and another added, *"Living costs are so high that youth need resources."* In this program, a member of the collective works one-on-one with youth to support them in various aspects of job seeking. This includes assisting them in drafting effective CVs (resumes) and guiding them through the process of applying for jobs. This initiative provides practical skills that are important for entering the workforce. By

learning how to create a CV and navigate job applications, youth build their competence and gain valuable tools that will serve them throughout their careers. (Lerner et al., 2005).

WYWC collective emphasis on connecting youth to local work experiences aligns well with the Positive Youth Development (PYD) framework, offering numerous benefits for youth development by emphasizing nurturing young people's strengths and potential rather than focusing solely on preventing negative outcomes (Lerner et al., 2005).

The graduated approach to work experience and apprenticeships supports the development of various competencies, including practical work skills, time management, and problem-solving abilities. These experiences contribute to cognitive, social, and vocational competencies, key aspects of the PYD framework (Benson et al., 2006). As youth successfully navigate work environments, they gain confidence in their abilities, fostering a sense of self-efficacy crucial for positive development and future success (Zimmerman, 2000).

This strategy also fosters meaningful connections between youth and adult mentors, both at Extreme Waste and in potential apprenticeships. These relationships are fundamental to the PYD framework, providing youth with support, guidance, and positive role models (Rhodes & DuBois, 2008). Through work experiences, youth learn about responsibility, work ethic, and integrity, contributing to character development, another core component of PYD (Park, 2004). By engaging in real work, youth begin to see themselves as valuable contributors to their community, developing a sense of purpose essential for positive development and well-being (Damon et al., 2003). The gradual transition from school to work life respects individual readiness and development, aligning with PYD principles of building on strengths and providing diverse opportunities for growth and success (Larson, 2000).

This approach creates a supportive ecosystem for youth development, providing real-world experiences, mentorship, and opportunities for skill development while recognizing and

nurturing individual potential. By focusing on building strengths and providing graduated challenges, it closely aligns with the PYD framework's goal of helping youth thrive and become successful, contributing members of their communities (Lerner et al., 2011).

Social Media: an additional tool to connect youth to the community

Another crucial aspect of WYWC's strategy is its effective use of social media, particularly Instagram, as a critical tool for maintaining connections between local youth and the community and fostering positive interactions among youth themselves. The WYWC's Instagram page serves as a dynamic platform to reach youth, advertise initiatives, and engage with the broader community (Boyd, 2014; O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011). In the digital age, social media has become an essential communication channel for youth engagement. By leveraging Instagram, WYWC taps into a platform that is already popular among young people, making their outreach efforts more accessible and relatable (Chan & Holosko, 2017; O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011). This approach aligns with best practices in youth work that emphasize meeting young people where they are, both physically and virtually (Checkoway, 2012; Ito et al., 2013; Jennings et al., 2006).

Research shows that social media have enabled and enhanced certain outreach practice processes, particularly in the context of youth engagement. These processes include the initial search for potential participants, facilitating initial encounters, icebreaking, and networking (Ito et al., 2013; Yuen & Tang, 2023). By leveraging these capabilities, the WYWC's use of Instagram becomes a strategic tool in their youth outreach efforts. Instagram's discoverability features, such as hashtags and location tags, enable the collective to reach a broader youth audience in Raglan/Whāingaroa. Initial encounters and icebreaking are facilitated through the platform's interactive features like stories, polls, and direct messaging. These tools provide low-pressure ways for youth to engage with WYWC, making initial contact less intimidating (Buckingham, 2007; Ross & Tolan, 2021). Finally, networking is significantly enhanced

through social media. Instagram allows WYWC to connect not only with youth but also with other community organizations, creating a web of support and resources for young people (Rice & Barman-Adhikari, 2014).

By recognizing and leveraging these specific affordances of social media, WYWC can more effectively engage with youth, build relationships, and create a supportive online community that complements their in-person efforts (Ito et al., 2013; O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011; Rice & Barman-Adhikari, 2014). The combination of digital and in-person efforts ensures that WYWC maximizes their outreach to connect with youth across various platforms and contexts (Lenhart et al., 2015). Furthermore, by involving youth in the decision-making processes of their community, WYWC fosters an environment for young people to thrive as active members of the community, thereby empowering their overall wellbeing (Checkoway, 2011; Zeldin et al., 2013). This holistic approach, integrating both online and offline strategies, not only enhances youth engagement but also promotes positive youth development and civic participation, aligning with best practices in youth empowerment and community building (Camino & Zeldin, 2002; Jenkins et al., 2016; Richards-Schuster & Pritzker, 2015; Ross & Tolan, 2021).

Growing Together: WYWC & Whāingaroa's Community Network

The second pillar that WYWC's work stands on, to change the narrative about local youth, is connection with community members. *“I have been all over the world and this community is really special, there is plenty of resources, we just need to learn how to use them.”* A key part of WYWC's approach is finding and involving a wide range of people and groups from the community who can contribute to their work. This aspect is also one of the most challenging tasks for WYWC because it requires multiple layers of connections, cultural understanding, and communal efforts.

Below is a table that outlines the various community organisations involved in the WYWC, highlighting the network’s ability to provide support to youth in an array of areas.

Table of community stakeholders involved in the WYWC

Cultural	Health	Education	Employment	Art	Sport
Poihākena Marae	Raglan Community House	The Raglan Library	Xtreme Zero Waste	Raglan Theatre Academy	The Refinery
Poutama Rites of Passage	Raglan Medicals	The Karioi Project	The Yard	Whāingaroa Talent Factory	DK surf school
	Whāingaroa Suicide Prevention Group	Toku Kainga Kids		The Old School Art Centre	
	Feed the Kids Whāingaroa	Raglan Radio		Whāingaroa Youth Movement	
	Rainbow Youth Group	Raglan Surf Academy			
	Te Toi Ora ki Whāingaroa				

The process of community engagement involves identifying and mobilizing various community assets, including individual skills, organizational resources, and cultural knowledge (Kretzmann, 1995). WYWC recognizes that these connections are crucial for creating a supportive ecosystem for youth development and for changing perceptions about young people in the community. Furthermore, this point was stressed from some of collective members from the first meetings, as highlighted by this comment: *“We need to meet with local businesses and relevant community leaders they need to know who we are, and we need to share local youth experiences with them.”*

While youth are the primary beneficiaries in WYWC initiatives, which might naturally foster their involvement, this is not necessarily the case for community members. Therefore, a significant component of changing the narrative and supporting youth involves connecting with community members who share similar visions and intentions. This challenging process requires strategic outreach, relationship-building, and the cultivation of shared goals (Camino & Zeldin, 2002; Zeldin et al., 2013).

WYWC's approach to community engagement goes beyond simply recruiting volunteers or seeking resources. It involves creating meaningful partnerships that recognize and value the contributions of all community members. This it includes engaging local businesses to provide internship opportunities, collaborating with cultural leaders to ensure programs are culturally responsive, partnering with educational institutions to support youth and more. Moreover, WYWC works to create platforms for intergenerational dialogue and collaboration. By facilitating interactions between youth and adult community members, they aim to break down stereotypes and foster mutual understanding. This approach not only benefits the youth but also enriches the community as a whole, creating a more cohesive and supportive environment for all residents (Kaplan et al., 2017). The challenge of engaging

community members also presents an opportunity for WYWC to model the very change they seek to create. By actively involving community members in their work, they demonstrate the value and potential of youth-adult partnerships. This practical example can be a powerful tool in changing narratives about youth capabilities and contributions (Checkoway, 2011). That is why this is a particular part of WYWC success considering the explained challenge.

The WYWC's approach to community engagement is comprehensive and dynamic. This includes individual community members, local services, and community organizations.

WYWC aims to bring together anyone who can contribute to supporting youth in Whāingaroa/Raglan, recognizing that a diverse network of support is crucial for effective youth development (McKnight & Kretzmann, 1996). This is crucial if considered one of the main philosophies of the collective captured in the sentence “*It takes a village to raise a child, and that is exactly our point of view*”

The WYWC is actively seeking to engage with as many community stakeholders and individuals as possible, understanding that each connection can bring unique resources, perspectives, and opportunities for youth. This proactive approach aligns with research suggesting that broad community involvement is key to creating sustainable youth support systems (Zeldin et al., 2013).

To manage this extensive network, WYWC has implemented strategic communication methods. The facilitator of the collective that works for Raglan Naturally oversees sending invites and keeping everyone involved and updated on WYWC activities through email. This regular communication helps maintain engagement and ensures that all stakeholders feel connected to the collective's mission and updated on the progresses of the initiatives (Camino & Zeldin, 2002).

In the modern era, it is crucial to leverage online platforms to connect with people and expand community reach(Boyd, 2014; Heidemann et al., 2012). However, this is only one

aspect of engaging with community stakeholders. Equally important is creating physical spaces where people can come together face-to-face (Oldenburg, 1999). The WYWC meetings embrace this dual approach, serving as a forum for expanding their network and refining their connections both online and in person.

The WYWC collective meetings are strategically hosted in well-known locations within Whāingaroa/Raglan. These venues are chosen for their capacity to accommodate a large number of attendees without logistical issues, aligning with best practices for community engagement (Collins et al., 2018). The selected locations are easily accessible, situated in the town centre, which is crucial for maximizing participation and ensuring inclusivity (Innes & Booher, 2004). Another aspect that fosters people coming together is the environment that the collective foster during their meeting. During the meetings the facilitators encourage a space where people can discuss issues openly, without judgment. This quote from the facilitator capture some of the spirit of the collective meeting *“Remember whanau [extended family, often used informally to refer to members of close-knit groups] this is not a professional meeting, please feel free to share your ideas and thoughts, no one will judge you here. We don’t take in depth minutes of what you say and who says it but we just record some of the ideas that will help us move forward with our shared goals”*

At the beginning of each session, everyone around the table is asked to share their updates: what is "on top" for them – their current experiences and concerns. This practice provides a safe and non-judgmental space for people to express their thoughts and experiences, which is crucial for building trust, social capital within communities (Innes & Booher, 2004; Nabatchi & Leighninger, 2015) This approach encourages people to know each other on a deeper level, thereby becoming closer to one another, which is a key component for creating sustainable networks of support (Kawachi & Berkman, 2001; Neill et al., 2015).

Another key aspect of these meetings is the sharing of success stories from local youth and initiatives that are currently supporting them. Highlighting these positive outcomes not only allows WYWC to celebrate progress but also inspires further action and commitment from community members. This practice of sharing success stories can be a powerful tool for changing community narratives about youth and demonstrating the tangible benefits of youth support initiatives (Fielding, 2001; Mitra, 2004).

