

Rangatahi Wahine: Overcoming the odds – preliminary results.

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The purpose of my research was to identify factors that have contributed to the development of resilience in young Māori girls' lives. Incorporated into this was an exploration of their psychosocial competence makeup, to see whether their sense of self, sense of relationship to the world, and ability to negotiate life events, was unique.

Method

Participants

The participants in this research were Māori adolescent girls who were currently attending secondary school. The participants were recruited from a local secondary school in the Bay of Plenty region. This school was selected because they operate a programme within the school that supports Māori students who are succeeding in the academic, sporting, and/or cultural fields. The girls ranged in age from 12-17.

Selection

The girls were selected if they met the following two criteria: Attendance as a student at the chosen local secondary school, and a participant in the Māori Achievers' Programme

The Māori achievers' programme was initiated with the purpose of supporting Māori students who were achieving in college. The criterion for inclusion was initially based on those students who were succeeding academically. However, changes have been made in the current year whereby selection is based on academic principle in addition to sporting, cultural and leadership arenas. Resilience requires that an individual is succeeding despite their adverse environments. Girls from the Māori achievers' programme were used as participants in this research as they fitted the resilience criteria of success.

Procedure

The first step was contacting the Bay of Plenty secondary school to organise a meeting with the principal to discuss the details and aims of my research. This meeting yielded positive outcomes as the principal was really enthusiastic to have the students take part in this research. The principal felt that the information from the research would be very beneficial for the school in terms of knowing what factors are helping Māori girls succeed, thus enabling resources to be directed into appropriate areas of support.

A meeting was also organised with the Whānau Support Group that was attached to the school. The Whānau Support group consists of Māori staff members, parents, and others from the community who meet to address the interests of Māori students. They were very supportive of the research and again felt that the outcomes of the research would be helpful in performing their role within the school.

With permission granted by the school, the next step involved organising hui within the school where I talked to students about the nature of my research. At the hui I talked about the purpose of the research and the student's role if they chose to participate in the research. Parental and participant consent forms were then given to the students to fill out if they wished to participate. Following this I made a list of students who agreed to participate in the research. I then set up times within the school day where they were able to come and fill out the psychosocial competency measures, and write their autobiographical essay.

Measures

Phase One

Phase one of the research involved the girls filling out three scales aimed at

assessing their psychosocial competence. The three scales explored their locus of control, sense of trust and the extent to which they actively planned engagement in life events.

There was no time limit on filling out the questionnaires. This was done to try and avoid the girls feeling as if they were under any kind of pressure. Listed below is a brief description of the measures:

Rotter Locus of Control:

The Rotter Locus of Control is a psychometric tool that differentiates between an individual who feels their life events are directly related to their own behaviour, as opposed to individuals who feel life events are controlled by external forces of which they have no control (Rotter, 1966).

The hypothesis for utilising this tool in the context of this research is that resilient Māori girls will have an internal locus of control.

Rotter Trust Scale:

The Rotter's Interpersonal Trust Scale is a five point rating scale that determines an individual's sense of trust. Interpersonal trust is described as the extent to which an individual or group believes that words, promises, or verbal or written statements from other individuals can be trusted (Rotter, 1967)

The hypothesis for utilising this tool in the context of this research is that resilient Māori girls will be moderately trusting.

Behavioural Attributes of Psychosocial Competence Scale:

A measure that gauges the extent to which an individual can manage their lives and effectively interact with their wider environment (Tyler & Pargament, 1982)

The hypothesis for utilising this tool in the context of this research is that resilient Māori girls "will have an active mastery-oriented planfulness in engaging life events" (Tyler & Pargament, 1982, p.1).

Phase Two

The objective of phase two was to elicit from the girls stories of how they have overcome hardship and adversity. This phase had two parts. First, they were given a risk factor survey to see what sorts of risks existed in these girls' lives. Questions were asked on topics of divorce/separation,

number of children in the family, who was earning in the family, perception of their neighbourhood, and drug and alcohol use in their environment.

Second, an essay question was given to the girls (attached to the risk factor sheet) asking the girls to write about their lives and how they have overcome challenges and obstacles. Challenges and obstacles were terms that seemed appropriate for this age group as opposed to hardship and adversity. The essay question was structured to elicit stories of overcoming hardship and adversity. The following directions, an adapted version of Smokowski, Reynolds, and Bezruczko's (1999) research were given to the students:

Stop for a few minutes and picture yourself in a movie about your life. Naturally the movie describes what is important to you, how you got where you are today, and where your life is heading in the future. The movie might also include your family and friends and why they mean what they do to you. In particular, tell us about challenges and obstacles you have had to overcome and how you did this as part of the family you have grown up with. The movie might also present some of your ideas about your approach to life.

This phase took place in a classroom under the instruction of the researcher. It was part of school policy that the students be supervised and it was felt inappropriate to have a staff member involved in this process. The students were told to take as much time as they felt they needed to complete the task.

Findings and Conclusions

My research identified a number of individual, familial, and external factors that contributed to the educational success and resilience of young Māori girls. It also provided a brief outline of the psychosocial competence configuration within this group. Summarised below are some of the key findings of this research.

The study highlighted that a variety of people were able to make a difference in these girls' lives, especially those within the

extended whānau unit. This is an important point as it gives health workers, educational providers, and those working with young people, a range of resources to be accessed; as opposed to assuming that if the nuclear family environment is not optimal then chances of success for Māori girls', in a setting such as an educational institution, is minimal.

The importance of family connections and support was strongly expressed in the girls' essays. More specifically, it was not the roles of the nuclear family but the roles of the extended family that were of great significance in these girls' lives. The power of the extended whānau to buffer or protect these girls was extraordinary. The most striking finding from this research that stood out from the others was the impact a significant female family member had on enabling the girls to become resilient despite their adverse background. This was usually the Aunt or Nan, or in some cases the older sister. The female family member's strength as a protective factor was their ability to make the girls feel comfortable in their presence, as well as the unconditional love and nurturance they gave them.

There was minimal representation of external support systems as a protective mechanism to overcome hardships and adversities. In the few cases that did identify external support systems, they ranged from school and friends, to counselling and spiritual support.

Outcomes of this study suggest a real need to build and strengthen external support systems which Māori girls are comfortable accessing. To assist this process it is recommended that research be conducted into the types of external support

systems Māori girls feel they would most likely connect with.

This study also showed that there are unique combinations of individual attributes that are characteristic of resilient Māori girls. These include a communication style that is open and honest, a caring and helpful nature, the ability to be self-reflective, a positive approach to life, and a maturity beyond their years. In addition to these attributes, the psychosocial competence results showed the girls to have an active orientation towards engaging in life events.

An important aspect to be noted, regarding resilience, is that these girls can lose their resilient characters at certain times. Although this research did not further explore these cases, it brings an awareness that resiliency can fluctuate depending on the circumstances.

In summary, the results of this research show a promising path for enabling Māori girls to succeed despite backgrounds of hardship and adversity. This research shows the need to emphasise that adverse environments do not have to determine the path in life one is going to take. In stating this, communities and wider society need to offer these girls opportunities for extra support, so that they do believe they are capable of success, in what ever manner each individual defines this. Overcoming the odds is a courageous endeavour. Rising above hardships and adversities requires a strength and determination unlike any other. These girls deserve to be commended for battling on despite the multiple struggles life presented them with. They possessed, as Smokowski et al., (1999) describes, "an internal fire that will not be extinguished" (p.435).

References

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