

Putahi Rangahau Ngatahi Centre for Community Research and Evaluation



Culturally sustaining and safe spaces for youth

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What is a culturally sustaining space?

In the pursuit of enhancing the well-being and developmental growth of Pacific youth in Aotearoa New Zealand, the concept of culturally sustaining spaces warrants consideration. Such environments are defined not just by their physical attributes but more so by their ability to allow individuals to express their authentic selves without the fear of judgment or discrimination based on their cultural identity (Hromek, 2023). These spaces are characterised by an atmosphere where experiences and knowledge can be freely exchanged, fostering a community where diverse opinions are respected, and every individual's voice is valued. The creation of culturally sustaining spaces, sometimes referred to as culturally safe spaces, specifically tailored for Pacific youth in Aotearoa New Zealand involves understanding the dynamics of such spaces—how they can be designed to be inclusive, how they support the sharing of experiences, and most importantly, how they contribute to the personal and communal growth of Pacific youth.

Literature was synthesised around the question “How do we create culturally safe spaces for Pacific youth living in Aotearoa New Zealand?” with the aim to uncover key factors that contribute to the creation of environments that not only safeguard the well-being of Pacific youth but also support the development of agency. Such spaces are envisioned to promote positive development, fostering an environment where Pacific youth can thrive, supported by the pillars of cultural identity, connectedness, and positive relationships. It is essential to recognise that ‘Pacific Youth’ encompasses a diverse group of young individuals from various Pacific Island backgrounds residing in Aotearoa New Zealand, including but not limited to Samoans, Cook Islanders, Tongans, Fijians, and others. ‘Safe Spaces’ are envisioned as environments that inspire confidence and provide protection from harm, discrimination, and conflict. The term ‘Culturally’ refers to the practices and beliefs specific to a society, which in this context, is integral to understanding and respecting the diverse cultures of Pacific youth. The focus on ‘Youth’ targets individuals aged between 15 and 24 years, acknowledging their unique needs and perspectives in the design of culturally sustaining and safe spaces.

Building positive relationships

The foundation of culturally safe spaces for Pacific youth is rooted in the establishment of positive relationships. These relationships serve as a cornerstone for enhancing engagement, resilience, and a sense of community among youth. Taulelei and Taylor-Leech (2021) emphasised the critical role of developing culturally safe environments early in the life of a young person, which facilitates the formation of meaningful connections, friendships, and relationships. Such interactions not only bolster the engagement of participants with one another but also significantly strengthen their experiences and resilience. This perspective aligns with Prapaveissis et al. (2022), who acknowledged that safe spaces build agency of Pacific youth to cultivate leadership skills, forge positive friendships, and foster self-awareness and personal development.

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The significance of family in building these positive relationships cannot be understated, as highlighted by Masters et al. (2020). The study revealed that sustaining positive family relationships is a vital motivator for Pacific youth, providing them with the necessary support during challenging times. In addition, participation in cultural activities, such as Polyfest performance groups, further exemplifies the importance of positive relationships. William (2018) illustrated how such group activities guarantee the formation of friendships through shared experiences and practice sessions. These gatherings are not only about learning and performing but also about creating a supportive environment where respect and trust flourish. Robbins et al. (2017) extended this notion to community-based culturally safe spaces, stressing their significance in fostering positive and trustworthy relationships. The involvement of indigenous youth in creative arts, as explored in the study, showcases how these activities can establish a culturally safe environment for participation and expression.

Sense of belonging and connectedness

The essence of culturally sustaining and safe spaces extends beyond mere physical environments to encompass the emotional and psychological aspects of belonging and connectedness. This is particularly vital for Pacific youth, whose cultural narratives and identities are deeply interwoven with their social environments. Paterson et al. (2016) and Rimoni (2017) both addressed the struggle of Pacific youth in forging their identities, indicating the complex interplay between their cultural values and social environments. Rimoni (2016) delved into the perceptions of belonging among Samoan youth, revealing that a sense of belonging is equated with feelings of relaxation, comfort, and welcome in their social circles. These feelings are rooted in positive relationships and a supportive community environment, underscoring the importance of relational connections in fostering a sense of belonging. Leenen-Young (2021) also highlighted the significance of cultural capital, including language, acceptance, pride in identity, and Pacific values, in the well-being of Pacific youth.