The use of the Raglan Chronicle has been particularly valuable in disseminating these stories to the broader community. Some of these stories have showcased local youth achievements in sports, art, and employment, as well as successful services for neurodiverse youth in the Waikato. By sharing these stories, WYWC encourages reflection and discussion about potential new activities, stakeholders, and community members who could contribute positively to the collective's efforts. Moreover, this approach aims to attract more people into the collective by showcasing the results of their initiatives and the positive environment they create. As one member explained: *'It is important that we uplift the mana of youth in the community while simultaneously uplifting the mana of businesses and adults who work with us. This may might change the narrative around youth and at the same time might help reduce barriers for others to access our space.'*

This ongoing assessment and expansion of their network underscore WYWC's commitment to adaptability and growth in meeting the evolving needs of youth (Checkoway, 2012).

Through these efforts, WYWC continues to build a supportive and inclusive environment that empowers youth and strengthens the community.

WYWC's effort to grow and connect more people from the community is a significant strength of the collective, as it ensures that they are constantly evolving to reflect the community's needs and perspectives. By being receptive to feedback and open to new points

of view, the collective remains relevant and effective in its efforts. This dynamic approach aligns with the principles of community-based participatory research and intervention, which emphasize the importance of ongoing community engagement and adaptation (Cargo & Mercer, 2008; Israel et al., 2019). Community-based participatory research (CBPR) is a cooperative research methodology that acknowledges the distinct qualities that each participant contributes and includes all stakeholders in the research process. In order to promote community health and eradicate health inequities, CBPR starts with a study topic that is significant to the community and combines knowledge with social change initiatives. (Israel et al., 2019; Wallerstein et al., 2017). In this case, the WYWC aligns closely with CBPR principles. The collective actively engages in gathering input from a diverse range of community members, ensuring that all voices are heard, particularly those that are often marginalized. This inclusive approach utilizes various methods such as surveys, town hall meetings, and informal conversations, allowing the collective to comprehensively understand the community's concerns and aspirations. By doing so, the collective gains a comprehensive understanding of the community's evolving concerns and aspirations. Furthermore, this strategy gives community members a sense of empowerment. People are more willing to take the initiative and take charge of programmes and interventions in the future when they perceive that their contributions result in noticeable results (Green & Mercer, 2001). The social fabric of the community is strengthened by this sense of ownership, which also improves the interventions' durability. The cyclical process of feedback, reflection, and action is crucial for producing more effective and culturally appropriate treatments. This is why the principles of CBPR emphasise it (Collins et al., 2018; Israel et al., 2019).

Additionally, WYWC's integration of CBPR and Positive Youth Development (PYD) principles strengthens the group's work. PYD places a strong emphasis on leveraging adolescent abilities and giving them chances to grow as individuals, form wholesome

relationships, and give back to their communities (Benson et al., 2007; Lerner, 2005). The collective supports young people's long-term developmental outcomes in addition to meeting immediate community needs by incorporating youth as active participants in the CBPR process. This inclusive strategy fosters a sense of community ownership and shared responsibility for youth well-being, which can lead to more sustainable and effective interventions (Zeldin et al., 2013). By continually expanding their network and incorporating diverse voices, WYWC enhances its ability to respond effectively to the changing needs of youth in Whāingaroa/Raglan. This adaptability is crucial in addressing the complex and evolving challenges faced by young people (Lerner, 2005). One of the key factors for WYWC longevity and success is the capacity to sustain relationship after creating it. This is conditioned by the fact that the collective emphasizes creating an environment where shared culture and beliefs are fostered, based on support rather than competition.

The collective's dedication to engaging with diverse community stakeholders to reflect local needs and perspectives is amplified by their cultural sensitivity and the openness of their initiatives. For example, they organized a series of activities for youth to celebrate Matariki and collaborated closely with the local iwi to arrange events for Māori Mental Health Day. In a significant gesture of inclusion, they worked with a local matua (elder) to bestow a name in te reo Māori on the WYWC: "Ngā Whakaruruhau Mahuri."

This inclusive approach is especially vital in communities where diverse cultures coexist, as a one-size-fits-all strategy is often ineffective (Benson, 2006; Smith, 2021). By embracing cultural practices and incorporating them into their initiatives, the collective ensures that their efforts resonate more deeply with the community, fostering a sense of belonging and mutual respect among all participants.

In this context, cultural competence and sensitivity are critical components of effective intervention strategies, especially in creating connections within colonized countries. These skills are essential for developing culturally responsive practices that acknowledge historical trauma and promote healing and empowerment among Indigenous youth (Durie, 2001b, 2003). Furthermore, culturally competent approaches foster trust and engagement between service providers and communities, leading to more effective and sustainable youth development initiatives (Burnette & Figley, 2017). This community-driven model aligns closely with Indigenous and Māori perspectives on wellbeing and community support.

For Māori culture, connection (*whanaungatanga*) is a fundamental component of wellbeing (*hauora*), extending far beyond simple social interactions. This concept is deeply rooted in Māori worldviews and encompasses connections to people (both living and ancestors), place, and the natural environment (Durie, 2001; Rata, 2012). These concepts emphasize the interconnectedness of individuals within a community and the importance of collective support. The WYWC's approach mirrors this by fostering a sense of community connection, and extended community responsibility for youth wellbeing (Mead, 2016; Wilson et al., 2021). The collective's efforts to acknowledge, respect, and follow *Tikanga Māori* within their meeting and initiatives demonstrate cultural responsiveness and inclusivity. Moreover, this approach enhances the capacity to create a stronger network of local people that can truly reflect the needs of a community and therefore support it more effectively (Durie, 2011; Bishop et al., 2009). This not only enhances the effectiveness of the interventions but also empowers community members by validating their cultural identities and contributions.

Recognizing and addressing the unique historical and cultural contexts of colonized populations is essential for fostering trust and collaboration in these communities in respect of *Te Tiriti o Waitangi* (Durie, 2001a; Smith, 2021). By ensuring that programs are culturally relevant, the collective can better address the specific needs and challenges faced by different

groups, leading to more sustainable and impactful outcomes (Lerner et al., 2021; Youniss & Yates, 1997) .

The WYWC's strategy to cultivate and reinforce local connections necessitates patience and a deep understanding of community resources and needs. This approach involves meticulously mapping community assets, encompassing individuals with specific skills, local organizations, and cultural resources (Kerka, 2003). One key strategy for community connection has been organizing workshops where local businesses can learn about the advantages of hiring youth. During these sessions, community members discuss the benefits of youth employment and explain how organizations like the collective can provide ongoing support to both employers and young workers.

“ We have so much that we can use for our youth in the community, ” This quote highlights the asset-based approach used by the WYWC, recognizing and harnessing the existing strengths within the community, rather than concentrating solely on deficits (Kretzmann, 1995). This strategy aligns with the principles of Positive Youth Development, extending them to a broader community perspective (Lerner et al., 2005) (Lerner et al., 2021). By focusing on community assets, the collective not only enhances youth development but also fosters community resilience and capacity building (Sheehan et al., 2022). This approach reflects a paradigm shift from problem-focused interventions to strength-based community development, mirroring the evolution in youth development theories (Benson, 2006). Just as PYD emphasizes nurturing youth's potential rather than fixing perceived deficiencies, the WYWC's community-focused asset-based approach cultivates the latent potential within the entire community ecosystem (Damon & Gregory, 2003; Eversole, 2014; Green & Haines, 2015; Jaye et al., 2022).

This approach, relying on volunteers and community members who are willing to go out of their way to support others, presents an alternative to the traditional communal health system where services are often divided and independent, and where holistic support or community connection may not be prioritized (DiClemente et al., 2002). In recent years, there has been an increased focus on holistic perspectives and community-based approaches in youth development and social interventions (Lerner et al., 2006; Trickett & Beehler, 2013). This shift is due to a variety of factors, including a growing understanding of the importance of the relationship between individuals and their environments (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007). These approaches recognize that human development and well-being are shaped by complex interactions between personal, social, and environmental factors (Deane & Dutton, 2020; Eccles & Roeser, 2009; Gootman & Eccles, 2002). In recent years, there has been an increased focus on holistic perspectives and community-based approaches in youth development, due to a growing understanding of the importance of the relationship between individuals and their environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Varga & Zaff, 2018).

The WYWC recognizes the importance of creating a space where support originates from the community itself, with the use of formal services being secondary to the utilization of available community resources. “*We don’t want other people to tell us what to do with local youth,*” By creating a network of people, fostering a sense of collective responsibility and leveraging local resources, the WYWC aims to create a more resilient and supportive environment for youth development.

Summary of theme one:

The analysis of the research highlights how collectives like the WYWC exemplify a positive and effective model for community-based youth support in Whāingaroa/Raglan. This addresses the first research question, while also highlighting the impact of such services on

local youth. The research lays the foundation by discussing the WYWC's core goals and principles. The collective's primary objective—to change the narrative around youth—is acknowledged as a complex and long-term challenge, requiring a strategic, resourceful, and informed approach.

Central to the WYWC's strategy is its dual commitment to both connecting youth with the broader community and fostering a deep understanding of their needs and aspirations. This dual focus is evident in the collective's initiatives, which are designed not only to engage youth but also to integrate their perspectives into the wider community context. This strategy has created a robust network of community support that is carefully coordinated by key members and a steering group within the collective, is driven by a clear intent to expand and involve more community stakeholders, ensuring that the support system for youth is both comprehensive and inclusive.

In answering the research question, it becomes evident that the WYWC's represents a successful strategy for Whāingaroa/Raglan services to support youth at a community-based level. However, by participating to the collective meetings and witnessing the delivery of their interventions it become clear that the WYWC mission is not only to unite the community in supporting youth and altering perceptions but also to transform the broader community narrative by fostering new relationships. This approach, centred on connection and support, is instrumental in building social capital and enhancing community resilience. Such a shift in community dynamics is likely to lead to long-term positive outcomes for both youth development and overall community well-being (Zeldin et al., 2013; Eccles & Wigfield; Gootman & Eccles, 2002; Lerner et al., 2005).

From a collective to a formal entity: the WYWC's long term goals and aspirations

In the second chapter of my findings, I try to answer the second question of my research which is:

“What could be implemented in the community to foster positive youth development in the future?”

