



Island Innovation Policy Brief:

Reconnecting Through Culture: A Model for Cultural and Health Empowerment

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Colonial processes have profoundly disrupted Māori social structures and connections to land, causing significant challenges in maintaining cultural identity and well-being. The displacement of whānau (extended family) from their whenua (land) and ancestral marae (sacred meeting grounds) has resulted in a loss of intergenerational knowledge and values crucial for cultural continuity. This qualitative study investigates the positive impacts of a whānau-led initiative focused on reconnecting families to their ancestral marae and highlights how such efforts can restore fragmented knowledge and strengthen cultural identity and wellbeing.

Global Relevance: Lessons for Island Communities

The experiences derived from this article offer valuable insights for other island communities, especially those impacted by colonial processes. Restoring cultural connections through whānau-led initiatives like the Reweti Whānau Hui (RWH) demonstrates the profound impact that cultural identity and land connections can have on health and well-being. For Māori, as for many Indigenous peoples globally, reconnecting with their cultural roots is essential for fostering resilience and improving overall health outcomes. The lessons learned from the RWH highlight the importance of culturally grounded approaches to health and well-being, offering a valuable framework for other communities striving to overcome the challenges posed by colonial legacies.

The Challenge of Disconnection

Colonization has led to severe disruptions in Māori communities, severing their connection to ancestral lands and practices. Land alienation and urban migration have fragmented Māori social organization, leading to a loss of cultural practices and values that once reinforced identity and belonging. Many whānau have experienced intergenerational loss of knowledge that was traditionally passed down through close ties to the land and communal spaces. This disconnection from whenua and marae has had lasting effects on cultural identity and well-being.

The Role of the Whānau-Led Initiative

The study focuses on the Reweti Whānau Hub (RWH), a whānau-led initiative aimed at reconnecting families to their ancestral marae and revitalizing their

cultural practices. This initiative serves as a case study illustrating how restoring cultural connections can enhance individual and collective well-being. By engaging with their ancestral lands and cultural practices, whānau have reported significant benefits, including improved social support networks, resilience, and self-esteem.

Enhancing Cultural Identity and Well-Being

Securing connections to culture and whenua is vital for improving health and well-being. The RWH narratives reveal how enhanced cultural connections foster a strong sense of identity, which, in turn, promotes overall well-being. For many Māori, being connected to their whenua is not just a matter of tradition but a fundamental aspect of their health. The state of the land, once central to their cultural practices, plays a critical role in their overall well-being. Disconnection from the land has been linked to poor health outcomes, underscoring the need for initiatives like the RWH that seek to restore these vital connections.

Addressing Negative Stereotypes and Building Resilience

The RWH also highlights how whānau-led initiatives can counteract negative stereotypes and social constructions of Māori. Māori communities often face detrimental attitudes and stereotypes that impact their mental health and self-esteem. The initiative provides a safe environment where whānau can connect with their culture and language, helping to build confidence and mitigate the effects of these negative influences. This is particularly important for rangatahi (youth), who have reported struggling with their cultural identity outside of supportive environments. By fostering a positive cultural environment, the RWH helps combat low self-esteem and mental health challenges among Māori youth.

Empowering Whānau Through Self-Determination

The success of the RWH illustrates the power of whānau exercising mana motuhake (self-determination) to achieve their aspirations and enhance their well-being. The initiative has created a space where whānau identity is

celebrated, and cultural connections are strengthened. This positive reinforcement of cultural identity not only benefits individual members but also enhances the collective mana of the whānau.

References

I. Reweti, Angelique. 2022. "Securing Cultural Identity for Whānau Well-Being: A Qualitative Study of a Whānau-Led Initiative." *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples* 18 (3): 117718012211186. <https://doi.org/10.1177/11771801221118623>

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