Suaalii-Sauni et al. (2012) emphasised the influence of family, peers, and church on Pacific young people, indicating the significance of social environments in shaping their behaviours and attitudes. Complementary to this, Ualesi (2021) and Rimoni (2016) discussed the vital roles of positive relationships, family connections, and active engagement in cultural traditions in empowering Pacific youth and affirming their cultural identities. For example, cultural events like ASB Polyfest have transformative power in reinforcing Pacific youth's sense of belonging and identity (William, 2018). Through music, dance, and cultural expression, these events become pivotal platforms for youth to explore and affirm their cultural identities, immersing themselves in their cultural traditions alongside peers. These gatherings are not just about performance but are critical in maintaining and strengthening cultural connections, offering unparalleled opportunities for cultural immersion and shared experiences. Homolja (2019) extended this notion by characterising Polyfest as a counter-space that fosters identity, community, solidarity, and citizenship among minority youth in Aotearoa New Zealand. This perspective highlights the festival's capacity to serve as a nurturing ground for cultural solidarity and a sense of belonging among peers within a culturally safe framework. Such spaces are instrumental in allowing Pacific youth to navigate their cultural identities confidently and comfortably. Furthermore, Siegert et al. (2022) concluded that ethnic identity can be a protective factor for Pacific youth, providing coping resources that mitigate negative experiences.

There is a complex interplay between cultural identity, mental health, and the socio-behavioural challenges encountered by Pacific youth in Aotearoa New Zealand, and a need to advocate for a holistic and culturally informed approach to their support. The variability and depth of cultural identity of Pacific people are highlighted in several studies. These studies stressed the importance of ethnocultural identity measures in understanding and addressing challenging social wellbeing issues, such as substance use among Native Hawaiian youth (Helm et al., 2019). Rivas-Drake et al. (2014) discussed the association between health risk outcomes and ethnic identity among Asian American and Pacific Islander youth, highlighting the importance of ethnic identity for the well-being of these groups. Studies such as those by Helm et al. (2019) and Edwards et al. (2010) revealed a positive correlation between a strong cultural identity and mental health outcomes, underscoring the protective role of cultural heritage. The necessity of culturally safe spaces is emphasised for nurturing this identity, as indicated by the work of Umaña-Taylor et al. (2014), which stressed the significance of ethnic and racial identity in the development of young people of colour. Bellringer, Pearson, and Lusitini (2021) further illustrated the complex relationship between cultural identity and risky behaviours, pointing to the need for interventions that are sensitive to the unique socio-cultural contexts of Pacific youth.

Together, these studies advocate for a supportive ecosystem that integrates culturally responsive practices, fosters strong community and familial ties, and facilitates active participation in cultural traditions to enhance the well-being and positive development of Pacific youth in Aotearoa New Zealand.

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Summary: Establishing culturally safe spaces

A multifaceted approach is necessary to create culturally sustaining and safe spaces for Pacific youth in Aotearoa New Zealand. These spaces, pivotal for nurturing the well-being, identity, and growth of Pacific youth, hinge on several core themes: a) the cultivation of positive relationships, b) the fostering of a sense of belonging and connectedness, and c) the reinforcement of cultural identity.

Positive Relationships as the Bedrock of Safe Spaces

Building positive relationships within culturally safe spaces is fundamental for the well-being and development of Pacific youth. These relationships, whether formed within the family, through community engagement, or during cultural activities, contribute to a supportive network that enhances the overall experiences of youth. By fostering environments that prioritise respect, trust, and shared cultural values, we can ensure that Pacific youth have the foundation they need to thrive and develop positively. They become the platform on which can be developed engagement, resilience, a sense of community and belonging, self-awareness and personal development, and leadership skills.

Belonging, Connectedness and Cultural Identity

A sense of belonging and connectedness emerges as a critical outcome of culturally sustaining and safe spaces, empowering Pacific youth by affirming their place within their community and culture. Events like Polyfest play a crucial role in this, offering a platform for cultural expression and shared experiences that deepen this sense of belonging. Cultural identity for Pacific youth is not a singular concept but a multifaceted one that encompasses participation in cultural events, engagement in positive relationships, and a deep connection to family and community values. Culturally sustaining spaces like Polyfest and school-based cultural groups serve as vital platforms for this exploration and expression and affirmation of cultural identity, enabling Pacific youth to navigate their cultural identities confidently and meaningfully. Developing programmes that promote culturally sustaining and safe spaces do not need to replicate events like Polyfest, or groups like church youth groups; but they should affirm the value of these for many Pacific youth, and support the engagement opportunities they provide. They can be a launching place for taking on new challenges, or setting further aspirations.

The establishment of culturally sustaining and safe spaces is integral to the positive development and well-being of Pacific youth in Aotearoa New Zealand. By focusing on building positive relationships, fostering a sense of belonging and connectedness, and reinforcing cultural identity, these spaces offer a nurturing environment where Pacific youth can thrive. As highlighted by the research, including the works of Williams (2018), Ualesi (2021), and Rimoni (2016), the collective effort to create such spaces can significantly impact the lives of Pacific youth, enabling them to navigate their journeys with confidence and resilience.

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