The Whāingaroa Youth Working Collective (WYWC), although recently established, shows a strong long-term commitment to Raglan/Whāingaroa. Their initiatives, as previously detailed, provide a wide range of opportunities for local youth. Achieving their goal of enhancing the environment for local youth requires both a long-term vision and sustained effort. The collective focuses on leveraging existing community resources and identifying what is currently available as explained in detailed in the previous chapter. Simultaneously, they assess what is lacking and what improvements can be made. In this context, it's important to note the initiative taken by the collective to pay one of its members to conduct research on what local youth desire to see in their community. This approach helps inform the collective's long-term strategy and goals. This dual strategy of leveraging available resources and identifying gaps is often evident in their meetings.

The collective's commitment to growth and improvement is clearly demonstrated in their discussions, where they actively explore numerous ideas about what can be done and how to achieve their objectives. “*We don't want to be all hui hui and not doi doi*”. This quote essentially means: "We don't want to just talk without taking action" or "We don't want to have endless meetings without actually accomplishing anything."

This phrase perfectly captures the essence of the collective approach and is demonstrating a commitment to not just discussing ideas theoretically, but to actively working towards their

objectives. It's a powerful statement about the importance of turning conversations and plans into actual progress.

This forward-thinking approach is crucial for the sustainable development of youth programs and community engagement and highlight the purpose of the collective members of keep moving forward (Zeldin et al., 2013). During these meetings, two main improvements that the WYWC envisions and aims to work towards have emerged:

1. Creation of a Paid Position within the WYWC:

The collective recognizes the need for a dedicated, paid position within their organization. This person would serve as a connector between youth and the community, facilitating better communication, coordination, and implementation of initiatives. Such a role could significantly enhance the collective's capacity to serve local youth effectively (Lasker & Weiss, 2003). This concept will be explored in my first subtheme, where I will outline some challenges this strategy may present, as well as key factors discussed and identified by the collective that would contribute to the success of this approach.

2. Development of a Youth Hub:

The second major goal and dream of the collective is the establishment of a youth hub - a physical space where young people can gather, socialize, and access a variety of activities. This concept aligns with research showing that dedicated youth spaces can significantly contribute to positive youth development (Malone, 2016). The envisioned youth hub will be my second sub-topic.

Creation of a Paid Position within the WYWC

The creation of a full-time paid position within the collective has been a consistent topic of discussion since the group's inception. This initiative reflects a growing awareness among volunteer-based organizations of the challenges associated with relying solely on unpaid labour (Studer & Von Schnurbein, 2013) As one member expressed during a recent meeting, *“We all have our own lives and jobs, and sometimes we need things done that we simply can't manage due to our other commitments.”* The collective members recognize that their current capacity to contribute is constrained by professional and personal commitments outside the organization, a common issue in volunteer-driven initiatives(Allen & Mueller, 2013).

The proposal to establish a paid position stems from the collective's desire to maintain consistent and sustainable operations. This approach aligns with research suggesting that the integration of paid staff can enhance the stability and effectiveness of volunteer organizations(Allen & Mueller, 2013) By introducing a full-time, compensated role, the collective aims to ensure that their initiatives receive dedicated attention and are not subject to the fluctuating availability of volunteers.

However, this transition is not without potential challenges. The introduction of a paid position within a volunteer framework can alter group dynamics and potentially impact volunteer motivation (Kreutzer & Jäger, 2011). Some of the potential impact to be mindful are:

1. Changing Organizational Identity: The introduction of a paid role can lead to what Kreutzer and Jäger (2011) term an "identity struggle" within volunteer organizations. Volunteers may perceive this change as a shift towards a more professionalized,

business-like model, which can conflict with the grassroots, community-driven identity that initially attracted them to the collective.

2. Volunteer Motivation: Motivation in volunteer organizations is often intrinsic, driven by factors such as altruism, social connection, and personal growth (Clary et al., 1998). The presence of a paid staff member might inadvertently diminish volunteers' sense of ownership and impact, potentially affecting their motivation to contribute.
3. Power Dynamics: A paid position often comes with increased responsibility and decision-making power. This can create a perceived hierarchy within the previously egalitarian volunteer structure, potentially leading to feelings of disempowerment among volunteers (Kreutzer & Jäger, 2011).
4. Role Ambiguity: The introduction of a paid role can create uncertainty about task allocation and responsibilities. Volunteers might question their role and value within the organization, leading to decreased engagement or even withdrawal (Studer & Von Schnurbein, 2013).
5. Preserving Volunteer Spirit: To maintain the collaborative ethos, the collective should consider the following strategies: a) Clear Communication: Transparently discuss the reasons for creating the paid position and how it will support, not replace, volunteer efforts. b) Inclusive Decision-making: Involve volunteers in the process of defining the new role and its responsibilities. c) Volunteer Recognition: Continue to acknowledge and celebrate volunteer contributions to reinforce their value to the organization. d) Maintain Volunteer Leadership: Ensure that volunteers still have opportunities for leadership and decision-making within the collective.
6. Balancing Professionalization and Volunteerism: The challenge lies in finding a balance between the benefits of professionalization (such as increased efficiency and

consistency) and the preservation of the volunteer ethos that has been central to the collective's identity and success(Hwang & Powell, 2009).

In conclusion, the collective's decision to create a full-time paid position represents a significant milestone in its organizational evolution. While this transition offers the potential for enhanced stability, consistency, and effectiveness in service delivery, it also presents complex challenges that must be navigated with care. The collective must strike a delicate balance between professionalization and preserving the volunteer ethos that has been its cornerstone. By maintaining open communication, involving volunteers in decision-making processes, and continuously recognizing their contributions, the collective can mitigate potential negative impacts on volunteer motivation and organizational identity. Ultimately, this strategic move towards a hybrid model of paid and volunteer roles, if managed thoughtfully, has the potential to strengthen the collective's capacity to serve its community and achieve its mission. The success of this transition will depend on the collective's ability to harness the benefits of professional staffing while nurturing the passion, commitment, and community-driven spirit that its volunteers bring to the organization.

All these points highlight why, the collective must carefully consider how to integrate this new role while preserving the volunteer spirit and collaborative ethos that has defined their work thus far. By carefully considering these factors and potential challenges and actively working to preserve their collaborative culture, the collective can navigate this transition successfully. The goal should be to leverage the benefits of a paid position while maintaining the passion, commitment, and community-driven spirit that volunteers bring to the organization. In analysing the discussions by the collective, the following sub-themes were identified about the new role: finding the right person, roles of the connector.

Finding the right person:

The WYWC frequently discussed during the collective's meetings regarding the creation of a paid position is the imperative to identify the ideal candidate for the role. The collective demonstrates a profound understanding of the crucial nature of this decision, particularly in the context of youth-focused initiatives. As expressed with these quotes by the members of the collective: *“Finding the right person for this role will be essential, as for adolescents, who communicates with them can be more impactful than what is communicated.”*

“We need someone they can rely on and look up to, who also aligns with the WYWC approach.”

They recognize that the success of their programmes hinges significantly on selecting an individual who can effectively connect with and mentor young people. The collective emphasizes that this role demands someone who possesses not only professional qualifications but also intangible qualities that resonate with youth. The effectiveness of youth mentoring relationships is heavily influenced by the mentor's ability to form strong, empathetic bonds with their mentees (Rhodes et al., 2006). They seek an individual with "mana" - a Polynesian concept that encompasses personal charisma, spiritual power, and leadership presence. This quality is seen as essential for establishing authentic connections with young people and serving as a positive role model, especially given the large number of Māori youth in the region.

Moreover, the collective stresses the importance of flexibility and the ability to work within a collaborative framework. This aligns with research by which highlights the importance of adaptability in youth work, given the dynamic nature of adolescent development and the varied challenges young people face. The ideal candidate must be able to seamlessly integrate into the collective's team-oriented approach, valuing and incorporating input from all members (Larson et al., 2005).

A particularly noteworthy aspect of their vision is encapsulated in the statement: *"Ideally, we want to train a youth to work in this space and this will create also the new leaders for our community."* This perspective reflects a commitment to fostering intergenerational mentorship within their community. This approach aligns with the principles of youth-adult partnerships and participatory youth development, as described by Zeldin and colleagues who emphasise the importance of engaging young people as active agents in their own development and as contributors to community change. The collective's desire to mentor a young adult who can, in turn, become a mentor to other youth and lead collective initiatives while adhering to their ethos demonstrates a forward-thinking, sustainable approach to community development. This strategy not only provides immediate benefits in terms of youth engagement but also contributes to long-term community capacity building and leadership development.

"We need someone that is able to take direction and also be a part of the decision making"

This quote highlights the collective emphasis on finding someone who can work within a team framework and maintain flexibility. As Akiva and Petrokubi (2016) point out, effective youth-adult partnerships require adults who can balance guidance with empowerment, adapting their approach based on the needs and capabilities of the young people they work with. This flexibility extends to the ability to navigate the sometimes complex dynamics of working within a collective decision-making structure while also taking initiative and leading when appropriate (Akiva & Petrokubi, 2016). In sum, the collective's approach to filling this role demonstrates a nuanced understanding of youth development principles, community capacity building, and organizational dynamics. Their thoughtful consideration of these factors increases the likelihood of selecting a candidate who can effectively bridge the gap between the collective's vision and the practical implementation of youth-focused initiatives. Moreover, by clearly defining the role of the connector, the collective aims to mitigate

challenges related to volunteer motivation, shifts in group dynamics, power distribution, and balancing professionalism with volunteerism. This specificity helps ensure the new role will align with the collective's mission while addressing concerns that often arise in volunteer-driven organizations.

Roles of the connector:

The collective demonstrates strong motivation to establish a full-time position, as evidenced by their consistent discussions on this topic. An important point to clarify is that the collective, through Raglan Natural Funding, has already taken concrete steps towards this goal by financing a research project. This initiative involved a collective member conducting surveys and interviews to ascertain the genuine needs and desires of youth in the community.

This research has been instrumental in shaping the collective's understanding of what the proposed "connector" role should entail and where it should focus its efforts. As one member articulated, *"The research that was conducted was also to understand what the role should focus on, how the role will look like."* This approach underscores the collective's commitment to evidence-based decision-making and youth-centred program development.

Moreover, this research initiative not only provided invaluable insights but also aligned closely with the collective's core ethos and values. This alignment is clearly expressed in a quote from one of the members: *"Part of the WYWC philosophy is to act based on what we know the youth want to see in the community."* This statement reflects a participatory approach to youth development, which is supported by research showing that youth-driven initiatives tend to be more effective and sustainable (Larson et al., 2005).

By basing their plans for the full-time position on direct input from local youth, the collective is demonstrating a commitment to responsive, community-driven programming. This

approach is consistent with best practices in youth development, which emphasize the importance of youth voice and agency in program design and implementation (Zeldin et al., 2013).

The research conducted by the collective has uncovered two primary desires among the youth in Whāingaroa /Raglan: firstly, to connect with their local environment through immersive outdoor activities, and secondly, to find employment opportunities. These findings are particularly significant as they reflect not only local preferences but also mirror broader global challenges facing young people today.

The desire for connection with Raglan and immersion in nature through outdoor activities can be seen as a direct response to a growing concern: the increasing disconnect between youth and their natural environment. This quote from one of the members reflects this: *“youth spend so much time on the phone and they are aware of it, they know it is a problem and they just want to spend time in nature and get their hands dirty.”*

The second key finding - the youth's desire for employment opportunities - reflects another pressing global issue: the rising cost of living and its impact on young people (Keith Neal, 2022). This economic pressure makes it increasingly difficult for youth to access resources that were once more affordable, potentially limiting their opportunities for personal and professional growth (Boston & Chapple, 2014). The desire for work among Raglan's youth can be seen as a proactive response to these economic challenges, demonstrating their awareness of the need for financial independence and stability.

This finding aligns with global trends highlighted by organizations such as the International Labour Organization (Dasgupta et al., 2020), which has noted the growing concerns about youth employment and economic participation worldwide. By recognizing this need, the

collective can potentially develop initiatives that not only provide employment opportunities but also equip young people with valuable skills and experiences that can enhance their long-term employability.

The parallel between what the youth want and the challenges they face in their lives underscores the relevance and potential impact of the collective's work. By addressing these desires, the collective is not merely providing activities or services but is actively engaging with core issues that affect youth well-being and development.

1. Based on the findings from the research, the collective identified that the full-time position of the connector would serve two main purposes: Support youth with employment
2. Facilitate activities that engage youth with nature in Whāingaroa/Raglan.

This dual focus directly addresses the key needs and desires expressed by local youth, as revealed by the collective's research. By targeting these areas, the connector role is designed to respond to both the economic challenges facing young people and their desire for meaningful engagement with their natural environment.

By combining these two focus areas, the connector role has the potential to address both immediate needs (employment) and long-term well-being (connection to nature) for the youth of Whāingaroa Raglan. This holistic approach demonstrates the collective's commitment to supporting youth development in a comprehensive and locally relevant manner.

Support youth with employment: The collective's vision for the connector's role in supporting youth employment is multifaceted and comprehensive. Building upon existing initiatives, such as the job search program already implemented by one of the collective members, the connector would be tasked with expanding and enhancing these efforts. This

approach demonstrates a commitment to continuity and the value of building on successful existing programs.

The collective discussed how some of the functions that the facilitator could undertake in this part of the role are:

- 1) CV Writing Assistance: Continuing and potentially expanding the existing program to help youth create effective, professional resumes.
- 2) Job Application Support: Guiding young people through the often complex process of searching for and applying to suitable job opportunities.
- 3) Interview Preparation: help youth develop the skills and confidence needed to perform well in job interviews. This could include mock interviews, coaching on common questions, and advice on professional presentation.
- 4) Employer Relations: While not explicitly mentioned, there's potential for the connector to also liaise with local employers to create youth-friendly job opportunities and foster a supportive work environment for young employees.

The collective's holistic approach is encapsulated in the quote from one of its members: *"We have to support youth to take their first steps of their work life and support them if they have problems."* This statement reflects an understanding that youth employment support should extend beyond just helping young people find jobs, to include ongoing guidance and problem-solving assistance. This approach also connects to another issue identified by the collective: reluctance from some local businesses to hire local youth, as they may be more prone to encounter challenges and require additional support at work. By acknowledging this, the collective is addressing both the need for sustained support for young employees and the concerns of businesses hesitant to hire inexperienced workers. This comprehensive approach aligns with best practices in youth employment support. For instance, the International

Organizations (ILO, OECD and EU) emphasizes the importance of providing young people with a range of employment services, including job search assistance, career guidance, and support for job retention and advancement (Öztürk, 2017).

Moreover, this approach recognizes the unique challenges that young people often face in their early work experiences. As noted by Lyons and colleagues (Lyons et al., 2015), early career experiences can be critical in shaping young people's attitudes towards work, their career aspirations, and their ability to navigate workplace challenges. By providing ongoing support, the collective aims to help youth not just find jobs, but build sustainable, rewarding careers. This quote from one of the collective members reflect this:

“We acknowledge that not everyone is suited for school, and that for some, beginning employment early could help them better understand their career goals.” The collective's vision for the connector role in employment support demonstrates a nuanced understanding of the complexities of youth employment. By addressing not just job acquisition but also job retention and career development, they are positioning themselves to make a significant, long-term impact on the employment prospects of youth in Whāingaroa/ Raglan.

The collective's comprehensive approach to youth employment support aligns closely with the principles of positive youth psychology. This framework, as outlined by Lerner et al. (2005), emphasizes the importance of fostering positive developmental experiences that promote the "Five Cs": Competence, Confidence, Connection, Character, and Caring. By providing multifaceted employment support, the collective is directly contributing to several of these outcomes. The job search and application assistance help build Competence in practical skills, while interview preparation and ongoing support can significantly boost Confidence. The connector's role in facilitating connections between youth and local employers enhances the Connection aspect, both to the community and to professional

networks. Moreover, by supporting youth through their early work experiences, the collective is helping to shape their Character in the professional world. This positive youth development approach recognizes that employment is not just about economic gain, but also about personal growth and community integration. As Damon (2004) argues, engaging youth in meaningful activities - such as employment - that connect them to their community can foster a sense of purpose and contribute to positive identity formation. Thus, the collective's employment support initiative, guided by the principles of positive youth psychology, has the potential to not only improve job prospects but also to contribute significantly to the overall well-being and positive development of youth in Whāingaroa Raglan.

Facilitate activities that engage youth with nature in Whāingaroa/ Raglan:

The community youth survey/research highlighted a strong desire among young people to reconnect with nature—both through hands-on experiences ('getting dirty') and developing deeper connections with their local environment. This finding aligns with global trends in youth engagement with nature. Research indicates that despite growing concerns about youth's attachment to digital devices, many young people express a strong desire to spend more time outdoors (Chawla, 2015; Ives et al., 2018).

This phenomenon, sometimes referred to as "nature deficit disorder" (Louv, 2008), is largely attributed to the pervasive use of digital technology. As young people spend more time on their phones and other devices, they often become detached from the physical world around them. This disconnection can have negative impacts on both physical and mental health (O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011; Twenge, 2017; Wheaton et al., 2017). One of the members of the collective highlighted: " *Most of the local youth reported to feel disconnected and unaware about their local surroundings.* "

As one collective member observed when discussing their participation in meetings with local youth: *'It was incredible when talking to youth about adventures and activities we could do in town—how many ideas were discussed. The youth were tremendously excited to do outside activities, especially in summer.'* This enthusiasm reflects broader research findings that suggest young people often seek meaningful outdoor experiences when given the opportunity and appropriate support structures (Malone, 2016) .

The collective's research findings align with studies showing that exposure to nature and outdoor activities can have significant positive effects on youth development. For instance, researchers found that nature-based activities can improve cognitive function, social skills, and overall well-being in young people (Lubans et al., 2012; Mygind et al., 2019; Wheaton et al., 2017). By identifying this desire among local youth, the collective is well-positioned to develop programs that not only meet the expressed needs of young people but also address a critical developmental issue. Moreover, studies have shown that nature-based activities can significantly benefit youth development, enhancing both physical and mental well-being while fostering environmental stewardship (Chawla, 2015). For example, activities like hiking local trails, exploring beaches, or participating in community gardens can provide opportunities for physical exercise while simultaneously fostering mindfulness and reducing symptoms of anxiety and depression that are increasingly prevalent among young people (Summers et al., 2017). This connection to nature is particularly relevant in coastal communities like Whāingaroa Raglan, where the natural environment plays a crucial role in cultural and community identity.

From a te ao Māori perspective, connecting youth to their local natural environment is fundamental to cultural identity and hauora (holistic well-being). The concept of whanaungatanga extends beyond human relationships to include connections with the natural

world, where young people are encouraged to understand their role as kaitiaki (guardians) of the local environment (Glassey et al., 2023; Harmsworth & Awatere, 2013). Through this cultural lens, rangatahi (youth) who develop a deep connection with their local taiao (natural environment) strengthen their understanding of whakapapa, which connects them not only to their tūpuna (ancestors) but also to the mountains, rivers, and coastal areas that shape their rohe (local area). In Whāingaroa specifically, this connection to place encompasses relationships with significant natural features like the harbour, surrounding hills, and coastal areas, which are integral to local mātauranga Māori and cultural narratives. The Karioi maunga (mountain) stands as a particularly profound symbol of this deep connection. Located on the western edge of Whāingaroa (Raglan), Karioi is more than just a geographical landmark; it is a living ancestor, a keeper of stories, and a critical environmental and cultural touchstone for local iwi and hapū. The moana (ocean) adjacent to Whāingaroa is equally significant, serving as a dynamic lifeline that connects the community to their ancestral maritime traditions, providing sustenance, spiritual context, and a profound sense of identity through its rhythmic waves and rich marine ecosystems. Activities to explore the story, significance, and more of these places are mediums to achieve well-being and education. This holistic understanding of environmental connection supports young people's sense of belonging, cultural identity, and overall mauri ora (life force/well-being) (Royal, 2012).

Arahanga Doyle's and colleagues's groundbreaking research further illuminates this critical relationship between rangatahi and the natural world. Their work emphasizes outdoor education as a transformative pathway for cultural reconnection and environmental stewardship. Doyle argues that traditional Māori outdoor education approaches provide a holistic learning framework that goes beyond conventional Western environmental education models. By integrating mātauranga Māori (traditional ecological knowledge) with contemporary pedagogical practices, their research demonstrates how outdoor learning

experiences can restore and strengthen cultural identity, environmental consciousness, and personal well-being among young Māori (Arahanga-Doyle et al., 2019).

The study further highlights the importance of place-based learning that centers Indigenous knowledge systems, showing how rangatahi can rediscover their ancestral connections through direct, meaningful interactions with the natural environment. Her Their research underscores that these experiences are not just educational encounters, but profound cultural practices that reaffirm the fundamental Māori principle of interconnectedness between people, land, and all living systems (Arahanga-Doyle et al., 2019).

Activities identified through youth consultations, including community meetings and local surveys, demonstrate a strong alignment with Whāingaroa Raglan's natural assets. The preferred activities encompass both water-based pursuits (fishing, kayaking adventures) and land-based recreational activities (camping, beach volleyball, rock climbing), with particular emphasis on social gatherings like bonfires. These preferences align with research indicating that youth engagement in outdoor activities is most successful when it combines physical activity with social interaction opportunities (Bartos, 2013; Jeffs & Ord, 2018).

The feasibility of these activities is enhanced by the availability of local resources and existing community infrastructure. Whāingaroa's natural environment, with its harbour, beaches, and surrounding cliff faces, provides an ideal setting for these activities.

Additionally, local organizations and community members possess relevant equipment and expertise that could support these initiatives.

However, the successful implementation of these activities requires dedicated coordination and oversight. A youth worker would play a crucial role in:

- Ensuring proper risk management and safety protocols

- Coordinating with local experts and equipment providers
- Maintaining consistent communication with collective members
- Documenting participation and outcomes
- Building sustainable relationships with community partners
- Facilitating youth feedback and program adaptation
- Ensuring cultural appropriateness and environmental responsibility

Structured outdoor programs are most effective when they have consistent leadership that can bridge organizational requirements with youth interests and safety considerations (Jeffs & Ord, 2018; Neprily, 2020; Shooter et al., 2009). Regular reporting and evaluation would enable the collective to assess the impact of these activities on youth engagement and well-being, while also identifying areas for improvement and expansion.

Whanau engagement:

Family engagement and risk management are crucial components in developing youth outdoor activities. The collective members recognize that parental/whānau support is not just a procedural requirement but a fundamental aspect of creating successful and sustainable youth programs. As one collective member emphasized: *"It is great that we have all these ideas, but we have to make sure that the parents are on board."* This sentiment reflects best practices in youth development programming, where family involvement enhances both participation rates and program outcomes.

Another collective member highlighted the importance of comprehensive risk assessment: *"When you work with youth, it's important that you think about everything that could go wrong and plan accordingly."* This proactive approach to risk management aligns with

research showing that successful youth outdoor programs require careful planning and clear communication with families (Shores et al., 2007).

Engaging with families fulfils several critical roles, including obtaining informed consent for activities, establishing clear communication channels for emergencies, and building trust between the collective and the broader community. This family-inclusive approach also helps address potential barriers to participation, such as cultural considerations, financial constraints, or safety concerns.

Moreover, from a te ao Māori perspective, the importance of whānau in wellbeing is profound, recognizing that young people are fundamentally embedded within their whānau networks, and that without comprehensive whānau engagement, programs are unlikely to achieve their intended transformative outcomes. This whānau-centred approach reflects the deep-rooted Māori principle of collective well-being, where individual development is intrinsically linked to family and community support (Glassey et al., 2023; Reid et al., 2016; Wilson et al., 2021). In practice, this means that successful youth programs must go beyond simply inviting whānau participation – they must actively create meaningful spaces for whānau involvement, decision-making, and ongoing dialogue.

Holistic support ensures that youth programs are not isolated interventions, but integrated support systems that consider the broader ecological and social contexts of young people's lives. Direct whānau engagement builds essential trust, as families who understand program goals, methodologies, and potential impacts are more likely to support and actively participate in their children's developmental journeys. Whānau members often serve as crucial knowledge holders, bringing intergenerational wisdom, local historical context, and culturally specific insights that can enrich and deepen program experiences. Inclusive approaches transform whānau from passive observers to active co-creators of educational and

developmental experiences, reinforcing their crucial role in community resilience and cultural continuity (Smith, 2015; Wilson et al., 2021).

In the context of outdoor and environmental education, this means creating program designs that are flexible, responsive, and deeply attentive to whānau needs, aspirations, and cultural practices. It requires ongoing dialogue, transparent communication, and a genuine commitment to shared decision-making. By embracing this comprehensive, whānau-centred approach, youth programs can move beyond traditional service delivery models to become transformative spaces of cultural reconnection, collective learning, and intergenerational healing.

As such, a paid position, and the subsequent increase in time and capacity hold great promise in growing the work of the collective to support young people and the wider community.

The Development of a youth Hub

Throughout the collective's meetings, a recurring theme developed overtime: the pressing need for a dedicated youth hub in Whāingaroa Raglan. This vision encompasses more than just a physical space—it represents a response to a critical gap in community infrastructure for young people. As one collective member poignantly observed, *"There is so much in this town for everyone but not for local youth."* Another member highlighted the visible impact of this absence: *"Often you see young people in the streets and they seem lost because actually they don't have a place where they can hang out besides the skatepark."*

These observations from collective members illuminate a paradox within the local community. Despite Whāingaroa Raglan's reputation as a vibrant, beautiful coastal town with numerous amenities, there is a notable absence of designed spaces for youth, particularly those aged 12 to 18. This gap in youth-specific infrastructure is particularly concerning as

this age group often faces negative community perceptions, a phenomenon that research suggests can be exacerbated by the lack of appropriate social spaces (Harris et al., 2021).

The absence of dedicated youth spaces can perpetuate a cycle of marginalization. When young people lack appropriate places to gather and engage in meaningful activities, they may congregate in public spaces not designed for their needs, potentially reinforcing negative community perceptions (Allwood, 2020; Jaye et al., 2022). This dynamic is particularly challenging for adolescents, who are at a crucial developmental stage where they need both independence and community support (Shek et al., 2019). The situation in Whāingaroa reflects broader research findings indicating that small towns often struggle to provide adequate infrastructure for youth, despite their importance for community vitality and future sustainability (Jaye et al., 2022; Simcock, 2016)

Youth-specific spaces serve multiple vital functions in community development and youth well-being. Research demonstrates that these spaces act as crucial "third places" - environments separate from home and school where young people can develop their identity and social connections (Khan, 2012; Malone, 2017; Tickle, 2016). Such spaces provide safe environments for socializing, which is particularly important in communities where young people might otherwise gather in less secure or supervised locations. The provision of structured program delivery within these spaces allows for consistent and accessible youth development opportunities, while simultaneously creating natural opportunities for informal mentoring and skill development. Moreover, as one member of the collective explained, a youth hub could have a transformative impact: *"Providing somewhere to go, something to do, and someone to talk to will make an incredible difference for our youth."* This vision underscores the importance of creating safe and engaging spaces where young people can connect, find support, and thrive.

More recent studies have expanded on these findings, suggesting that dedicated youth spaces play a critical role in building community resilience and social capital (Billett, 2014; Farrell et al., 2002; Philp & Gill, 2020). When young people have access to their own space, they develop stronger connections to their community and are more likely to engage in positive social activities. Furthermore, these spaces can serve as incubators for youth leadership, where young people can practice decision-making and develop organizational skills in a supportive environment. This also highlines with one of the collective goals to " *build the future leaders in the community*".

The significance of these spaces extends beyond individual development to broader community outcomes. Research indicates that communities with dedicated youth spaces report lower rates of youth disengagement and higher rates of youth participation in community initiatives (Settipani et al., 2019). These spaces become focal points for intergenerational interaction, cultural expression, and skill-sharing, contributing to the overall social fabric of the community. In the context of Whāingaroa Raglan, such a space could bridge existing gaps in youth services while building on the community's strong sense of place and connection. Finally research highlight how youth centres can mitigate some of the issues that young people in rural areas encounter, like social marginalisation brought on by limited access to public areas, a dearth of recreational opportunities, and poor public transit (Khan, 2012).

The current situation in Whāingaroa Raglan, where youth activities are largely limited by family resources and access to private facilities, potentially exacerbates social inequities among young people(Vlachopoulos et al., 2024). Research indicates that dedicated youth spaces in small communities can significantly impact youth well-being and community engagement (Matthews et al., 2021). Such spaces not only provide practical solutions for

youth activities but also signal community investment in young people's development and future (Thibault & Walton, 2019).

Taking a step forward, the collective has identified Papahua Reserve as a potential location for the youth hub. This site is ideal due to its proximity to the town centre, making it easily accessible for youth. Additionally, its location near the harbour beach adds to its appeal, and it already offers several valuable resources, including a skate park, basketball court, playground, pump track, and a ramp for kayaks or boats.

As one member of the collective stated, “We already have the perfect place—it’s designed for this purpose; we just need to make it happen.” This statement underscores the enthusiasm and readiness within the collective to transform this location into a vibrant and multifunctional hub for young people.

Vision and Purpose for the Whāingaroa Youth Hub:

The collective members acknowledged from their initial meetings that Whāingaroa's youth need more than just a physical space—they need a place of belonging and self-expression. As one member articulated, "*The community wants to feel that there is a space for youth in town and that they want to be there.*" This vision aligns with contemporary research on youth development spaces, which emphasizes the importance of creating environments where young people feel not just physically present, but emotionally and socially connected (Nolas, 2014; Tickle, 2016).

The discussions around youth engagement prompted deeper exploration of what would make such a space genuinely attractive and meaningful for young people. Research indicates that successful youth spaces are those that emerge from young people's own interests and needs, rather than being solely adult-conceived and directed (Sanders et al., 2015; Thomas & Percy-

Smith, 2010). This understanding was reflected in the collective's emphasis on creating a judgment-free environment that facilitates creative expression and skill development.

The vision for the hub particularly emphasizes creative arts and cultural expression: *"The youth hub should be a place where youth can feel creative—they could do murals, have resources to paint and someone that teaches them how to paint, have musical instruments and youth concerts during the weekend."* This focus on creativity aligns with research demonstrating that artistic expression plays a crucial role in adolescent development and well-being. Creative activities provide multiple benefits for young people such as: enhancing psychological well-being, building resilience, and developing important life skills (Barbot & Heuser, 2017; Ennis & Tonkin, 2018). Moreover, when young people have access to creative resources and mentorship, they are more likely to develop positive self-identity and stronger community connections. The provision of art materials, musical instruments, and performance spaces—resources often unavailable in private settings—can democratize access to creative development opportunities.

The collective's vision for the youth hub extends beyond indoor activities to address barriers in accessing outdoor recreational equipment and opportunities. Community survey results indicating strong youth interest in outdoor activities align with broader research showing the positive impacts of outdoor recreation on youth development and well-being (Louv, 2008). As one collective member expressed, *"It would be great if youth could have a place where they can access material to play and have fun for free."*

The proposed equipment lending system at the hub would include kayaks, tennis rackets, soccer and basketballs, skateboards, and other recreational gear. This approach to creating an equipment library addresses a significant barrier to youth participation in outdoor activities: the prohibitive cost of equipment and lack of storage space at home (Armour & Sandford,

2013; Leyshon, 2011). Research has shown that when communities provide accessible recreational equipment, youth participation in outdoor activities increases significantly, particularly among those from lower-income households(Edwards et al., 2014).

The concept of an equipment lending system within youth spaces has proven successful in other communities. Such systems not only provide physical access to equipment but also create opportunities for peer-to-peer skill sharing and informal mentoring (Carpenter & Harper, 2015). This model could be particularly effective in Whāingaroa Raglan, where the natural environment offers numerous opportunities for outdoor recreation, but access to equipment may be limited by financial constraints or storage capabilities. The proposed youth hub represents a significant evolution in the collective's operational model. While the collective has historically relied on borrowing resources from volunteers and community organizations to deliver youth initiatives, a dedicated hub would enable more sustainable and autonomous program delivery. This transition from borrowed to owned resources aligns with research on organizational development in community youth services, which identifies resource independence as a crucial step in program sustainability and growth (Zeldin et al., 2016).

Education and Risk Prevention: Creating Safe Spaces for Critical Conversations: The collective envisions the youth hub also as a space where young people can access reliable information and engage in open discussions about challenging topics that affect their lives. As one member of the collective explained: *"I think that is important that we talked to youth about certain topics that are considered taboo, because if we don't they will go and try to find out on their own which it could be risky."* This observation aligns with research indicating that youth often seek information about risk behaviours from potentially unreliable sources

when they lack access to trustworthy adults and safe spaces for discussion (Dishion & Tipsord, 2011).

The member further emphasized: "*Youth want to know about responsible drinking, drug use. And it is also important to teach them about the consequences of getting into fights or not paying for their fines.*" This perspective reflects current evidence-based approaches to youth risk prevention, which emphasize the importance of providing accurate information and fostering open dialogue rather than relying solely on abstinence-based messaging (Pound et al., 2016). Research shows that youth are more likely to make informed decisions when they have access to accurate information and supportive environments for discussing sensitive topics (Fagan et al., 2011)

Creating spaces for these conversations requires careful consideration of both physical environment and program design. Studies indicate that effective youth education programs on sensitive topics share several key characteristics:

- Non-judgmental approaches that respect youth autonomy
- Information delivered by trusted adults with relevant expertise
- Opportunities for peer-to-peer discussion and learning
- Integration of real-world scenarios and consequences
- Cultural sensitivity and awareness of local context

Finally, the collective recognizes mental health support and education as a crucial component of youth services in Whāingaroa. As one member poignantly stated, "*This town has high rates of suicide—we need to teach youth what resources they can access when they are struggling.*" This concern reflects broader research indicating that rural and coastal communities often face unique challenges in providing mental health support for young

people, including limited access to services and social stigma (Ferguson et al., 2019; Hirsch & Cukrowicz, 2014).

Research consistently shows that youth-centred spaces can play a vital role in mental health prevention and early intervention strategies. These spaces can serve as entry points for mental health support and awareness—places where young people can access information and help in non-clinical, less intimidating environments (Clark et al., 2013). Evidence suggests that when mental health resources and education are integrated into youth spaces, young people are more likely to seek help and support earlier (Fleming et al., 2020; Henderson et al., 2023).

The proposed approach of providing workshops and facilitating open conversations about mental health represents a sophisticated, evidence-based strategy for youth development and suicide prevention in Aotearoa New Zealand. Emerging research in positive youth development (PYD) frameworks emphasizes the critical importance of creating supportive environments that not only address mental health challenges but actively promote psychological resilience, social connectedness, and personal agency (Clark et al., 2011; Fagan et al., 2011; Kazantzis et al., 2010; Williams et al., 2018).

Research have consistently demonstrated that community-based mental health literacy programs can significantly transform youth help-seeking behaviours, particularly when these interventions are culturally responsive and strategically embedded within existing social networks (Clark et al., 2011). These approaches go beyond traditional deficit-focused models, instead focusing on building protective factors that enhance young people's capacity to navigate complex emotional landscapes.

In this environment mental health workshops and open dialogues become powerful mechanisms for developing these developmental assets. By creating safe, non-judgmental spaces for conversation, these initiatives help youth develop critical emotional intelligence skills, strengthen social connections, and build a sense of personal and collective efficacy (Catalano et al., 2004; Lerner et al., 2006; Lerner et al., 2005).

Culturally specific approaches are particularly significant in the Aotearoa context. Māori models of well-being, such as Te Whare Tapa Whā developed by Sir Mason Durie, provide holistic frameworks that understand mental health as interconnected with spiritual, familial, and environmental dimensions. This approach moves beyond Western clinical perspectives, recognizing that mental well-being is fundamentally relational and contextual (Williams et al., 2019; Wilson et al., 2021).

Studies highlights the transformative potential of youth spaces that normalize mental health conversations while providing clear, accessible pathways to professional support. These interventions effectively bridge informal support networks and formal mental health services, reducing stigma and increasing help-seeking behaviours (Anae et al., 2002; Cooper et al., 2023).

Two exemplary youth hubs demonstrate these principles in practice in Aotearoa/New Zealand are:

Marlborough Youth Hub (Blenheim): established in 2020, embodies a comprehensive approach to youth support. By organizing targeted events, providing service information, and creating opportunities for community participation, the hub creates a holistic ecosystem of support. Their model recognizes that mental health is not just about addressing challenges, but about creating environments where young people can genuinely thrive (Trust, 2024).

VIBE (Lower Hutt and Upper Hutt): represents another innovative approach. By offering an integrated support model that combines career guidance, mental health support, educational assistance, and social connection, VIBE breaks down traditional service silos. This approach acknowledges the interconnected nature of youth development, recognizing that mental health cannot be isolated from educational, vocational, and social contexts (Vibe, 2024).

These initiatives reflect a profound understanding that supporting youth mental health requires more than traditional intervention strategies. They represent a paradigm shift towards proactive, strengths-based approaches that view young people as active agents in their own development, capable of resilience, growth, and meaningful community contribution.

Important considerations for the youth hub:

The collective's vision of establishing a youth hub adjacent to the local skatepark represents a strategic approach to youth engagement in rural communities (Cooper et al., 2023). The location of youth facilities plays a crucial role in their utilization and success (Henderson & Thomas, 2020). Positioning the hub near existing recreational facilities, such as skateparks, can increase accessibility and create natural synergies for youth participation (Taylor & Khan, 2011). The proposed hub would serve as a multipurpose space offering educational, creative, and leisure resources. This aligns with best practices in youth development, which emphasize the importance of providing diverse opportunities for engagement and skill development (Bowers et al., 2015; Dawes & Larson, 2011). Studies have shown that such integrated approaches to youth services can lead to improved outcomes in education, social connection, and community involvement (Cooper et al., 2023).

As noted by a collective member: *"It is important to be organized. We will need someone to open and close the hub, someone to monitor the use of our material and also someone who*

would be able to facilitate and run this space." This observation reflects key findings in community centre management research, which emphasizes that successful youth spaces require dedicated staffing and clear operational structures (Nolas, 2014; White, 1998). In terms of staffing requirements and roles, professional staffing has been identified as one of the most crucial elements for youth space success (Keller, 2007; Nolas, 2014). This includes the need for a dedicated facility coordinator responsible for daily operations, along with youth engagement specialists who can build relationships and facilitate programs. The staffing structure should incorporate trained volunteers who can support regular activities, all operating within clear reporting structures and role definitions. Staff training in youth development and safety protocols is also essential for maintaining high-quality service delivery.

Operational systems form another crucial framework for maintaining consistent service delivery (Blanchet-Cohen & Brunson, 2014). These systems encompass clear opening and closing procedures, comprehensive asset and inventory management approaches, and well-defined booking and scheduling protocols for spaces and equipment. Safety and emergency response procedures must be thoroughly documented, alongside regular maintenance schedules and responsibilities. Additionally, documentation systems for attendance and program participation help track engagement and impact.

Summary of theme two

This chapter explored two key initiatives emerging from the WYWC's vision for supporting youth development in Whāingaroa: the creation of a paid youth connector position and the establishment of a dedicated youth hub. The youth connector role would focus on two primary areas identified through community research: supporting youth employment and facilitating nature-based activities. This position represents a strategic step toward

professionalization while maintaining the collective's grassroots values and community connections.

The proposed youth hub at Papahua Reserve would address a critical gap in community infrastructure, providing a dedicated space for youth creativity, recreation, and support. The hub's vision encompasses equipment lending, creative arts programming, and safe spaces for critical conversations about mental health and risk prevention. Both initiatives demonstrate careful consideration of cultural responsiveness, particularly incorporating te ao Māori perspectives and emphasizing whānau engagement.

These developments align with positive youth development frameworks while responding to specific local needs. The findings highlight how community-driven initiatives, when grounded in research and local knowledge, can create sustainable pathways for youth support and development. The success of these initiatives will depend on maintaining strong operational systems, ensuring cultural appropriateness, and balancing professionalization with community values.

The WYWC's vision reflects a comprehensive approach to youth development that recognizes the interconnected nature of employment, environmental connection, creative expression, and mental wellbeing in supporting young people's growth and potential in Whāingaroa.

Discussion

This research sought to investigate two primary dimensions of youth support systems in rural New Zealand:

- The capacity of rural communities, specifically Whāingaroa/Raglan, to support youth development through existing local resources: *How Whāingaroa/Raglan services can support youth at a community-based level?*
- The identification of additional external resources needed to enhance youth support services. *What could be implemented in the community to foster positive youth development in the future?*

The discussion examines this study's significance through five dimensions: methodology and focus key findings and their implications; practical strategies for implementation; theoretical and practical significance; research limitations and recommended future research directions. This framework demonstrates how the research enhances both theoretical understanding and practical application of youth support systems in rural New Zealand communities.

Methodology and Focus

The study employed a community-based participatory research (CBPR) approach, focusing on documenting and analysing the activities and meetings of the Whāingaroa Youth Working Collective (WYWC), a volunteer-based organization in rural Aotearoa/New Zealand. This methodological choice enabled direct observation and intensive analysis of grassroots initiatives in action, while facilitating a deeper understanding of the broader context within which the collective operates. The research design's strength lay in its longitudinal nature, spanning over two years of active participation in seven WYWC meetings and three semi structured interviews with key members of the collective, which provided robust empirical

evidence of the model's sustainability and effectiveness (Bloor, 2011; Lochmiller, 2021).

This extended timeframe allowed for comprehensive documentation of the collective's evolution, including their response to challenges, adaptation of strategies, and development of sustainable practices within the unique social fabric of the Whāingaroa/Raglan community.

The participatory nature of the research methodology, while requiring significant time investment and potentially influencing the collective's natural dynamics through the researcher's active involvement, proved invaluable in understanding the complex interplay between various stakeholders and the dynamic nature of resource utilization in a rural setting (Rossman & Rallis, 2011). The extended period of engagement enhanced the study's validity by enabling the identification of persistent patterns versus temporary phenomena, verification of initial observations through repeated exposure, and documentation of the collective's resilience through various challenges. This approach not only validated the sustainability of volunteer-based, community-driven initiatives but also provided a template for studying similar organizations in other rural settings, particularly those focusing on youth support services (Aktinson & Hammersley, 1998; Denzin, 2018; MacDonald, 2012).

Key findings

The research revealed that volunteer collectives represent an effective mechanism for youth support delivery in rural towns. Through detailed analysis of the Whāingaroa Youth Working Collective (WYWC), the study identified how structured volunteer collaboration can create sustainable youth support systems that maximize limited rural resources. This finding directly addressed the primary research question regarding how rural communities can effectively support their youth populations.

The WYWC's approach was fundamentally transformative, targeting the deeply entrenched deficit-based narrative surrounding local youth. The collective consciously challenged these reductive characterizations by implementing a strategic narrative reconstruction that repositioned rangatahi (youth) as valuable community assets, potential leaders, and active contributors to local social and environmental well-being.

This narrative shift was not merely rhetorical but operationalized through deliberate, community-embedded strategies. By creating visible platforms for youth participation, showcasing their capabilities, and highlighting their contributions, the WYWC systematically dismantled negative stereotypes. The collective's work demonstrated that narrative transformation is a crucial intervention strategy. Negative community narratives about youth can become self-fulfilling prophecies, undermining young people's sense of belonging, potential, and agency. By contrast, positive narratives create ecological environments that support psychological resilience, community engagement, and personal development (McCabe & Anhalt, 2022; Rappaport, 1995).

Through their strategic narrative reconstruction, the collective demonstrated how rural communities can transform their approach to youth support. This was not about external intervention, but about internal reimagining – seeing rangatahi not as passive recipients of support, but as active, capable contributors to community well-being.

The WYWC's success was fundamentally built upon a sophisticated dual connection framework that operated simultaneously at two critical levels. First, the collective established deep connections with local youth, creating spaces for authentic engagement that allowed young people to express their emotions, feelings, and challenges openly. This youth-centered approach ensured that support services remained relevant and responsive to actual youth needs rather than perceived ones. Second, the collective developed robust connections with

the wider community, effectively mapping and mobilizing available resources within the rural context. This community integration approach transformed traditional resource limitations into opportunities for innovative collaboration, demonstrating how rural communities can leverage their social capital to support youth development (Collins et al., 2018; Gootman & Eccles, 2002; Green & Haines, 2015).

A significant outcome of the collective's connection-based approach was the emergence of youth leadership development opportunities. By actively engaging young people in decision-making processes, the WYWC initiated a transformative cycle where youth transitioned from being mere recipients of support to active participants in community development (Youniss & Yates, 1997). This "leaders of tomorrow" approach created a sustainable model where youth gained practical leadership experience while contributing to current community initiatives.

The research documents how the WYWC's connection-building efforts extended beyond immediate youth support to strengthen the broader social fabric of the community (Green & Haines, 2015). Through intentional networking and collaboration, the collective catalysed the formation of a community-wide support network. This network transcended traditional organizational boundaries, creating new pathways for resource sharing and collective problem-solving. The resulting strengthened social tissue enhanced the community's overall capacity to support youth development while simultaneously building community resilience.

The dual connection framework proved particularly effective in generating sustainable impact. By simultaneously engaging youth and community stakeholders, the collective created a self-reinforcing system where:

- Youth voices informed program development
- Community resources were efficiently allocated

- Local expertise was effectively utilized
- Intergenerational relationships were fostered
- Social capital was continuously built and reinforced

The findings from the research align closely with the principles of Positive Youth Development (PYD), which emphasizes creating supportive environments that nurture young people's strengths, agency, and connections (Benson et al., 2011; Bowers et al., 2010; Dimitrova & Wiium, 2021; Meyers et al., 2013). The Whāingaroa Youth Work Collective (WYWC) exemplifies PYD by fostering authentic engagement with local youth, allowing them to express their emotions and challenges while ensuring services are responsive to their actual needs. This approach enhances youth agency and resilience, key components of PYD. Additionally, the collective's robust community integration demonstrates the value of leveraging social capital to create sustainable support systems, turning rural resource limitations into opportunities for collaborative innovation (Farrell et al., 2002; Norton et al., 2002).

The second important findings of my research were the related to the second question of the my research: *What could be implemented in the community to foster positive youth development in the future?*

The research identified two critical infrastructure developments proposed by the collective to enhance youth support services in Whāingaroa/Raglan. The first major initiative involves the establishment of a dedicated full-time Youth Connector position. This role would serve as a consistent point of contact and support for local youth, providing professional coordination of services and maintaining steady engagement with young people in the community. The position represents a significant shift from volunteer-dependent operations to a more structured, professional approach to youth support.

The second key development involves the creation of a dedicated Youth Hub - a physical space designed specifically for young people to gather, socialize, and participate in organized activities. This facility would address the current lack of youth-specific spaces in the community and provide a stable environment for program delivery and youth engagement. The hub concept emerged from the collective's recognition that consistent physical space is crucial for effective youth support and community building.

These proposed developments mark a strategic evolution in the collective's approach, moving from ad hoc, volunteer-driven initiatives toward a more sustainable and institutionalized model of youth support. This transition addresses several key limitations of the current volunteer-based system, particularly the inconsistency of service delivery due to volunteer availability and the lack of dedicated youth spaces. The proposed changes would create a more reliable and professional support structure while maintaining the community-driven ethos that has been central to the collective's success (Studer & Von Schnurbein, 2013; Stukas et al., 2006).

The development of both a permanent staff position and a dedicated facility demonstrates the collective's commitment to creating sustainable, long-term solutions for youth support in rural communities. This approach would provide stability and consistency in service delivery while reducing dependency on volunteer availability. Furthermore, it represents a mature understanding of the need to balance community engagement with professional support structures, potentially creating a hybrid model that could serve as a template for other rural communities facing similar challenges in youth support delivery. Something that was not largely discussed but that could be helpful in this change for the collective it could be a proposed integration of a youth connector position with the hub operations presents a viable solution to these organizational needs. This dual role would allow the youth connector to

establish a consistent presence while implementing structured activities and maintaining the space.

The proposed developments further embody PYD principles. The Youth Connector role provides consistent, professional coordination of youth services, ensuring steady engagement and fostering positive, supportive relationships that contribute to holistic growth. Similarly, the creation of a dedicated Youth Hub offers a physical space where young people can gather, socialize, and participate in organized activities. This hub not only promotes social connectedness and a sense of belonging—both central to PYD—but also serves as a platform for skill-building, peer support, and positive engagement. Together, these initiatives highlight how community-driven strategies can effectively align with PYD to empower youth and promote thriving rural communities (Deane & Dutton, 2020; Dimitrova & Wiium, 2021; Stukas et al., 2006).

Contributions and Implications

These findings have significant implications for rural youth support initiatives, offering valuable insights into how communities can overcome the challenges of limited resources. The success of the Whāingaroa Youth Working Collective's (WYWC) connection-based approach demonstrates the potential of strategic relationship building and collective action as powerful tools for addressing youth needs in resource-constrained environments. By fostering authentic connections with young people and mobilizing existing community assets, the WYWC has shown how volunteer collectives can act as catalysts for broader community development while maintaining a focused commitment to supporting youth (Camino & Zeldin, 2002; Kretzmann, 1995; Stukas et al., 2006).

The relevance of volunteer-based organizational models is particularly evident in this context. By relying on structured collaboration among dedicated volunteers, the WYWC was able to implement sustainable support systems without requiring substantial external fundings. This demonstrates the viability of volunteer-driven frameworks as a model for rural youth support, particularly in areas where professionalized services may be limited or unavailable.

Volunteer-based initiatives not only optimize the use of existing human and social capital but also foster a sense of shared ownership and responsibility within the community (Grant et al., 2020; Larkin et al., 2005; Stukas et al., 2006).

This model underscores the importance of leveraging the unique strengths of rural communities—such as close-knit social networks, a strong sense of community identity, and abundant social capital—to design effective and sustainable youth support systems. By tapping into these inherent assets, rural communities can not only address immediate challenges faced by their young populations but also build long-term capacity for sustained youth development (Cooper et al., 2023; Edwards et al., 2014; Simcock, 2016). This approach transforms perceived limitations into opportunities for innovation and resilience, offering a replicable framework for other rural areas seeking to empower their youth while strengthening overall community cohesion and well-being.

The findings from this research are deeply connected to Te Ao Māori, aligning with its emphasis on collective well-being, interconnectedness, and the importance of community-based approaches to support and development (Arahanga-Doyle et al., 2019; Durie, 2003; Wilson et al., 2021). The Whaingaroa Youth Working Collective's (WYWC) connection-based model reflects whanaungatanga (relationships and kinship), a core value in te ao Māori that highlights the significance of building and maintaining meaningful relationships (Wilson et al., 2021). By fostering authentic engagement with youth and mobilizing community

resources, the WYWC exemplifies the Māori principle of working collectively (kotahitanga) to achieve shared goals and uplift the community.

The relevance of volunteer-based organizational models within this context also resonates strongly with Māori values. The reliance on collaborative efforts and shared responsibility mirrors the practice of manaakitanga (hospitality and care for others), where individuals and groups contribute to the collective good (Te Momo, 2003). The WYWC's approach to resource-sharing and relationship-building aligns with the Māori understanding of utu (reciprocal balance), wherein community support systems are sustained through mutual contribution and respect (Reid et al., 2016; Wilson et al., 2021).

Additionally, the proposed infrastructure developments—such as the Youth Hub and the Youth Connector role—have particular significance within Te Ao Māori. These initiatives create spaces and opportunities for youth to connect to their local environment, express themselves, and grow within a framework that values their unique identities and contributions. This approach aligns with rangatiratanga (self-determination), encouraging youth to take ownership of their development while being supported by a nurturing and inclusive environment (Arahanga-Doyle et al., 2019; Williams et al., 2019). This culturally grounded approach offers a pathway for other rural communities, to develop a sustainable and meaningful youth support systems that reflect their values and heritage.

Practical Applications

The findings of this research aim not only to provide a theoretical overview of the Whāingaroa Youth Working Collective's (WYWC) work but also to highlight practical applications that can support Positive Youth Development across Aotearoa/New Zealand and particularly in rural communities.

For Other Rural Communities Developing Youth Support Systems: The research offers a detailed blueprint for community-driven youth engagement, moving beyond traditional service delivery models. The Whāingaroa Youth Working Collective (WYWC) exemplifies an approach that shifts the focus from standardized programs to adaptive, context-specific frameworks tailored to the unique dynamics of local communities. This adaptable model provides rural communities with actionable strategies that can be customized to fit their specific environments. Moreover, the research delves deeper than merely outlining strategies; it explores the underlying principles and rationale, offering valuable insights into how sustainable youth support can be achieved. Key tasks highlighted include changing youth narrative, cultivating local leadership, developing flexible intervention models, utilizing existing community resources, and prioritizing meaningful relationship-building over bureaucratic processes. These strategies are particularly relevant for rural communities, which often face limited resources and complex social challenges. By emphasizing adaptability and community-centred approaches, the WYWC provides a pathway for other communities to develop effective, sustainable youth support systems.

For Community Organizations Working with Limited Resources: The study provides a comprehensive framework for community organizations operating with limited resources and for effective volunteer coordination in rural settings. It highlights how the Whāingaroa Youth Working Collective (WYWC) successfully maximized impact through resource-efficient interventions. Key strategies include leveraging volunteer networks, developing multi-purpose intervention models, adopting collaborative approaches to distribute organisational labour, and prioritizing relationship-building and narrative transformation. This model serves as a practical guide for organizations aiming to establish high-impact, low-cost community support systems in resource-constrained environments. Additionally, the research offers sophisticated insights into volunteer mobilization and coordination, emphasizing the

importance of a clear collective purpose, strategies to sustain motivation, methods for fostering supportive and sustainable volunteer ecosystems, and approaches to managing diverse skills and capacities. It reveals that successful volunteer coordination goes beyond recruitment, focusing on creating meaningful engagement opportunities, providing structured frameworks, and recognizing volunteers' contributions. Together, these findings present a holistic approach to building resilient, community-centred initiatives that thrive on limited resources.

For Policy Makers Focusing on Rural Development: The research challenges conventional top-down approaches to rural youth support, offering empirical evidence that successful interventions are collaborative, locally driven, and deeply attuned to community-specific needs. It emphasizes that policymakers must prioritize community-led initiatives, create funding mechanisms that support volunteer-driven collectives, develop flexible policy frameworks that allow local adaptation, and recognize the critical role of volunteer networks in fostering rural community resilience. The findings advocate for a paradigm shift from deficit-focused interventions to strength-based approaches, viewing youth not as problems to be solved but as active contributors to their communities.

Theoretical and Practical Significance

Beyond immediate practical applications, these findings contribute to broader conversations in community psychology, rural development, and youth studies. They challenge existing narratives about rural youth and community development, offering a more nuanced, asset-based perspective that recognizes the complexity of community support systems. Moreover, the research offers a significant contribution to Positive Youth Development (PYD) frameworks by demonstrating how local communities can transform youth support through asset-based, relational approaches. The Whāingaroa Youth Working Collective (WYWC)

exemplifies a nuanced PYD approach that moves beyond traditional service delivery. Instead of focusing on risk mitigation, the collective created ecological environments that foster youth belonging, agency, and potential. This approach aligns with contemporary PYD scholarship that understands youth development as a dynamic interaction between individual capacities and supportive community contexts. Equally, the research illuminates a critical pathway for cross-cultural approach in Aotearoa/New Zealand, showing how PYD can be adapted to authentically reflect indigenous perspectives on community, well-being, and youth empowerment. By bridging Western psychological approaches with Māori cultural principles, the collective provides a nuanced framework that respects and incorporates traditional knowledge while supporting contemporary youth development strategies. This approach goes beyond mere cultural accommodation, instead presenting a genuine synthesis that recognizes the unique strengths of both Māori cultural approaches and contemporary youth development methodologies. It offers a powerful model for understanding how theoretical frameworks can be transformed through cultural dialogue and mutual respect.

Research limitations

The study, while providing valuable insights into youth support and community development in rural Aotearoa, acknowledges several inherent research limitations that contextualize its findings:

- *Geographical Specificity:* The research was conducted exclusively in Whāingaroa, a specific rural context with unique cultural and social characteristics. This localized focus, while providing depth, limits the direct generalizability of findings to other rural communities in New Zealand or internationally. The contextual nuances of Whāingaroa may not translate uniformly to other rural settings with different demographic, cultural, and social compositions.

- *Methodological Constraints:* The qualitative nature of the research, while providing rich, contextual insights, inherently limits the ability to establish causal relationships or generate statistically generalizable conclusions. The research methodology prioritizes depth of understanding over breadth of quantitative measurement.
- *Temporal Limitations:* The research captures a specific moment in the collective's development, potentially missing long-term developmental trajectories or sustained impacts of the youth support approach. Longitudinal follow-up would be necessary to fully understand the sustained effectiveness of the intervention strategies.
- *Potential Researcher Bias:* As with many community-based participatory research approaches, there is an inherent risk of researcher positionality influencing data interpretation. The researchers' close engagement with the community could potentially introduce subtle interpretative biases.
- *Resource and Scalability Questions:* While the research demonstrates an effective approach in Whāingaroa, questions remain about the model's scalability and resource requirements for implementation in other contexts. The volunteer-driven model may not be easily replicable in communities with different social infrastructures or resource constraints.
- *Measurement Challenges:* The study relies primarily on qualitative assessments of youth development and community impact. Developing more robust, nuanced metrics for measuring the long-term outcomes of such community-driven approaches remains a challenge.

These limitations do not diminish the research's significance but rather highlight areas for future investigation. They provide a transparent acknowledgment of the study's boundaries and offer valuable directions for subsequent research in youth support, community development, and cross-cultural approaches to positive youth development.

Recommendations for future Research Directions

Based on some of the limitations outlined above, the study highlights several areas for future investigation that could contribute to a deeper understanding of this topic while generating more robust data to support similar initiatives.

- *Comparative studies across different rural contexts:* Future research on youth support and community development in rural settings could focus on addressing the current limitations and building on existing knowledge. One key area is conducting comparative studies across different rural contexts in New Zealand. This involves investigating multiple rural communities with varied demographic compositions, cultural backgrounds, and socioeconomic conditions. Such studies should aim to develop a comparative framework for analysing differences and similarities across regions, identifying both common patterns and unique contextual influences. Moreover, comparative research would highlight how adaptable the Whāingaroa model is to other rural environments, tailoring it to suit local needs.
- *Longitudinal tracking of youth outcomes:* Another critical focus is the longitudinal tracking of youth outcomes to address temporal limitations. Researchers should design long-term studies that monitor participants over 5 to 10 years, employing comprehensive mechanisms to track individual trajectories, personal and professional growth, and sustained community involvement. This would give a more complete understanding of initiatives such as the WYWC.
- *Exploration of scalability and resource requirements:* Finally, research should delve deeply into the scalability and resource requirements necessary for expanding successful models like Whāingaroa's to other rural communities. This includes conducting comprehensive feasibility studies to evaluate the financial, human, and material resources required for effective implementation. Such studies should

investigate resource allocation models, examining how limited resources can be optimized and redistributed to meet the unique needs of diverse rural environments. Volunteer sustainability is another critical area of focus, as community-based initiatives often rely heavily on volunteer support. Research should identify best practices for recruiting, training, and retaining volunteers, as well as strategies for preventing burnout and ensuring long-term commitment. Analysing organizational infrastructure requirements is equally important, as the successful replication of models may depend on robust administrative systems, governance structures, and community partnerships. Funding mechanisms should be thoroughly explored to identify sustainable financial pathways. This includes evaluating potential sources of funding, such as government grants, philanthropic contributions, and private sector partnerships, while also considering innovative approaches like community fundraising and social enterprise models. To facilitate scalability, researchers should develop detailed implementation guides tailored to diverse contexts. These guides should outline practical steps for replicating the model, adapting it to local conditions, and addressing potential challenges. Cost-benefit analyses will be instrumental in demonstrating the economic and social value of these initiatives, providing compelling evidence to secure stakeholder buy-in and financial support.

CONCLUSION:

This research meticulously traced the journey of the Whāingaroa Youth Work collective, documenting their evolution from an initial meeting to a structured, community-embedded organization. By following their developmental trajectory, the study provides critical insights into youth support and community development at a local level, revealing the transformative potential of a volunteer-based, culturally responsive approach to positive youth development. The investigation illuminates the intricate relationships between community engagement, cultural identity, and youth empowerment through the lens of Positive Youth Development (PYD) frameworks.

More than a localized case study, this research represents a paradigm shift in understanding youth development within rural contexts. By integrating Western psychological frameworks with indigenous cultural approaches, the study demonstrates the power of community-centric, culturally-grounded support strategies. Significant theoretical contributions emerge from bridging psychological perspectives with indigenous cultural understandings. The research effectively challenges traditional, one-size-fits-all models of community support by highlighting the critical importance of contextual understanding in youth development approaches. By creating a comprehensive template of the collective's work, the study offers a reproducible model that can be adapted to other community contexts. Consequently, practical implications of this research are profound, providing valuable guidance for community organizations, local government youth support programs, educational institutions, and social service providers. The volunteer-driven model developed in Whāingaroa presents a replicable framework that emphasizes cultural responsiveness, community ownership, and holistic youth development.

While acknowledging the research's geographical specificity and potential sampling limitations, these characteristics are viewed not as weaknesses but as opportunities for further sophisticated investigation and methodological refinement. The findings illuminate critical research trajectories, including comparative studies, long-term youth outcome tracking, and exploring scalability of community-driven support models.

Beyond its immediate context, the study contributes to a broader narrative of youth empowerment, community resilience, and cultural preservation. This is particularly significant in the Aotearoa/New Zealand context, a bicultural environment that demands flexible, responsive, and culturally embedded approaches respecting local knowledge and community dynamics. The research exemplifies a holistic and locally-driven support model that navigates the complex cultural identities of the country. It demonstrates that effective youth support transcends standardized interventions, instead requiring approaches deeply rooted in local context and collective aspirations. The journey of youth development in Whāingaroa emerges as more than an academic exercise. It stands as a profound testament to the power of community, cultural understanding, and collective investment in young people's potential. By challenging existing paradigms, the study invites researchers, policymakers, and community leaders to reimagine youth support as a collaborative, transformative process.

Ultimately, this research serves as a beacon of hope and a practical model for nurturing youth potential in rural communities. It powerfully demonstrates that meaningful development emerges not from external interventions, but from within the community itself. The support model developed is not only relevant to youth support but offers insights into broader community development strategies, highlighting the extraordinary potential of exploiting local community resources.

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